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“D'un Îlot de Chaleur à un Îlot de Fraîcheur”¹

A Co-op Intervenes Upon Itself

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¹ From A Heat Zone To A Cool Zone

D'UN ÎLOT DE CHALEUR À UN ÎLOT DE FRAÎCHEUR

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

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This action research report prepared

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In the spring of 2019, I was referred to Touski, a co-op in Montreal, who had been experiencing debilitating conflict in their organization, and was unable to get to the bottom of it. Our work together became my AHSC 698 Senior Project. What follows is a series of reflections on my experiences with the client system, inspired and informed by theories from the field. Another consultant might have responded differently to the issues faced by this organization. While I drew on well-proven practices I knew, and others I came to know for the first time, I now believe that what I was doing was working intuitively with the group, and their challenges (Lipson Lawrence, 2012). I listened deeply, and unremittingly, throughout the process, with all my senses (Holman, 2010), and I exercised a kind of vigilance to the quality of presence I brought to each of my interactions with the client. I did not realize it at the time, but what I was practicing, and heavily relying upon, was my *self as instrument*. “Use of self is *the conscious use of one’s whole being in the intentional execution of one’s role for effectiveness in whatever the current situation is presenting*” [italics original] (Jamieson, Auron, & Shechtman, 2010, p. 128).

Although I am not an acupuncturist, I liken human systems intervention to acupuncture in this way. The client is struggling. I try to get still, and *see*, and *see into*- “seeing self, seeing others, and seeing context” (Jamieson et al., 2010, p. 129). They go on to describe this practice as a kind of “social sensitivity to the surrounding system” (p. 129). What am I observing? What am I knowing, even if it is not named by the client? What should I address with my intervention? “Effective use of self includes not only our self awareness, but also our ability to interpret what’s going on as clearly as possible, and take action appropriate to the situation” (p. 128). What actions will help re-establish a healthy flow of life-force energy in this organization? What will bring maximum benefit? I must be strategic. Where should the needles go?

My Learning Goals

My initial learning goals were to practice straight-talk (Jamison, 1999) with the client, and to help to keep the client in divergence (Kaner with others, 2014) for as long as would be needed for innovation to happen, and for the organizational culture to benefit from equitable collaboration.

I worked with 3 clients- had been in dialogue with a total of 4- before finding Touski. Each one of these seemed to be in a different stage of readiness for a change process. Perhaps the only one truly ready was Touski. Client readiness had been something I was preoccupied with, prior to meeting any of these clients, but I suppose actual readiness was not easy for me to identify at first; I just took people at their word. What was interesting was to notice- with the help of my field supervisor, Riham Ahmed- where I was losing energy because of the client's particular expression of *resistance* (Block, 2011) or lack of readiness. Block encourages process consultants to ponder the questions: When do you name it, and jointly move through it? And when do you walk away?

“If we aspire to both the labels and the roles of helper, counsellor, adviser and supporter, using ourselves as key instruments, we must undertake a process of life-long discovery and of owning and refining our instrumentality” (Cheung-Judge, 2001, p. 16). Although I had not stated it outright, at the onset of my 698 journey, a learning goal that emerged through the process, was- and continues to be- to take care of myself during a project, and to healthily manage my energies. This has been an on-going challenge for me, in my personal and professional life. I have worked against a default habit of prioritizing the needs of others above my own, at the expense of my own well-being. I was able to take excellent care of myself during my work with Touski. I rested, meditated, exercised, ate well, and I stayed present and grounded through the

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interventions (Cheung-Judge, 2001). But during my exchange with a client I was trying to support prior to meeting Touski, I was blinded to the ways in which I was being worn thin in the process. I wonder if there is a connection between the self-awareness, and readiness of the organization, and my ability to practice my own self-care. Do I lose self-awareness- and energy- when working with clients who are skillfully unaware? (Argyris, 1990). What I have learned is that, as I move forward in my professional practice, using self as instrument, my energies must be optimal (Cheung-Judge, 2001).

