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Ilene C. Wasserman

Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, ilenewas@pcom.edu

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Profound Simplicity: Lessons Learned from Ed Schein on Rituals That Sustain and Nurture Relationships

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Ilene C. Wasserman^{1,2,3} 

Abstract

As I attempt to digest Ed Schein's recent passing, I am present to the friendship I was honored to develop with him over the past 12 years and the voluminous lessons I learned. Like so many, my career was shaped by Ed Schein's scholarship. And yet, it was in our personal, unstructured conversations that I was most impacted by who he was, and the values and principles by which he lived. Our conversations centered on what creates, sustains and nurtures relationships all while we were doing so.

Keywords

dialogic OD, leadership, mentoring, identity, communication

Introduction

Ed and I agreed to tape our conversations from the start of our relationship as, in Ed's words, "there seemed to be something valuable here." In the wake of Ed's passing, I have been listening to these recordings and noticing the patterns: sharing stories, noticing and exploring our underlying assumptions, naming frameworks and doing so in ways that were sometimes playful and more often purposeful. We were in a rhythm of building a relationship while looking at how relationships develop, build trust and sustain and recover from tests and disruptions. In this essay I share some of the richness of these encounters and what I learned in the process.

¹ICW Consulting Group, LLC, Penn Valley, PA, USA

²The McNulty Leadership Program at Wharton, The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

³PCOM, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Ilene C. Wasserman, ICW Consulting Group, LLC, 744 Clarendon Road, Penn Valley, PA, USA.

Email: iwasserman@icwconsulting.com

Relationship Developing: Exploration, Testing, Trust-Building and Obligations

Our first conversation occurred during a six-hour car ride from Montreal, Quebec to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Kathy Kram and I had just participated in a panel discussion at the annual Academy of Management (AOM) for the 2009 JABS edition that honored Ed Schein. I approached Ed afterward about the possibility of meeting sometime to discuss a book I was writing. The book was about how we are continuously co-constructing shared meaning in relationships. He responded by suggesting we share a town car to Cambridge Massachusetts the next day.

As I write this, I recall the flutter of energy I felt as I worked through the logistics of arranging for a town car. Up until then, Ed Schein was beyond approach to me. A great scholar and a theoretician, he was bigger than life. While considering the invitation, something Charlie Seashore said to me shifted my frame. He said, "Ride with Ed. He just lost his wife and what he needs most now is a friend." That shifted the frame from one that prefigured role and hierarchy to a personal one.

From the first moments in the car, I experienced the very qualities Ed Schein studied, wrote about and taught: humble presence, inquiring, and reflecting. The rhythm was that of a metalogue. We started out reflecting on how it came to be that we were sharing a town car from Montreal to Cambridge. We explored the structure: what each of us was thinking about in the process. The rhythmic pattern we enacted was self-disclosure, exploring our underlying assumptions, deepening inquiry, and more self-disclosure with some theoretical framing mixed in. We were creating a relationship while talking about how relationships are created.

Early on, Ed offered the following reflection on the initial conditions:

"So now, an initial trust relationship always exists... we never start with zero... Even then I have taken a relationship building step (referring to the invitation to share a ride). And now we'll go into an exploration mode. but in the test.

This is what Ed would later refer to as an initial test. Would I take the next turn which involved planning the logistics necessary to take a 6-h car ride together. "What are we tolerating? What are the obligations?" Ed later told me that he was testing my willingness to deal with his randomness: "Is she someone who can deal with that or is she someone who wants a particular focus?"

Ed felt strongly about the lost art of the T-Group as a training ground for process awareness and leadership team development. In our first meeting, he asked me if I had T-Group experience. When I replied yes, he responded: "That is why we are having such an easy time talking with each other." He saw it as an essential grounding for professional and personal development because the experience helps to develop self-awareness and a strategic self-consciousness. We later talked about this aspect of development as related to engaging dialogically.

Our primary frame, or superordinate agreement was to get together and talk. Then Ed offered the Goffman's use of the term "keying" as a musical metaphor.

