#notknowing
#culturalparent
#liminalspace
#changemanagement
#autonomy

The art of not knowing

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Introduction: 'I just have no idea what to do'

Those who work with groups recognise the experience: someone poses a question you cannot answer, tension rises, you notice non-verbal contact between the members of the group, a dynamic comes up which you don't understand, and you get the feeling: 'this is slipping out of my hands'. Then what? When being a facilitator or leader of a group, it may be attractive in this uncomfortable moment, to flee into the familiarity of your script. However, one of the effects of going in script is that neither the group, nor yourself is working in an autonomous way. Yet you as a Transactional Analyst (TA) professional want to enhance autonomy. In this article I will describe why the 'not-knowing' results in tension and I will offer an alternative to fleeing into the script.

The Cultural Parent

TA professionals focus on stimulating autonomy of their clients, whether the client is a team, a student or an organization. We do so in the role of manager, trainer, consultant, teacher or team coach. We fulfil these roles amidst a societal context with assumptions about the behavior of a 'typical' manager, consultant or trainer. What are the assumptions? I have identified several typical assumptions which can be read in the below. This list is not complete.

Giles Barrow [2009] argues 'we have all been schooled'. By this he means that children at school are not only taught language and mathematics, but also the values and standards of the culture we live in. Everyone in the western world goes to school and thus education is a universal experience. More specifically, we learn that the teacher knows the knowledge and gives the student the right answer. The student is the consumer of education. Barrow states that our culture's starting point is that students are passive, and teachers are active.

A famous and much used book on change management is 'The heart of change' by John Kotter and Dan Cohen [2012]. Kotter and Cohen indicate that in change processes are made up of eight phases. Leaders have to manage their organization through these eight phases of change. Here I do

not discuss the valuable information the book gives. What it is about now, is the assumption about leadership that underpins the theory. This assumption is that leaders know which way to go; that leaders are the starting point of the change, for which they need to enthuse others; that leaders plan the results in advance.

Lastly an example from consultants. Antonie van Nistelrooi and Thijs Homan [2019] intensively describe their personal experience as consultants, working with a group of top managers. An incident takes place in a meeting and the group stops to move and talk. The eyes of all managers are on the consultant. In the silence the managers as a group clearly expect the consultant to get the session up and running again. They assume that the consultant has the rationality, strategy and the right tools and methods to get the group to start moving again.

The assumptions about managers, team coaches, consultants, teachers and trainers belong to the realm of general beliefs in our society. Pearl Drego [1984] called those general beliefs and a society's do's and don'ts the Cultural Parent. The Cultural Parent is part of the Parent egostate and determines the (un)conscious boundaries of what is acceptable behavior in a certain culture. The Cultural Parent is rulebound conservative: he wants to maintain the status quo and repeat the existing story. This story expects teachers, managers, consultants to be active, lead the way, know what to do. In the above mentioned workshop, participants made a *tableau vivant,* adding to this list: give solutions, have a helicopter view, show understanding, cut the knot. There is very little tolerance in the Cultural Parent for facilitators of groups to 'not know'. The Cultural Parent, with all his expectations, beliefs and assumptions is present, both in the leader and in the employee, both in the consultant and in the managers being facilitated, and also in the teacher and in the (adult) student.

Your own script
Beside the Cultural Parent, facilitators have their personal experience with 'not knowing'. Though this experience is different for everyone, in the workshop it became clear that the experience of not knowing is an experience of risk. For example, being mocked when you lost your words during your first ever presentation, playing school with older siblings who hit you when you didn't give their right answer, frowns and sighs when you asked for explanation during a meeting. These personal experiences are collected in your Child egostate. You take them with you as a consultant, trainer, teacher, manager, team coach when you work with a group.

Knowing as a defense against learning & developing
There you are, well prepared, with expertise and experience. And yet you get to the point where you have no idea what is happening, where you don't understand what is going on between the group and you as a facilitator. The group is silent in all languages, you cannot find any answers to their questions. In this particular moment you feel the burden of expectations – your own and the participants'. Your Cultural Parent whispers in your ear that you have to solve this. In this uncomfortable moment your script beckons: you can just state it is a dumb question, you can joke, play the clown, you can explain again, yet a little louder now (see figure 1).
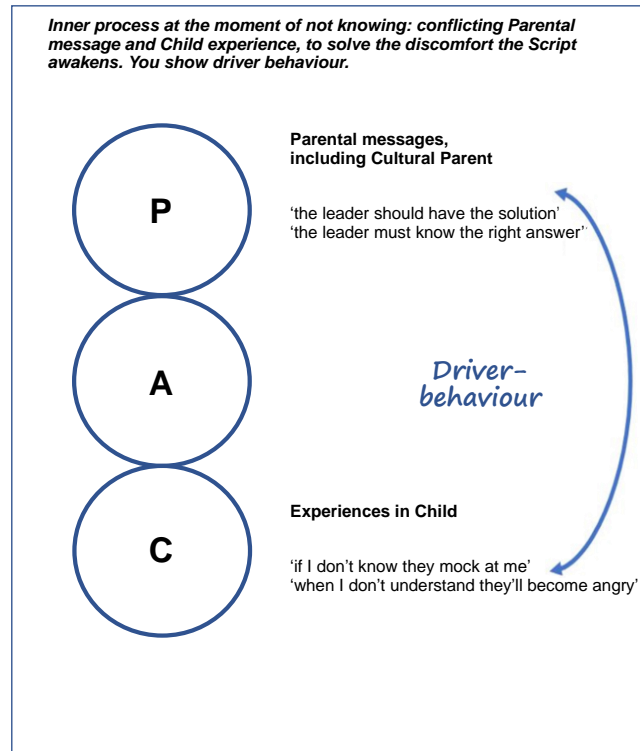
Figure 1: inner process whilst not knowing (entering script)