Introduction to the Client

In conflict situations... we focus on what is being inflicted upon us or what we are being forced to endure. But if we are part of this universe, then every situation we are in, including moments of conflict and struggle, brings something fresh and offers us an opportunity to innovate. (Hamilton, 2013, p. 122)

Touski is a restaurant co-op in the Centre-Sud of Montreal, whose founding mission is to nourish the community with healthy food, art and culture, in a family-friendly setting. From their very beginning, the café itself was a radical social and political intervention in the neighbourhood. Started by two single moms, aspiring to make a living for themselves, and look after their children at the same time, giving them healthy food and an inspiring place to hang out- Touski was their way to survive, and thrive- and on their own terms. As such, it became a living symbol of possibility, hope, and culture, and a place for other folks, like themselves, to go, in an otherwise fairly culturally barren part of the city. According to my contact client, who arrived on the scene in the first few years, at the time the co-op was founded, on Ontario East, the neighbourhood was rough. There were sex workers on either corner of their block, the backyard

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was often littered with syringes, and the IGA grocery store kept the doors locked, and buzzed in customers one at a time, in the evening. Touski's bacon was regularly stolen, because folks would break into their fridge. But the co-op held steady and became a staple in the neighbourhood. In the backyard, they planted plants, trees, and vegetables, and slowly, they transformed the area from a literal, and documented hot zone, to a cool zone. They created a kind of fresh oasis, for thirsty minds, hearts and bellies to be quenched. They gave the neighbourhood- and themselves, what they all needed: a community.

Upon meeting members of the co-op, I was genuinely touched by their earnestness, warmth, depth, and the honesty with which they were examining their current challenges- as well as the more persistent systemic patterns they shared with me, around communication issues- both structural, and relational. The co-op did not tend to consult with anyone outside of the co-op. They decided to trust me, because they were desperate, and I was honoured to be invited in, to support them, and I knew, as well, that this trust would also have to be earned, over time.

In recent years, the co-op had undergone a great deal of stress and uncertainty. They suddenly had to move locations, as their building was put up for sale, and they were not in a position to buy it. They went through a number of experiences: grant-writing, business plans, many meetings, to determine their future. Could they just be caterers? Did they need a public location? What about continuing to serve the Centre-Sud? Could they be a food truck? What was the most important aspect of their service to salvage? Their identity was in question, and their future was uncertain. This not only impacted members in terms of financial uncertainty, but also much had been poured into the co-op, by current members, and also by those who had come before them, and the fate of the co-op was unknown.

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Finally, in the eleventh hour, they found a building they could afford to buy as a “co-property;” they would own the building with other people, who would own the other floors. They would occupy and own the first floor, and share expenses for the outside of the building with the other owners. More stress arose as they tried to get a mortgage, move, and do renovations. It was during this time that some members began making what were perceived to be autocratic decisions. Tensions were mounting, and not getting addressed- in the interest of just getting through. Now, 6 months after the move, they were settled in the space, and it is a beautiful, charming café, with delicious food, prepared and served by very kind-hearted people.

The first feeling I remember having was that these were good people, with good intentions for the co-op. External and internal pressures of the move magnified already-present communications issues, and they temporarily lost their way. What this allowed for, however, was an excellent moment to land, take a real temperature-read, and make conscious choices about how to now move into their collective future.

The Presenting Issue

As reported by the contact client, the organization had been stuck in an extensive period of conflict. There were 1 or 2 people around whom all of the conflict seemed to be centered, one in particular. He reported that these individuals were also making autocratic decisions and wielded the bulk of the power in meetings and decision-making, in an organization that espouses horizontality. This was ruffling the feathers of many, and rendering some co-op members feeling helpless, powerless and frustrated. In terms of the channels of communication within the co-op, there was no system in place for feedback, and culturally, the relationships were deeply enmeshed; co-op members were often roommates, lovers, and/or friends, making for an environment of “choosing battles wisely.” What I surmised was that all of this was supported by

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a well-established co-op culture of little tolerance for feedback; therefore, this straight talk-avoidant culture created the structure, and the structure reinforced the straight talk-avoidant culture. Perhaps because of this lack of transparency, when the conflict was building, complaints were not made explicit, but were rather, back-channelled in the system.

My Initial Contact

After he reached out by email, giving me a detailed description of the conflict, I met my contact client in person, at another lovely café in the Centre-Sud. We spoke for a couple of hours, in which he gave me a more thorough download of the challenges Touski was facing. He is presently the most senior member of the co-op, with 14 years invested in the organization. Because of my experiences with my three prior clients, I was ultra-clear in my contracting phase this time. In the first 5 minutes of our meeting, I reflected to him that, while it was entirely possible that the person identified at the center of the conflict may well have been behaving in ways that were negatively affecting others, and not discounting the need for peer-to-peer accountability around the issue- more than likely, there was an organizational mindset, or *paradigm* that was operational in their larger system, that allowed for this conflict to be born. "These problems do not lie 'out there', objective and independent of our actions" (Proulx, 2010, p. 58). I offered that, if the co-op was willing to have a look at how they were all contributing to this paradigm in some way, we could work together. It also turned out they were planning on restructuring their committees at this time, so I offered to host that process, and address how they are working with one another, from a relational perspective, at the same time. The co-op met to make the decision. By consensus, they agreed to work with me.

