Making the Invisible Visible

Journal of the Association for Management Education and Development
Making the invisible visible

Alison Donaldson (Editor)

A more than usually open story of how this issue came into being prompts a reflection on some widespread, invisible metaphors that subtly distort our view of managing organisations.

There's no such thing as invisible if you know where to look

Robin Shohet

Consultants, coaches and supervisors have a responsibility (starting with themselves) to enable people to become more aware of their vulnerability.

Revealing practices

Christina Breene

To help people reveal more of themselves, there are several quite simple methods or practices, but simple does not mean easy.

Seeing patterns in high-performing teams

Jonathan Wilson

Excellent team working does not depend on roles and skills alone. If we help teams to become more aware of their patterns of relating, they can work better together and even be more healthy.

Private conversations and public presentations:

Robert Warwick

The story of a group working on strategy shows how both informal and formal communication are vital and inseparably intertwined. When this is overlooked, implementation and morale suffer.

Take your turn in writing

Louise Cornelis and Mike Huiskes

By viewing writing as a step in conversation rather than just an end product, people can write more useful documents and the burden of producing a perfect product in isolation can be lifted.

Tales that tell

Julie Allan

Stories of real-life experience are shown to complement quantitative evaluation and reveal important knowledge, while staff working with families develop expertise in “Storycatching”.

Nurses’ Voices, or curating the invisible

Kathy Jones, Carol McCubbin and Kath Start

Oral history allows people to relate past experiences so everybody becomes wiser, but making the records available – whether in video, audio or written form – is trickier than it seems at first sight.
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A real account of being part of a writing group demonstrates how much we can discover about ourselves in this way. Suitably adapted, the method could strengthen management development.

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A personal story involving writing shows the pitfalls of “aboutness talk”, offers insights into the philosophical roots of this phenomenon and provides a taste of the kind of "withness talk" that connects.

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Connecting humans
The emotional consequences of noticing and narrating our own experience

Theodore Taptiklis

I have been trying to reach below the surface of our conversational exchanges by considering “aboutness” and “withness” thinking. This led me to recount a discomfiting recent personal experience here in an effort to enable readers to experience the reality of withness thinking for themselves. But this act of writing was itself so emotionally challenging that it suggested another layer of invisibility to me: the underlying anxiety of everyday life in the wake of our Cartesian inheritance. And I am struck by the difference between this sense of deep-felt unease in our present day, taken-for-granted forms of public conduct and my experience of group work with narratives, where the feeling in the room is typically inviting, down-to-earth and collaborative. Your response is welcome.

Keywords
aboutness, withness, storytelling, Cartesian, anxiety, assertion, opinion, vulnerability, sharing

For nearly 20 years I have been struggling, along with many others, towards a prospect of better human connection. This turns out to be a journey of unknown duration. There are always fresh glimpses of yet new layers of understanding just ahead. And it is even more challenging in the doing. To promote relational betterment, I feel that I must do my best to exhibit its qualities in myself. But every step that I try to take towards mastery seems to reveal just how far I myself have yet to travel.

To consider this paradox, I have found the concepts of “aboutness” and “withness” – as described by John Shotter (Shotter 2011: final chapter) – to be helpful. “Aboutness” talk – the dominant mode of the present day – entails speaking “about” the world as though it were separate from the speaker. One explains things at a distance, just like a scientist who sees themselves as standing outside their experiment. Aboutness explanations – “This is how I see things” – tend to be offered as assertions, and can be laid down as intellectual challenges to their audience. They invite debate and counter-assertion. What often follows is a competition for intellectual dominance.

“Withness” talk, by contrast, begins with the felt experience of the speaker. Rather than reaching for any fixed and final explanation of something, here the speaker looks to evoke connection, recognition and understanding in others by talking “with” them about the details of a specific event or personal experience. Because one story invites another, this mode of discourse is allusive, resonant and suggestive. One
person's account awakens responses and comparisons with the experiences of others. In this way a back-and-forth movement can begin. "Your story reminds me of something that happened to me", we might say. And then another person takes up the thread. Before long a space of shared possibility opens up between those present. The modes of being that are invoked by aboutness and withness discourse are worlds apart.

