

IS “BOTTOMNESS” GETTING IN THE WAY OF YOUR EFFECTIVENESS?

Two recent experiences, one from my home life and one from my executive coaching work, have refocused my attention on the notion of “bottomness” and how it can have unhelpful impact on our performance.

Before I explain what I mean by “bottomness” let me share the first of those experiences: I am at times challenged in parenting my teenage daughters. My wife observed to me last week that more than usual I have been expressing my parenting frustrations and they tend to sound like: “it really wasn’t meant to be like this”, “if only she had...”, and “she really should ...”.

She wanted me to know that it was really not very helpful or productive and was just a little tiresome. She went on to remind me that our successful parenting strategies (we do have some) have had a common quality that is; we make more progress in our parenting and nurturing when we deal with the reality we are facing rather than moan about how it should be. I am a more effective parent when I choose to stop complaining and get alongside my daughters, engaging them and co-creating ways forward.

She had caught me in a cycle of “bottomness.”

So let me explain “bottomness”. It is a made up word. This notion comes from the powerful work of Barry Oshry and his Human Systems Theory that sets out several predictable, usually unseen, unproductive dynamics of organisational life. One of these is “bottomness”.

“bottomness”: adj. or abstract noun. Describing moments when:

- we are dissatisfied with our experience and
- we feel powerless, that others are doing to us and
- we are convinced all would be OK if only others would sort it out

In these moments of “bottomness”:

- It seems clear that others are responsible, not us. We are unable to see that we might have a part to play in either creating our dissatisfactions or in perpetuating them. It is after all about others doing to us.
- We have given up our power, our sense of possibility and our sense of responsibility. Others hold all that.
- We are unlikely to sustain creative and productive relationships.
- We are unable to focus on finding alternative productive strategies.
- We are hooked into holding others responsible, our moaning, and our blaming. This is where we become unproductive as we lose sight of what really needs to happen.

Bottomness is a predictable and common unconscious human reflex reaction to circumstances. We do not consciously set out to create it for ourselves, yet with regularity many of us find ourselves in it.

How often do you hear yourselves or colleagues say things like “it shouldn’t be like this” and “if only they would sort it out”? When “they” are usually those people “up there”: the bosses, people in Head Office, who are held to be responsible. I think this is a common dynamic, yet how often do we catch ourselves doing it, getting caught in our bottomness?

Being around colleagues who are caught in their “bottomness” can be a pretty frustrating experience, yet we are all susceptible to moments of bottomness, it's a very human thing whatever our role or status.

Bottomness holds us in unproductive and powerless patterns. It can be a distraction from what we are really trying to achieve. If we want a different more powerful experience then we have a choice to shift out of our bottomness, a shift from being victim and complainant, from blaming others and holding others responsible for our experiences, to creators and co-creators of positive alternatives.

Here is an illustration of “bottomness” experienced by a Leader:

I was recently coaching an NZ based country General Manager. Last year his organisation had been taken over by a global organisation based in Australia. He was expressing strong frustrations about his relationship with the new overseas HQ and various individuals there. In one particular coaching session he was giving me a summary of what life was like for him at that time. His sentences were full of phrases such as: “they don’t understand me / us”, “if only they would do xyz.” “It is unreasonable and unfair that ...”, “they think we are uncooperative”.

My “bottomness” radar was on full alert.

I shared with him what I was hearing, not the words exactly, but the extent of his dissatisfaction, that his reputation and that of the NZ operation were at risk, and that he might be holding “them” responsible for the situation. I asked him, “and to what extent might you be responsible for the unsatisfactory relationships with Australia? “. There was silence. A light went on.

In the dialogue that followed, my client, at first a little reluctantly, began to see what he had not seen before, that he was playing victim, that he had not realized how much of his power he was giving away to people in HQ. As the coaching progressed he identified plenty of ways for him to create the more productive kind of relationships with Australia that he desired starting with a clear vision of what he wanted for NZ and himself.

The significant shift was for him to notice his moment of “bottomness”, to notice that he was attributing significant responsibility for his dissatisfactions to others. He resolved to do something different and continues to work on creating more connected and productive relationships with every conversation he has. Today, a few months later, he is able to report that Australian colleagues are talking positively about the value of the NZ operation and he is enjoying more cooperative and supportive relationships with Head Office colleagues.

So what?

Well, it matters to me that organisations are healthy, effective and productive, and that people have the most satisfying experience of work that they can have. This drives my professional work.

I want to raise awareness of our vulnerability to predictable, but so often unseen, unproductive systemic dynamics of which “bottomness” is one. (Topness and Middleness could follow).

So, I invite you to turn on your bottomness radars. See what you notice:

- What are your familiar moments of bottomness?
- Ask a trusted partner / colleague if they have ever seen it in you
- What do you think, feel and do in those moments?
- What are the unproductive consequences to you? Impact on others? Your organisation?
- What happens to your power in those moments?
- What does it take for you to shift out of bottomness?
- Talk to people around you about this notion of bottomness
- Notice potential bottomness in others

- Use a journal to reflect on your bottomness

If you should find yourself in a moment of bottomness and choose to do something about it, here are some strategies to try:

Actions to shift out of bottomness:

- Smile! It's OK. Accept bottomness as a predictable human reflex. It's great that you have noticed (because more satisfactory possibilities lie ahead)
- Make a choice to get more of the outcome you desire
- Create a clear vision and purpose for what you want more of
- Declare your positive intentions and wishes so others may get alongside you and help make it happen
- Engage others in co - creating ways ahead

If this article has resonated with you I would love to hear about how you experience Bottomness, and if you know others who you might be interested please share it with them. Thank you.

About the author:

Alex Smith (www.brittendensmith.co.nz) is an executive educator working as a coach and facilitator of leadership development. He works with individuals, teams and organisations to develop leadership that creates powerful cultures and productive organisations. He is particularly interested in the Systemic Dimensions of leadership.

References:

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