What other options do we have? During a conference on change management, university teacher and speaker Naomi Raab [1997] noticed that she got furious reactions of participants when she acted differently than expected. Uncommonly she placed the chairs in a circle, and she did not start the session in the usual way. Instead she asked the participants what they were curious about. The participants became resentful with Raabs question and the silence that followed. 'You did continuous learning on this, not we', 'This is not the way the other sessions were performed, this is not as it ought to be', 'If only you would give us a handout', 'This is manipulation!'. Raab is quite surprised at what happens: the participants – all of them being experienced managers - seem to completely discount their own expertise and expect her to be the 'fountain of wisdom'. Her own inclination to be so was remarkably strong: she deeply longs for a nicely structured Power Point Presentation and seriously doubts the method of working she has chosen. However, when Raab perseveres in her attitude and manages to resist her tendency to give right answers, after a while a different atmosphere is noticeable in the group. Then one of the participants carefully starts to fumble around his personal experience in the moment saying 'Gosh, all she did is change the chairs and the map of the room and look how vehemently we react'. This is the start for sharing explorative questions. 'What have my employees felt when I announced the reorganization?'. Learning comes up in a different, more profound way because Raab herself was able to deal with her personal discomfort.

In hindsight she states that her personal inclination and the participants' invitation to start from the point of knowing, in fact is a defense against learning. The anxiety and discomfort of not knowing are curbed by teacher and consultant by taking the role of the expert, the one who does know. Raab advocates to become an expert in not-knowing, in order to facilitate deeper learning.

On the basis of research, Arend Ardon [2018] concludes that development is restricted by strong steering and that managers may even block the changes they want to stimulate, by behaving in a certain way. For his PhD he observed 100 meetings of management teams and meetings of managers with their employees. He looked for patterns in the notes he made of those meetings.

What he found is that managers in their actual work life, do not behave the way they theoretically say they want to behave. Especially in moments of stress, anxiety and excitement they activate their script, which Ardon calls the automatic pilot. In a moment like that they experience thread. This thread can take many forms, they fear for loss of face, they dread their approach to be obstructed etc. Instead of staying with the discomfort and exploring its meaning – preferably with the others involved – the managers try their best to keep the situation in their hands and shut off information that is not welcome to them. This makes them 'break the resistance' and 'get back in control'. Ardon is clear about the effects of this managerial attitude: employees may (temporarily) obey, but no real learning takes place! Managers can continue to grumble about unwilling employees and employees can continue to grumble about dictating managers. By recognizing and focusing on unwelcome information, it is possible to create a climate in which change becomes an option [Ardon 2018]]. He says it is necessary for managers to see themselves as part of the picture, or even part of the problem. Managers need to dare to 'speak about the unspeakable'.

Illustration from practice

In a team coaching session, two team members are late after a break. I restart the session at the agreed time and notice some whispering here and there. A few minutes later one of the team members - voice loud of agitation - says 'I think it is impolite what you are doing here'. Now I surely have the attention of all participants: some support their colleague who addressed me, others look at me with a glance of 'how do you deal with that', some individuals seem positively surprised by my way of keeping the time boundary.

I feel I start to blush and do not know how to proceed. The emotions I pick up from the group towards me, are rather hostile.
Then the two delayed arrive with a casual 'oh, you already started' but also a grumbly 'I find that strange!'. Team members start to talk one to one.
My heartbeat raises, around my stomach I feel a knot. I suppress the impulse to act as if nothing is going on, I suppress the tendency 'now everyone is there' to continue the program by going to the flipchart.

This is a moment of not knowing that might become meaningful.

The experience of not-knowing as *liminal space*

Barrow [2000] believes pupils learn more when the teacher does less. Raab [1997] advocates to become an expert in not-knowing. Ardon [2018] emphasizes the importance of the unspeakable. Evelyn Papaux [2016] underlines that accepting vulnerability and valuing not knowing are essential to learning and change. To learn, by definition you need to leave your comfort zone.