But part of the "withness-aboutness" paradox is that the foregoing can itself be seen as a kind of aboutness talk. How, in this discussion here, can I get beneath its smooth explanatory surface, and invite the reader to experience the rough ground – the yearning, the reaching for, and the incompleteness of real relational movement – "with" me?

**Speaking from experience**

Perhaps I can give an account of a recent experience of my own. I took part in an event that involved bringing people together for a detailed exploration of particular aspects of their professional activity. The aim was to prepare for the possibility of a major collaborative improvement project. The event had been carefully planned and prepared for. All those present had shared something of themselves and their prior workplace experiences before they met. At the gathering, the mood was open and curious, and the conversation soon became lively and free-flowing. Before long, the room was full of suggestions and ideas for further action. Each person added something to what had previously been said. A series of potential initiatives that could involve all the members of the group began to take shape. As we left, everyone had a sense that this might be the beginning of something momentous and exciting. It had felt like a genuinely withness encounter.

I left with my head full and my mind buzzing. This felt to me like a pivotal moment and an amazingly fruitful opportunity. Ideas that had been pent-up for some time burst forth. I began to envision an entire architecture, a vast symphony, of potential responses. These were more extensive, and more closely articulated, than all of my previous imaginings. In my mind, the possibilities arising from this event might open up a unique new landscape, even a new era, of professional activity.

As soon as I could, I sat down and wrote out a detailed proposal for action. "We will...play a pivotal role in a landmark initiative," I told my colleagues. "We will build important working relationships...with some outstanding people...(in) something that is entirely new, absorbing and engaging, and that we will develop a shared sense of accomplishment about...we will build a capability...that will be transferable to other arenas and will have significant... social and commercial value...we will have a blueprint for action...that can be...tailored to the needs of a wide variety of domains of human activity." I held nothing back. It felt like a bravura performance. I sat back and waited for the applause.

The response from my colleagues, when it came, seemed curiously muted. They saw it as "a big idea", but it clearly wasn't yet entirely theirs. I was at first puzzled by this. Why hadn't they got it? This was everything we had been looking for! This was the Big One! Then a new possibility occurred to me: I hadn't explained it clearly enough! I had given them the answer without defining the problem! Feverishly, I began writing again. This time, I set out the background, the whole historical sweep, the unconscious assumptions that, when cleared away, pointed irrevocably towards my epiphany. Now they had it all!
The response this time was even more puzzling. My colleagues agreed that what I had written was “very interesting”. But there were dissenting voices, chipping away at aspects of what I had seen as a flawless argument. And it was clear from our conversation that my vision – powerful as it was acknowledged to be – was not yet the apotheosis, the alpha and omega, of all of our joint endeavours that I had intended.

Slowly and gradually, in the days that followed, the emotional intensity that was gripping me began to subside. An encounter with an old friend and former colleague helped me to come back down to earth. He listened carefully while I told him my story. He then suggested that my “one right road” wasn’t an undeviating straight line from here to a perfect future, but that there were a number of interesting side paths and parallel tracks that might be practical, useful and less grandiose alternatives.

As I absorbed the full implication of these modest and helpful suggestions, an unexpected emotion stole over me. It was a feeling of shame. Where had I been? It was somewhere I recognised from my past. I had been marooned on Planet Ego. I had been so full of – so bound up emotionally with – my imagined possibilities and their excitements that I’d lost my connection with the felt realities of the others around me.

This situation felt steeped in irony. I am an advocate for withness conduct, yet my entire approach seemed to have been an aboutness one. Instead of engaging with my colleagues, and exploring all of the possibilities together, I had somehow become desperate to impress them with the completeness of my solution. In doing so, I had resorted to a medium that is extraordinarily prone to misunderstanding – lengthy email exposition. I should have remembered the risks of email – that it is potentially troublesome for anything subtle, personal, complicated or novel. I now saw that I had been going too far, too fast, and by the wrong means. But most of all, I could see that I should have been paying attention to and reflecting on my own conduct, and in this way, seeking to make this aspect of the ordinarily invisible more easily visible, to myself and others.

