

CHAPTER 1

Matt's Story: An Introduction to Conscious Change

The static was so loud during the call that I often asked him to repeat his words. Matt explained that he was caught in an airport on his way home from a conference and wanted to know if I had time to talk. The unanticipated delay had given him some uninterrupted time to focus on a problem he had been worrying about for some time. He had decided to call me because he could see connections between his current dilemma at work and what he had learned in my class on organizational learning and change he had taken a year ago.

"I remember some of what we learned," he said, "and I've applied some of the ideas, but it hasn't been enough. I thought maybe you'd be able to help me figure out what else to try."

"You've been at your job nearly six months now, haven't you?" I asked, wanting to get a mental picture of his work situation. I knew the organization was relatively small, and remembered his excitement when he had taken the job: "It's my dream job, Jean," he had proclaimed proudly at the time.

"Six months and two promotions," he said now. "During this time, several managers in our area have left. People keep leaving, and I keep getting promoted."

I waited, knowing he had more to say.

He continued, "The problem is that my director is such an unethical person. She's so manipulative. You wouldn't believe the things she's done." He paused.

Knowing this would be a lengthy call, I put my feet up on the desk.

"You know, Matt," I said, "this is the third call I've gotten in the last couple of months from former students who're either unhappy with their managers or the people around them at their jobs. People graduate ready to go into the world and make a difference, and then they encounter what's out there. It can be rough."

He continued, "Well, the whole thing's awful. I keep thinking I should leave, but I'm reluctant to start looking for another job, because I know that if she got a whiff of it, she'd fire me on the spot. That's how unethical she is."

"So, what's happening exactly?" I asked.

"Just yesterday, one of my key staff members came to see me, crying.

The director does things to put the staff down; she calls it 'putting them in their place.'"

"Putting them in their place?"

"And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Staff members come to me all the time to complain about her. I sympathize with the unfairness of it all and try to reassure them, but I'm not sure it helps much.

"Jean, you wouldn't believe what's going on. Here's the most recent example. Staff members have glass panes in their office doors that anyone can see through. Most cover the glass with pictures so they have some privacy. Well, she decided that only managers had the right to cover up the panes and the staff should leave theirs uncovered so they wouldn't feel too important."

"Too important?!?!" He was right; I was having difficulty believing it.

"Yes, exactly!" That's what she said two weeks ago when she showed me the memo she'd written about taking down the pictures. When she asked what I thought, I told her the staff needed privacy for interviewing clients, and that they'd feel totally demoralized if she made them uncover the glass. She said, 'Matt, they need to have an office that anyone can look into so they won't feel so important.' I asked, 'But isn't the point for them to feel valued in their work? If they don't feel valued, then our clients won't feel valued either.' She said, 'They already think they're too important, and it's got to stop.' So I said, 'Well, it will make it more difficult for them to do their work.'

"Thankfully, she didn't send the memo—at least not right then. Two days ago, though, when we came to work, all 20 staff members had a memo saying that anything on the glass panes had to be removed by the end of the day or would be taken down for them. I was so angry that I went to her and asked how she could do such a thing. She looked at me as though I was the crazy person and said, 'Matt, I told you staff members were feeling too full of themselves. I'm sorry you don't understand this, but they're just front-line workers. They aren't managers. I can't have them walking around as though they are managers. That has to stop.'"

Listening to Matt's story, I was growing more and more appalled. "So what did you say then?" I asked.

"Well, I told her it was important they feel valued and left her office. I couldn't look at her another second."

"Did you get in trouble with her for speaking up?" I asked.

"Oh, no. I'm still golden. In fact, a few hours later she said she'd been planning to give me a raise and I should expect it in my next pay check. I was furious. She was obviously trying to buy my silence."

"So what do the staff think about your raise?"

"Well, they don't know about it, but they do know about the new computer she gave me just a few weeks before she declared the pictures had to come down. The staff are limping along on computers so antiquated we can't update their software, but all the managers have

been given state-of-the-art equipment. She also walks right past the staff without speaking. Here's the bottom line, Jean. She's nasty to them and generous with us. She's promoting divisiveness between staff and managers by taking things away from them and giving things to us. I've tried talking to some of the other managers—asking them not to fall for it, but, sad to say, some of them have! A few agree that the situation is deplorable, but others are doing what they can to win her favor, even at the sacrifice of their own staff. It's demoralizing to watch. Also, the last time I looked our service numbers were steadily dropping, which means our clients are the ones who are really being hurt by all this."

"Why do you suppose she's doing this?"