When you leave your comfort zone without going into script you enter a liminal space. *Limen* is the Latin word for boundary. A liminal space according to Emily Perlow [2014] is a kind of in-between, a no man's land, in which the old, the known, suddenly has lost its meaning because you are on your way to something else. In a liminal space there is no etiquette yet, social hierarchy is gone, existing answers don't bring solutions. It is a transition from the one to the other. The old does not suffice

anymore, the new is not yet there. Liminal space is the place for innovation. You are the one to fill in the new. This demands the capacity to endure uncertainty or even impotence. It asks from the leader, teacher, trainer, team coach or consultant the courage to be uncomfortable. If the facilitator of a group can stay with the discomfort, continues to be curious for the world beneath the surface, (s)he gives the living example that this is possible and facilitates growing space for group and individual.

Illustration from practice - continued

Now the participants talk out loud: 'we are used to waiting for each other', 'you cannot do this, they can't help the need to go to the bathroom', (the grumpy late-comer:) 'I feel very much put aside'.

At that point I share my considerations about time management (which is: keeping safe boundaries) which resonates with some participants and is nonsense according to others. Then comes to my mind the theme of this team: we want to be taken seriously in our role. I pose the question 'in what way might the occurrences here and now relate to your theme?'.

One of the team members again clearly shows he thinks this is nonsense, my personal discomfort still is very present, but yet a more explorative conversation arises. Intimacy raises when one participant questions whether or not he is allowed to say what he professionally needs to say, because 'we so often condone what is going on'. Another participant, who had been silent until then, pronounces his irritation about the careless way the team is used to manage their time. He shares his thinking that this might even be an explanation why the team is not always taken seriously. The grumpy late-comer reveals her longing for some attention – from her colleagues and from me – for being present this day, in spite of grim problems at home. Then follows a serene silence.

The rest of this team coaching session benefits by the deepening of professional intimacy between the participants.

Cheerful uneasiness
There must be a certain amount of chaos to make growth and change possible, but not so much chaos that you drown in it. This general rule also applies to TA professionals working with groups. It is useful to have something to hold on to, to support the autonomy of the professional in the fairly chaotic moment of not-knowing. The thing to hold on to in this article is an elaboration of the model of Michelle Novellino [1984], on how to deal with transference.

To be cheerful in uneasiness:

1. Develop a sense for experience 'I just have no idea what to do'
2. Notice all feelings and thoughts that go with this experience
3. Take three deep breaths before saying or doing anything (do *not* react automatically)

4. During these moments of breathing: notice the story you tell yourself about yourself, the participants, students, employees and about not knowing. Is this your script story?

   If your script comes to action: be aware of your need to flee to the safety of the known. Your script behaviour (as a team coach, teacher, manager) hinders an attitude of exploration and blocks growth. You create a temporary comfort, to the expense of your own autonomy and to the expense of learning and changing by your participants.

5. Instead of satisfying the desire to flee into the known: go to the discomfort and explore with your participants how the theory you are working with or the project on the agenda comes to life in the here and now. Pose an open question….
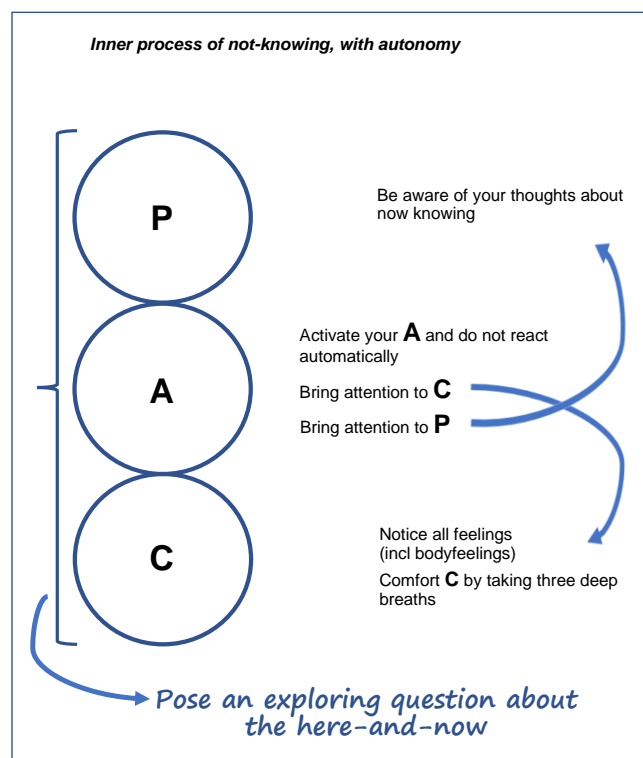

Figure 2: inner process in liminal space (autonomy)

It is important for facilitators of groups to become artists in 'not knowing' because – as Blaise Pascal said - '*Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known*'.

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Honour the space between no longer and not yet

Nancy Levin