And I have another reflection at this point: that telling a story of this kind, against oneself, is surprisingly difficult. In the doing, all the emotions of the original experience – of shame, of regret, of misplaced hubris – rise up again in a new welter of discomfort. No wonder this induces resistance in me! (I am also suddenly reminded of another phenomenon – my experience of others who, asked to reflect about the details of a specific event, and to describe these in a step-by-step narrative form, find that they are unable to do so. Perhaps there are those who, in effect, are un-storied. Could my responses, and theirs, be connected in some way?)

**Aboutness: a world of anxiety and assertion?**

This piece of writing is already developing a story around itself, because in its early stages it has provoked a conversation with both John Shotter and the editor of this issue of *Organisations & People*, Alison Donaldson. And that further conversation has reinforced an idea that I was just beginning to glimpse: that an important distinction between aboutness and withness discourse, and one that has profound
consequences, is its emotional character – the mood that it establishes, and the feelings that it evokes. To develop this idea I would like to fill out the description of aboutness and withness thinking that began this article. I understand aboutness as something that has its roots in the Cartesian view (which we in the West have largely absorbed to the point of invisibility) – namely that we are independent, separated, self-defining individuals, looking out into a surrounding world. From this atomised perspective, we see the world as fixed and final, and “out there” to be discovered, understood and inhabited by ourselves.

The significance of thinking that the world is separate from ourselves cannot be underestimated. It means, for example, that we cannot take our existence for granted but instead must assert it through action. To become part of the “real world” (as distinct from our own story, or our own personal experience of it) we must move out “into” it and make our mark on it by some means. Our selfhood must be earned. So there is an underlying impetus in this way of thinking towards what Maslow popularised as the notion of “self-actualisation” – the pursuit of a promise of selfhood that would otherwise be unfulfilled. We might recognise in this impetus many of the underlying urges of our time – for career, for celebrity, for admiration, for validation, for autonomy, for mastery, for the assumption of leadership, for a chance to “change the world”.

But what particularly interests me is the emotional state this way of thinking sets up in us. Because it seems to me that, if our fundamental drive is to prove our existence, then there might be two emotional consequences. The first is a kind of existential fear of failure: an anxiety that we might never be acknowledged as a real person, as a fully-fledged member of the human race. This might be present in a
variety of ways: as an underlying angst, as a recurrent disquiet, or perhaps as a kind of resigned acceptance accompanied by a deeply-buried sense of loss. Some years ago I conducted a life-course study that extended to a random sample of nearly 1800 people, and I recall all these emotions vividly in the expressions of the study respondents. And I can certainly recognise them in myself.

The second emotional impulse can be understood as a reaction to the first: a kind of heroic determination to break out of the prison of Cartesian isolation, and to claim by assertion a place “in the world”. This impulse is accompanied by feelings of striving, of struggle, of wilfulness, even of desperation. At its most basic, this is the impulse that says, “Notice me!” It is the impulse behind self-branding; self-assertion by CV; or identity construction as a blogger or on Facebook. It is the impulse that leads to ego-manifestation and hubris. And it is extraordinary how much self-absorption it can generate. I believe that the urge for self-assertion can so occupy one’s attention that it can crowd out almost everything else. In the grip of establishing and defining oneself, everyone and everything else can become effectively invisible. I think my own experience illustrated this phenomenon.

The basic currency of aboutness talk is the opinion. We have opinions “about” things that we see as outside ourselves. Much aboutness talk is the exchange of opinions. The influence of Cartesian science – systematic doubt and the search for proof – encourages us to adduce evidence for our opinions. Or we may bolster our own opinions with the supporting opinions of others. It was Kierkegaard who worried about the rise of newspapers 150 years ago, blaming them for the development of mass-market opinion-forming about things far distant from their readers, that were therefore free of any personal, local commitment. If he were alive, he might further decry today’s burgeoning blogosphere. However it is opinions – often dressed up as “scientific” or “objective” – that now form the basis of most public discourse. And perhaps their emotional tone is the key to their ubiquity. Unlike assertions “about” oneself, opinions about things other than oneself do not generally generate anxiety or personal distress. Opinions about the world and its affairs can be offered and considered in a calm, neutral, impersonal tone. We admire “rational” debate that is unclouded by emotions (except when we are swayed by politicians such as Clinton and Blair who seem to manufacture emotion in order to demonstrate conviction and sincerity). My thought is that in an aboutness world, the expression of opinion is a relief from the underlying emotional anxiety that may otherwise occupy us.