"Beats me. But she does it all the time. I do know she's really insecure. She constantly asks me if I think someone is mad at her or doesn't like her or something. I'd guess this has something to do with her insecurities, but I don't know what's in her head. Now, here's the kicker. People tell me she's the third director they've had in as many years. I understand each of them was equally oppressive toward staff—each in his or her own way. There's really nothing I can do because I'm not the one with the power to fix it. And I can't afford to quit right now either!"

"Is there anything else, Matt?"

There was a long silence. Then, "Well, yes. I don't know if it's significant or even worth mentioning . . . I mean . . . well, she's not from the United States originally. In her country, people in charge are generally obeyed without question. I sometimes wonder if this is why she thinks she can get away with what she does. I'm trying not to stereotype and it may be nothing at all, but still, I wonder. Not that I would say anything to her about this, of course."

He paused—and awaited my reaction.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

Unfortunately, Matt's story is not that unusual. We hear many examples like this from our clients and students—illustrating how frustrated they are in certain relationships, because people can be so difficult. Those who tell us their stories usually have explored a number of options to handle the situation before talking with us. They have already tried to logically explain how right they are to the other person, sometimes again and again; but their reasoned explanations have gone unheeded. They have made overt or covert threats. Some have withdrawn psychologically; that is, given up—only doing what is absolutely necessary. If the situation was bad enough, they might even have left the relationship (quit the job, requested a transfer). A few have taken up sports, yoga, or meditation to manage the level of stress and frustration they have decided is an unavoidable part of their jobs.

Nearly all are convinced that things would get better if others would just listen to them and change their ways; if other people would just "act right," the problems would disappear. Yet no matter how great

their efforts to change others' attitudes and behaviors, those others seem incorrigible, unwilling, or unable to see the light. We suspect you, too, have had similar experiences. The greater your efforts to change others, it may seem, the stronger their resistance—and the greater the resultant frustration on both sides.

This book has been written to provide you with options. Matt's story is not an irresolvable situation; in the last chapter, Chapter 8, we will come back to see how he resolved it. But we cannot leap directly there, because, like many organizational issues, his is a complex problem. It takes a variety of acts, at the personal, interpersonal, and organizational levels, to repair this type of dysfunctional situation.

Right now, Matt is doing all he can to convince his director to change her ways. Matt believes the director is using a divide-and-conquer strategy, pitting the managers against the staff, and that some of the managers are going along with it. He is trying to ease his staff's anxiety, encourage his peers to resist buying into the divisive strategy, and convince his director to do things differently. He is worried about the impact of all this on their clients. Though he may not have thought of it in this way, Matt's goal is to encourage three groups—the director, managers, and staff—to work together more effectively for each of their own sakes as well as those of their clients.

It may seem strange to imagine Matt being the one to bring the director, managers, and staff together. After all, he has no clear authority to do so. In the organizational hierarchy, he reports to the director and the other managers are his peers. If he lacks formal power in this situation, is there anything he can do? This book is based on the belief that there is plenty he might do, with or without formal power. Although people with more formal power may find it easier to make improvements in their workplaces, we have found that people lower on the organizational totem pole can also have significant impact—if they are willing to take the risk and use a skill-based approach. The purpose of this book is to describe those skills.

What skills might Matt use in this situation? We begin with the premise that for Matt to accomplish his goals in this situation, he must first be willing to examine and test his assumptions about the director. This is not easy, since from Matt's vantage point, it is his director whose assumptions and behaviors need to change, not his own. Yet Matt's director is not seeking counsel in this situation; Matt is. If Matt wishes to initiate a positive change in this situation, he must first acknowledge that his current thoughts and feelings have helped get him where he now is, and for him to go further he must reconsider them.

The director may not be as unreasonable as she seems—most individuals are well-meaning and doing the best they can with what they have and know. It is likely that some of Matt's assumptions are inaccurate. You will learn as you read Chapter 2 on testing assumptions that perceptions are not always trustworthy, and assumptions about others can

sometimes lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. In other words, people often contribute to creating, or keeping in place, the very situations they are trying to change. Learning how to test his assumptions will allow Matt to look at the situation with fresh eyes.

There is also evidence that Matt and others, including the director, have had strong emotional reactions which may be getting in the way of dealing with the situation effectively, and might even be contributing to its dysfunction. We will cover this in Chapter 3 on clearing emotions. Learning how to reduce the baggage of negative emotions will allow Matt to move forward with fewer encumbrances; building positive emotions will give him more positive energy to deal with difficult situations.

If Matt commits to personal change in the form of testing his assumptions and clearing his emotions, he still has the task of forging productive connections among his director, his peers, and his staff. Using the skills of listening, inquiry, openness, and feedback would help improve this—and most situations. Matt would benefit from practicing these skills, and his staff would benefit from seeing him do so, as well as learning the skills themselves. Even if Matt should decide to leave the organization, his staff would be left more protected. No matter the resolution of this particular situation, there will be future situations and relationships that could be more satisfying and effective if these skills were applied. Hence Chapter 4 focuses on building effective relationships.