“The piece could be framed in different keys. You can change the key and it sounds different and has a different context. We can change the key to talking about family or talking about a personal or professional experience. Or to talk about when we should stop for coffee... We are always negotiating which subframe we are in. If one of the subframes gets uncomfortable, how do we shift into another without destroying the main frame?”

Ilene: I like the music metaphors as they touch on emotions in ways that words can't.

Ed: Absolutely! And certain kinds of conversations do the same thing. There are periods we are in the flow, and then it shifts to something else.

Part of the rhythm of that first conversation that we later reflected on were the choices we made about the key we were playing in or in other words, the context.

Ed: We seem to forget the Johari window and the Goffmanesque dilemma that is with us all the time: How open to be and about what? I can make sense of this only by stating at the outset that we have an inner sense of what is “task” stuff and what is “personal” stuff, what is “private.” But as I examine our conversation, it seems that one way to “build a relationship” is to mix up these two areas and either leak private information or test the relationship by putting it out there to see what will happen. By leak I mean to reveal it in an unobtrusive way so that it can be denied, ignored, or picked up.

Relationship Strengthening: Disruptions, Recovering, and Recalibrating

When we don't uphold our mutual obligations, be they explicit or implicit, disruptions happen. If we have built up enough of a bond, we can recover from a disruption. During our car ride, interruptions from phone calls from family members changed the key and expanded our permissions to talking about family. One of these calls was from my daughter. That introduced the context of my relationship with my daughter, my telling the story of a disruption we had when I asked her about a sensitive topic – missing her friends after graduating college. I was relieved that she and I were able to get past it by naming it and identifying what was the process of getting triggered and what we could do in the future to be more in sync. Ed came back to this story in our meeting after the car ride as an example of recovering in relationships.

Ed: Because so what is so interesting to me in your story is that you asked a question that was disruptive. But she found a way to rebuild the relationship in the way she responds. What intrigues me most (about the process) is that if you had asked me (a general question) and if that had disturbed me, we nevertheless (would have found a way to recover) What keeps striking me is how the situation defines the micro dynamics.

If the disruption happens early in the relationship, or if we haven't had enough experience to endure a disruption, we might be more likely to step back and recalibrate. If we have built up enough of a bond, then we can be at that point where there's that

disruption and recovery. Because we've learned how to recover, and we trust that there is something to recover.

In turn, Ed shared a story of how he just barely avoided a potential disruption in his relationship with his grandchildren and their parents when he offered to "help." The back-and-forth sharing of stories was part of the mutual exploration of how we stay coordinated in relationships, how we honor and respect the rules, the obligations, and how we help each other save face.

Relationship Deepening: Helping is in the Eye of the Beholder

Ed's book on helping was a great manifestation of his gift of simply articulating and highlighting the complexities of a concept like helping through stories about everyday dynamics. One example we talked about was when people call and ask: "Can I do anything?" when another person is vulnerable. Ed shared how difficult it was to respond when people would make a general offer to help after his wife died. A specific offer is something that could be responded to. In contrast, I told Ed about how a friend knocked on my door after I had abdominal surgery and humbly asked if she could walk my (90 pound) dog. It was a very simple yet specific and very valuable offer.

Ed talked about how we build protections in the rhythm of our relationships – saving face. If it turns out that they could care less about the conversation, we both lost a little bit of face. If the person responds very positively, then I may be tempted to try another question or to say something more. And out of these initial tests a relationship begins to form with each event on both sides is still a test.

Ilene: In relationship building you are initially agreeing to a contract. In any moment it could be renegotiated. Sometimes that renegotiation is in a coordinated dance: you make a move and I go along with it in an undisturbed fashion. And sometimes we negotiate and there is a disruption.

Ed: That's right. There's always a risk whether the renegotiation will work or not. Because in facework (Goffman) terms, renegotiation is a new claim. The basic notion of facework is that we're always putting out a claim. I'm putting out a claim right now of having something reasonably important to say. If you yawn or get easily distracted, then you haven't upheld the claim.