The Environmental Scan

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Instead of thinking in terms of the paradigm that condemns what's going on in a given conflict situation and implementing programs, methods, and procedures that implicitly look down on the people involved, process-oriented work discovers the missing power of transformation in the tension itself and in people's behavior. (Mindell, 2002, p. 4)

The environmental scan was my discovery period; I spent time with the client system, soaking in their ways, their culture and learning about the issues they were concerned about. A week after meeting my contact client, I sat in on a meeting of the ad-hoc restructuring committee, which consisted of 6 people. During this meeting, each person took turns naming the major problem spots in the co-op's current structure. I experienced the process as highly civilized and respectful, with little to no repeats of issues. People were forthcoming about their concerns. Some areas that needed restructuring included workflow and role definition, onboarding and exiting, the lack of a coordination committee (which would be responsible for communication of vital information across all committees), and how to deal with conflict. It seemed their meetings typically went on for hours upon draining hours, because they were bound by their decision to always come to consensus. It was reported that, during these meetings, a few voices spoke loudly, and many voices did not speak at all. Lastly, there were issues around trust, and a lack of shared leadership, and self-stewardship.

At the end of the meeting, I reflected back to them what I had heard. "Process consultation is the creation of a relationship with the client that permits the client to perceive, understand, and act on the process events that occur in the client's internal and external environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client" (Schein, 1999, p. 20). This is what I strove to do. The scan was the beginning of me offering a spacious container (Bushe, 2010) within which co-

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op members could begin to move again, reflect, and become *unstuck*. My presence seemed to already be bringing some benefit, or relief. I remember a couple of co-op members sighing and smiling, as though a weight was beginning to lift. They also thanked me profusely, and I found them to be genuinely grateful. I had the feeling at that time that we might be a very good match. I remember thinking how, even though the group discussed some hefty problems, and our work was certainly cut out for us, we finished the meeting with people feeling happy and smiling. I left feeling happy, too, and it struck me how differently that felt from my experience of client #3. They also offered me the most delicious soup. It was so good, I thought of it often over the following week, wishing I could eat it again.

I met the committee again a week after that. This time, the purpose of the meeting was for them to express their fears and concerns about the restructuring event. Again, they did not hold back. Some fears mentioned were: that other co-op members would not participate, or would be cynical in their participation, or would somehow de-legitimize the restructuring initiative altogether; that the past would dominate the discussion and folks would get stuck in heavy emotions, retelling the same old stories; or that major conflict would arise and take over the process. I reflected to them at the end of the meeting that it was unusual, in my experience, that folks were so forthcoming about their fears; typically, these stay hidden. I found it refreshing, and I told them so. It seemed to have a ventilating effect for them, as well: sighing and naming what worried them. And again, there was even some laughter, and levity, and by the end, again, they seemed brighter, lighter, stronger. The concerns were real, however; they had weight. I, myself, kept returning, in my mind, to the potential lack of sincerity in certain people's participation. "Commitments that go unmade, or have a lack of intent, can destroy even the noblest of dreams" (Turner, 2017, p. 156). I registered the cynicism as something to monitor, but

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decided not to give it too much power. I also found that their naming the concerns somehow re-emboldened them, rekindling their flame, and fortifying their commitment to carry through their aspirations to examine and change what was not working in the co-op. At the end of the meeting, a few of them discussed momentarily that, even with the fears, they were still going to do the event. It was a powerful moment to witness. I remember thinking that, this restructuring initiative was the co-op intervening upon itself, bringing the organization “back to flat” after the upsurge of hierarchy, and that the equitable, collaborative approach I was bringing would vehiculate the change.

I spent one afternoon parked at a table in the restaurant, and ate another delicious lunch- for which they only let me pay \$2.50! I sat with 6 more co-op members during that time. The vibe was that folks were a bit discouraged. They were tired, and lacking trust. Some felt betrayed by the power differential, and unsure how it would ever be resolved. They hadn't yet caught the wave of hope that was starting to take hold in the restructuring committee; but by the end of our brief chats, they left with a glimmer of possibility, like maybe this event could bring some good after all.