Matt mentioned that his director was born in another country, suggesting that cultural differences might be adding to their difficulties. Juxtapose this with their unequal power and status in the organization and the situation is ripe for what we call dominant/nondominant dynamics. These dynamics complicate interactions and relationships. An understanding of these dynamics would help Matt bridge what may seem like an unbridgeable chasm between him and the director based on their differing job ranks and cultural expectations. You have undoubtedly encountered situations confounded by differences between yourself and those with whom you are trying to connect—either in terms of demography, hierarchal rank, attitudes, values, or taken-for-granted behaviors. As you will see in Chapter 5, the differences we consider go beyond the traditional categories of race and gender. Becoming more aware of the many ways in which differential status and power divide will help Matt, and you, effectively use known antidotes to predictable dynamics among those more and less powerful.

How might Matt develop a greater ability to influence his director and peers? We don't believe that he is powerless in this situation. He may have limited formal power, but he may have significant informal influence. He has already demonstrated the power of personal integrity and courage, evidenced by his willingness to speak up to the director on behalf of his staff. In Chapter 6 on the conscious use of self, we show how skilled individuals pay close attention to the ways in which their thoughts, emotions, interpersonal skills, personal integrity, and ability to bridge differences affect their interactions and others' perceptions of

them. Fortified with this knowledge, they can then make more intentional choices of words and actions to bring about conscious change.

Matt has provided hints that the problems in his organization go beyond the individuals and their interactions with one another. After all, three directors have come and gone over the past three years. Even if Matt is able to work through his current challenges with his ctor and form a more meaningful connection with her, their relationship may continue to be tenuous unless the organization itself is geared toward promoting constructive rather than destructive relationships. Why did his director feel free to order the staff to remove their pictures? Is there a viable human resources department in this organization? Is there a culture of trust and respect? How might Matt creatively work with his staff and other concerned managers to foster a workplace where people feel valued and even important?

In Chapter 7 on initiating workplace change, we explain how to move beyond a focus on interpersonal dilemmas—especially those involving differences, and most do—to also consider situational dynamics and policies which may be supporting and constraining these dilemmas. We have some suggestions for Matt, and for you, about how to initiate change in the workplace.

The purpose of this book is to help you learn to use yourself more fully and to make more intentional choices about how to draw upon all your resources—your thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—as you seek to influence others and bring them together to initiate positive change.

Reframing change means no longer trying to get others to change, but paying more conscious attention to how you show up in interactions with others. It is about the power of self-change: the potential you have to initiate change by focusing on yourself and the effects of your actions on others.

Demanding that others change often increases resistance and ends up pitting people against one another. Self-change is more likely to plant seeds leading to broader-based change in the work setting—change that may be more sustainable. No matter how powerless you feel in a given situation, you have choices. The ability to choose is a major source of your power to make a difference.

Figure 1.1 depicts what we call the Conscious Change model. The book is organized accordingly.

WHY THIS BOOK?

We, Jean Latting and Jean Ramsey, have spent a combined four decades honing the Conscious Change model and helping others learn it. ¹ We have taught and tested this approach in both management and social work classrooms. We have provided training in for-profit, nonprofit, and government settings. We use the principles of this book in our own professional and personal lives. And we continue to gather feedback on their effectiveness.

We wrote this book, in fact, because we found ourselves helping many, many organizational clients and students like Matt. Our goal is to provide a way for those with similar problems to help themselves: to become proficient at identifying workplace dynamics that pit people against one another, and use the influence and power they have, and the skills they have developed, to make things better. There is no magic bullet here. Yet hundreds of organizational clients and students have told us these skills work.

We assume that most people reading this book are competent and already doing pretty well. We know many people like Matt who are quite capable in carrying out their functional work tasks. Work itself is not the source of problems; instead workplace dynamics—what some call politics—are an underlying theme. Referring to these meaty mind-benders as “just politics” belies the complicated nature of what is going on. Over and over, well-meaning people become embroiled in scenarios they had no intention of creating. Again and again, individuals with integrity and ideals throw up their hands in surrender when confronted with the difficulty in getting from Point A to Point B in their work lives. The message of this book is that it doesn’t have to be this way.

Differences do not inevitably lead to conflict. Change does not inevitably lead to resistance.