It's a line that you're going to honor or not. I've always thought that that's the only real understanding when we talked about deep relationships. They reach a certain level where the person feels they can say practically anything.

Ed: This is a way to define intimacy. When two people who start out being self-oriented, gradually develop and showing orientation through more revelations that are acceptable to each other and that comes from a quality of being present and listening. What are the conditions under which that happens? The line we feed each other is always a test. I have no way of knowing what the other understands until they respond.

There were moments in our conversation when Ed would take a gentle turn of phrase in such a way that under other circumstances (such as a hierarchical

relationship) could have been critical or judgmental, but instead just moved us in a different way.

Ed: The other thing that I am doing and I'm also encouraging you to do is relying more on telling stories. When you shared the story of Edie sitting there, that immediately brought an image to my mind of Edie sitting there saying to her clients "Well what do you want me to do?" That was vivid.

Ed was about stories even more than theories, as the source of learning.

Humble Inquiry: From Doing and Telling to Curiosity and Inquiry

In more recent years, Ed talked about how renewed he felt in the writing and consulting he was doing in partnership with his son Peter. Humble Inquiry was an opportunity to bring Process Consultation up to date with a focus on being in relationships. Ed felt concerned about our culture of telling and doing and that we needed to focus more on inquiry and curiosity.

Ed: (On the patterns in our culture) why is it so hard in this culture, to be humble? It's extraordinary when I sit at the dinner table, three or four people to talk, talk, talk, and tell, tell, tell and there will not have been one single question in over an hour. I may not have said it strongly enough in the book. I may have to write something more if I continue to feel this way.

Ilene: What I love about the (framing) of humble inquiry, is ... in our culture we don't recognize questions that are telling in disguise. Recently, I have been coaching students around appreciative inquiry and many of them are having a hard time surrendering the sense of knowing the answer to the question that they're asking and being present to the possibility of being surprised at what you hear.

Ed: And not being aware of the danger of that situation (assuming that you know without being curious to what is emerging). I'm quite obsessed with the notion of a relay race. I'm running the first lap and I've got the baton. And I tell the next person, stick out your hand so that I can give them a baton. And this notion that we are interdependent, and don't realize it is crucial. As long as we keep asking rhetorical questions and just testing our suppositions, we're not paying attention to the reality that we may be on the wrong track.

Ed continued to talk about the importance of using humble inquiry with ourselves. We strengthen our presence when we begin with ourselves.

Ed: The reason why dialogue is an important concept in the whole theory of communication and listening is that it redresses the balance between observing the other and observing oneself. Dialogue gets you to say, 'Wait a minute!' Before you are even in a good

position to figure out what this other person is doing, you have got to get acquainted with your own filters, your own assumptions, and your own biases. By putting the focus on self-analysis and self-observation, it leads to better listening. Listening to the other is secondary to listening to the self.

It all came down to the strategic use of self and using the awareness of the presentation of self in each moment, to make the most of the moment. His “tests” were in service of connecting more so than judging. Every moment was an intervention.

Summary

Ed hated jargon. Ed loved T-Groups. Ed was a masterful storyteller. Mostly, Ed had a gift of being very present in relational processes, analyzing them at the moment and then honoring his dialogue partners and theoretical influences. Being free of an agenda and explicit obligations supported our process. We were fully present when we showed up to explore the most precious topic of our lives.

The invitation to write this essay has been a gift for me to look at the ways in which being in dialogue with Ed the last 12 years of his life has touched me and resonates in all my relationships. When someone dies, it truncates the future of the relationship in the world as we know it. And yet, it opens and expands a path of relating that is virtuous and continuous. We connect to the part of that person that lives within us. We expand with the connection that others felt and lived with that person. I will be forever grateful for all I learned from and with Ed. This issue of JABS brings that to life.


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ORCID iD

Ilene C. Wasserman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2187-6530>