**Withness: a world of acceptance and understanding (and visibility)?**

The basic currency of withness talk, by contrast, is the personal narrative. When we offer an account of our own experience instead of taking and defending a position on an issue or a concern, I have found that the feeling in the room is entirely different. A detailed story of our own does not have to be asserted, but simply told. One story can then invite another. The second does not argue with or negate the first, but offers a fresh perspective. Unlike opinions – that tend to polarise discussion – narrative accounts open up new layers of possibility, and relate to one another at oblique angles, often by way of nuance and suggestion. Each new story can be additive in some way. Gradually a rich and deep understanding can accumulate.

But just as important as shared understanding is the mood and feeling that is evoked in the detailed exchange of personal experience. My repeated experience of aboutness exchanges – in organisational settings such as board meetings – is that they have a kind of brittle formality that makes me think of pursed lips and suppressed emotion. I find that withness exchanges, by contrast, often have an upbeat tone, and
also a sense of discovery and curiosity that can be infectious. Personal stories invite openness - a further level of visibility - and shared vulnerability. An experience that has not previously risen to consciousness may suddenly spring to mind and be spoken about for the first time. A mood of surprise and spontaneity can appear. In these circumstances, novelty and fresh insights emerge. And all of this can quite naturally lead towards joint commitment and collaborative action.

So what is happening in this withness world that is so different from our taken-for-granted aboutness experience? I think that I have only slowly come to understand something of this. Like many others, I have been drawn to the importance of stories and storytelling. At first, I thought of stories as containing something (some sort of “content”) and that they mattered mostly for this, and that many stories together – for example in a repository – might constitute a kind-of sense-making map for subsequent navigation.

But more and more, I have come to see the value of stories as something both more elusive and more fundamental. What I think they really do is to project a mood and a tone into their surroundings that evokes a kind of matching response. And strangely, the more imperfect, the more uncertain and the more unfinished they are, the greater can be the response. Because what personal accounts do best is to act as reminders or intensifiers of our common humanity. They bring us down to earth, away from abstractions and grand ideas, towards the shared realities of our everyday existences.

And as well, the exchange of stories challenges our Cartesian individualism and the feelings of isolation and anxiety that are produced by this way of thinking. When we offer and share our personal stories, we are able to form a community without rank. In doing so, we create a unique, once-occurring relational circumstance for ourselves and for others. Without assertion, I can now be “with” these people and they can be “with” me.

**This article as a test**

But I can perhaps use this piece of writing as a test of my argument. I have offered a personal story here – an experience that I feel uncomfortable about. Has writing about it helped me? I really don't know yet. Alison Donaldson's first editorial response offered some helpful reassurance. But what will be the wider response? Will there be any? Will others simply feel embarrassed for me, and prefer to say little or nothing? Will I confirm for those who don't tell stories (especially against themselves) that there's no value in doing so? Will the response of others be an aboutness one – "This is interesting as an example of...." or "This supports my theory of...." or instead perhaps, a withness one – "I've had an experience like that...."? In trying to get below the surface of our everyday discourse by drawing attention to my sense of its moods and feelings, have I made anything that is normally invisible, visible to others?

I can't wait to find out.

**References**


**About the author**

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**Invitations and Notices**

**Some forthcoming events**

*Here are a few of the AMED events that will be taking place in the next three months. You are most welcome to join us.*

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<td>23 March</td>
<td>Joint AMED/IAF Facilitation Workshop ‘Building bridges through effective facilitation’</td>
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<td>17 May</td>
<td>AMED AGM</td>
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**The Summer 2012 issue of e-O&P**

“How can we create wiser organisations?”

**Guest Editor: Julie Allan**

**Your invitation**

Increasingly, we are urged, forced, or are choosing to seek wiser ways of organising ourselves, prompted by reasons of economics and sustainability -- of people, commerce, countries or the planet. What contribution can OD practitioners and others make in creating wiser organisations? In this special edition of e-O&P, we’ll share how we’re working to raise the ‘wisdom quotient’ (WQ) of ourselves and our client organisations, and illustrate the ensuing benefits.