Our students and organizational clients have told us that, in learning

how to consciously use themselves to bring about change in their workplaces, they have achieved:

- an increased sense of personal responsibility and personal choice—they no longer feel powerless to make a difference;
- an increased ability to get more done with and through others—they have learned to appreciate strengths and capabilities in others and be less reactive to others' preferences and moods;
- a workplace climate that is more supportive of them as individuals and employees—they feel more energized and positive, and have experienced improved outcomes;
- an increased comfort with differences—as conflicts arise with others who are culturally different, they feel a greater sense of self-confidence in negotiating that tricky terrain; they no longer feel it necessary to avoid certain people or tip-toe around certain issues;
- resolution of long-standing strain in their lives—they find this reduction in stress improves their physical and emotional well being; and
- a more profound sense of meaning and contribution to the world.

In developing this approach, we used a combination of academic research, self-help tools, and old-fashioned trial and error in our teaching, consulting, and training to identify key principles that seem to have the most impact in helping people improve their work lives. An important condition for what we included was that it be supported by solid social science research. Many self-help books provide valuable assistance based on the authors' own experiences; several such books introduced us initially to some of the methods described. Other self-help books, however, contain superficial, even bad advice. To avoid this, we included selfhelp references only if they were backed by social scientific research.

Ideas and advice were included only if they met three criteria:

- supported by academic research—conclusions and applications have been tested in research studies, some in the laboratory, others in the field;
- supported by our own experiences—methods proposed have worked for us; and
- reported as useful by our students and organizational clients—feedback has confirmed the practical utility of what we recommend.

We wanted our suggestions and ideas to be backed by academic research because experts who have studied a phenomenon understand nuances far beyond what single individuals might conclude based on their limited experiences. We included only those things we could vouch for personally because we would not impose on readers anything we are unwilling to do ourselves. Relying on feedback from former students and organizational clients was a means of ensuring that our advice was practical

and applicable in today's organizations, beyond ourselves, and beyond academia.

In seeking research to support the recommended principles and practices, we cast a wide net, drawing from many disciplines—social psychology, social work, management, organizational behavior, industrial and organizational psychology, relationship and marital studies, public health, sports psychology, education, marketing, and others. We were particularly drawn to the work of positive psychologists who study happiness—a state to which we all aspire. This emerging field seems particularly promising to us as a way to improve our lives, our organizations, and our society.

The format of this book is conversations—between a consultant/coach and her clients, between former students and their instructor, and between colleagues in the workplace. These conversations are loosely based on real situations, with settings and names deliberately concealed. They are intended to make the book more readable and help you apply the ideas to your own situations and lives. We encourage you to stop and reflect as you read—and to use the principles and practices to improve your workplaces, your personal lives, your communities, and the ever-shrinking world in which we all live.

With so much conflict, animosity, hatred, greed, and suffering in the world, people often wonder what one person can do, especially when the individual is not a world leader, or even a local one. Our response is that each of us can begin by doing what we can to improve our own little corner of the world. Indeed, this is happening. Around the globe, more and more people are doing what they can to create peace, to foster human connections, and to share what they have with others.

Using Conscious Change to bring people together is part of that movement. The patience, kindness, compassion, courage, and skills embedded in the model enhance individuals' abilities to significantly influence others. "I feel so much more empowered, I can make a difference," people tell us. The word "empowerment" has become somewhat hackneyed in recent years, but no other word quite captures the glow on people's faces as they report to us, often years later, the results they have experienced from using this approach. We hope you will experience these benefits as well.

Notes to the reader: Throughout this book, in conversations and anecdotes, we have chosen to use the first-person singular: for example, "'You've been at your job nearly six months by now, haven't you?' I asked." Since each story is based on a conversation one of us took part in, we thought it most authentic to pretend there is one "author-Jean" telling the stories. This allows you to benefit from a sense of coherence that comes from one narrator, as well as from the broader perspective and insight that come from having two authors.

We have capitalized the terms "Black" and "White" throughout the

manuscript whenever these refer to race. Most people who identify themselves as “Black” are not black in hue nor do most Whites have a white hue. Hence the terms Black and White as we use them are proper nouns referring to ethnicity and not adjectives referring to a particular color or hue.²

A parallel distinction exists within the Deaf community. The words deaf or Deaf are used depending upon whether the reference is to an audiological trait (deaf) or a cultural identity (Deaf).³ In this book, we use the term “deaf” as an auditory trait and hence do not capitalize the term when it is used.

NOTES

1. Ramsey, V. J., & Latting, J. K. (2005). A typology of intergroup competencies. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 41* (3), 265–284.
2. Do we dishonor a people by misnaming them? (1999). *Editor & Publisher, 132* (33), 46; Wachal, R. S. (2000). The capitalization of Black and Native American. *American Speech, 75* (4), 364.
3. Senghas, R. J., & Monaghan, L. (2002). Signs of their times: Deaf communities and the culture of language. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 31* (1), 69–97.