Beyond this, I intentionally, informally met people around the restaurant on a regular basis whenever I was there. And lastly, I had a meeting with the woman at the center of the conflict, on another date, at a different location that was convenient for both of us. It was a great meeting. She fully owned having made autocratic decisions in the thick of things, in recent months. She also shared her perception that the co-op had become disconnected from its history; new members not even knowing the story of how the co-op was formed, and this greatly troubled her. This information planted the seed for me to have the co-op do a collective recounting of the organizational history. It could help to situate this particular group and context in the timeline of

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the co-op's larger journey. It could, potentially, be bonding, and it would link them all to the greater, original values of the organization. With client #2, we were planning to do a Search Conference, and as such, I had done a fair bit of research on teams telling the story of their organization. I was very inspired by the prospect of doing that process with this group of people, who were beginning to touch my heart.

"Disrupting current patterns in a way that engages people in uncovering collective intentions and shared motivations is required. As a result, change processes are more heterarchical than hierarchical" (Bushe & Marshak, 2015, p. 18). During the period of the environmental scan and beyond, I aspired to embody what Bushe describes as a "non-anxious presence" (2010, p. 12). As a stranger to the co-op members, I intuitively felt it was crucial that the co-op members felt comfortable with me, and that they could sense my competency to support them in their quest. I wanted them to feel safe with me, and to know that I would take the very best care of their co-op. I stayed grounded, but also modeled a fluid inclusivity of peoples' perspectives. I invited all views as *welcomed*, as *vital*. If, as Stacey writes, "an organization (is) the patterning of peoples' interactions with each other" (2003, p. 325), then, logically, changing the way the conversations are held could change the patterns. I believe I saw dividing walls start to crumble almost immediately. This led me to believe that, more than likely, folks' interests were more similar than they imagined, and that a new narrative could be created- or an old, dear narrative could be remembered. Stacey continues to hypothesize that "there are then no separate levels, only paradoxical processes of individuals forming the social while at the same time being formed by it" (p. 327). I consciously embodied *possibility*. I was regularly told of the value I was bringing, by simply reflecting what I heard, and asking clarifying questions, and so I continued. I believe that my willingness to receive folks as they were, where they were, with the challenges

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they were facing- with presence and openness- offered a non-judgmental space, and modeled an openness and curiosity that they, too, could practice (Schein, 1999; Schwarz, 2013). This posture, this use of *self as instrument* was, perhaps, *permission-giving* to others (Jamieson et al., 2010). It seemed to help people find their own relationship to the work we were doing together, and to this moment in the timeline continuum of the co-op.

My Reflections on the Environmental Scan

"Trust, specifically trusting people to manage themselves, with the interest both of others and the organization in mind, is the foundation of a horizontal culture" (Slade, 2018, p. 32). Perhaps, the central value of shared leadership, and trusting that members are operating with the best interest of the co-op at heart, got lost somewhere along the way. Perhaps the stresses of the move magnified already-present unhelpful patterns around lack of transparency, and back-channelling conversations. The beauty and magic of the tribe that was the Touskiens² were more than evident; they were an inspiring group of people. With the move, they had been in full survivor mode for several years; no play, not maintaining relationships- just focusing on the task of getting themselves steady and stable again. In one of our meetings, they referred to themselves as *weak*, having gotten through the move, but at a cost. And the lack of shared leadership was demoralizing to many members. It occurred to me that maybe the restructuring committee, by initiating this event in the first place, was working to reclaim everyone's power- as shared. In her book on mature leadership, Marshall writes, "the reality is that a true call *cannot* be ignored... [And] a call cannot and will not be heard without true longing" (2004, p. 44-45). This longing felt palpable to me- and it felt as if it was growing. I wondered if, during the move, all the members of the co-op did what they needed to, in order to get the organization through a difficult

² The name they called themselves and each other, and anyone who has been a member in the past.

time, and they came out of it a little dishevelled. The unaddressed conflict grew, became unmanageable, and became the reason they would seek help, and begin to take a closer look at what was not working, and how they were contributing to it, whether they were aware of it or not (Argyris, 1993). Kahane says, "When in these ways power and love become polarized, both manifest their degenerative, fallen forms. Our power becomes reckless and abusive, and our love becomes sentimental and anemic" (2010, p. 71). The best of the co-op, the tribe, the community, and the bonds- had been damaged by power differentials, and dis-served by systemically not addressing issues. They were soft around feedback, not always thinking it was worth having your also-room-mate or lover angry with you. I also felt intuitively (Lipson Lawrence, 2012) that these people were not *in their power*- but they were starting to rise up.