**Some aspects our authors have been invited to consider**

- *Perhaps you’ve worked with different value sets or in conditions where much is unknown and perhaps unknowable.*

- *Maybe you’ve a spiritual tradition or philosophical stance that’s informed your work in organisations and you’d like to reflect on its connection with wise outcomes.*

- *Have you worked specifically on adult life stage development in working contexts, and has that been useful?*

- *Have you learned something unexpected from your work which struck you as profound and which enabled a significant shift?*

- *Or have you some reflections on foolishness in organisations that you think provide valuable learning? (Such counterpoints might be another helpful way to examine wisdom.)*

Please join our collective exploration by reading, writing and talking about the aspects of Wisdom which you’ll find in this special edition. You’ll be interested in new conceptual and practical approaches and inspirations through which practitioners might help organisations develop, incrementally or radically, in today's contexts.

**About our Guest Editor, Julie Allan**

For Julie, her applied research into Wisdom in corporate contexts has naturally emerged as an exploration consistent with professional and personal interests that include psychology, leader development, complexity, story and narrative, ethics and responsibility and raising a family. It seems to her a timely topic for all those of us working alongside leaders at all levels, in business, in non-commercial organisations and more broadly in our communities. Julie also serves in ethics roles for the British Psychological Society.

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Your invitation to become more involved with e-O&P

About e-O&P:
e-O&P is AMED’s quarterly online journal, available in pdf format, for academics, professionals, managers and consultants at all stages of their careers. It addresses innovative approaches to personal, professional and organisational development in a reflective and accessible way. It has a practical bias with a balance of well-written thought pieces, case studies, interviews, articles, reviews and editorials. Our articles are succinct, engaging, authentic and easy to read. We maintain our high standards of writing through the careful selection of relevant themes and our support of outstanding guest editors.

About our guest editors:
Once selected, our editors have a pretty free hand within a broad set of guidelines. Guest editors deliver to the e-O&P editorial board a set of articles of suitable quality, ready for publication, according to a pre-arranged schedule. This involves editors in inviting proposals for contributions, identifying authors, commissioning stimulating articles, reviewing, and where appropriate, critiquing drafts and proof-reading final copy.

About our ‘Critical Friends’:
For their particular edition, guest editors often find it useful to create a small, temporary editorial team to support them, including ‘Critical Friends’. The e-O&P editorial board is happy to help them find such collaborators, and is on hand to explore any issues or concerns that arise, bearing in mind our limited time to engage in extensive, detailed reading or conversations.

We are always looking to expand e-O&P’s network of ‘Critical Friends’, who would be available to guest editors or individual authors on request. Depending on their preferences and any specific need, Critical Friends can help by reading drafts, offering constructive feedback, clarifying ideas, commenting on style, providing encouragement, or by proof-reading or copy-editing pre-publication texts. In return, this offers Critical Friends the opportunity to develop greater insight into, and awareness of possibilities for, their own writing and professional practice. They might even consider subsequently becoming a guest editor or author for e-O&P.

Are you interested in joining our exciting project?
If so, please contact one of us on the e-O&P editorial board as soon as possible. We’d love to hear from you.

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A note about AMED

AMED stands for the Association for Management Education and Development, [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk). We are a long-established membership organisation and educational charity devoted to developing people and organisations. Our purpose is to serve as a forum for people who want to share, learn and experiment, and find support, encouragement, and innovative ways of communicating. Our conversations are open, constructive, and facilitated.

At AMED, we strive to benefit our members and the wider society. Exclusive Member benefits include excellent professional indemnity cover, free copies of the quarterly journal e-O&P, and discounted fees for participation in a range of face-to-face events, special interest groups, and our interactive website. We aim to build on our three cornerstones of knowledge, innovation and networking in the digital age. Wherever we can, AMED Members, Networkers and Guests seek to work with likeminded individuals and organisations, to generate synergy and critical mass for change.

To find out more about us, you are welcome to visit our website [www.amed.org.uk](http://www.amed.org.uk), or contact Linda Williams, our Membership Administrator, E: [amedoffice@amed.org.uk](mailto:amedoffice@amed.org.uk), T: 0300 365 1247