The fact that they were "flat," i.e. an organization with decentralized leadership, did not automatically mean that they had wholesome and equitable practices in place. In fact, they seemed to have a variety of approaches, some of them healthy, some of them less so- for example, the back-channelling and unchecked, autocratic decision-making. They could be very fair and respectful; I personally witnessed them taking turns speaking and being open to diverse and even contentious views. The potential was there for real, shared leadership, and enough people wanted it.

Double-Clicking on the Conflict

Demonstrate the care and attention for yourself and others that anything of value deserves. That is the first and only imperative. Don't miss an opportunity to exert the power you have to remind others of who they are: invaluable, priceless, and irreplaceable. (Hicks, 2011, p. 3)

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I wondered how to address the conflict that had been stirring in the co-op, without delving into it. One member of the co-op had been making autocratic decisions, and was suddenly wielding a lot of power, and, it had been reported, that she was becoming increasingly difficult to work with. A number of members had come to the HR committee, expressing frustration- some saying they did not want to work with this person anymore. Prior to contacting me, members of the co-op had spent 5 hours in a meeting, spinning their wheels around the conflict issue- without the “culprit” present. I was also told, however, that this same person was a hefty, tireless worker for the co-op: setting up business plans, landing the mortgage, doing renovations in the new place, late into the night. They did not want to fire her. I thought that boded well, for, on some level, they could see her value. They just didn’t like the way she was working. Apparently, she was also not accountable for flying solo, beyond reproach- and this offended co-op members most of all. Professor Rosemary Reilly said, "Sometimes conflict is the symptom, and sometimes it is the cause" (personal communication, June 15, 2019). In this case, I believed conflict was a symptom of larger issues within the co-op (lack of direct communication, for one), and it was also the result of internal and external pressures in the system (the move, and all it entailed). They had moved, but I intuited that they were also *evolving*, and dysfunctional relationships and communication patterns did not reflect who they now wanted to be. They did not have a structure, yet, in place, to support this new way of being. This is what they wanted to create. The model needed an upgrade. It was a glimmer, gaining light.

Could collaborating to intentionally create a structure that supports the co-op, wherein their highest values are embedded, be enough to reinstate equity? And shift this conflict story from a victim/villain binary narrative (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012)- to a more balanced view, and empowered position?

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In my initial conversation with my contact client- right before the end of our meeting, I asked him if there was anything else I should know, to help me be of the best support to the co-op. He said, “Yes, don’t bring in a model. It won’t work. We need to do things our way” (personal communication, March 12, 2019). I didn’t bring in a model, but I modeled Schwarz’s (2013) Mutual Learning Mindset Behaviors, whenever I had the chance. I modeled curiosity, and I modeled that “I (had) information, so (do) other people” (p. 50). Could our event be a context wherein folks could simply stand in the current circumstances of the co-op, but observe them from a different perspective, assuming best intentions of each other? What could that simple act of faith and generosity do? Pushing the idea further, at one point, in my scan, I invited a member to consider how the surge in hierarchy might have been an expression of the co-op's *intelligence*. I asked her, "How did the hierarchy respond exactly to what was needed in the co-op?" She replied, "Ah, now you are really illuminating something for me that I had not yet considered." "We can change our internal default setting from victim mode to self-questioning mode: 'Might I have contributed to the breakdown of this relationship?'" (Hicks, 2011, p. 143). As mentioned earlier, I also held that, probably, people were acting out of the same interests, only expressed differently, and there would always be "multiple concurrent realities" in every situation (Hammond & Mayfield, 2004, p. 8). Perhaps, in a wholesome, held context, people could come to understand that, in this highly stressful time of the move, *everyone* in the co-op acted in the best interest of the co-op- but perhaps also- made mistakes? Perhaps, in such a setting, accountability may gain appeal, and begin to take root, as a wholesome expression of horizontality (Slade, 2018). For now, I was holding in mind Johnson's work on polarity (1998)- again, holding the perspective that inclusivity of diverse views was wise, and could offer insight, direction and innovation. As such, I was imparting to the co-op that there were probably "two or

more right answers that are interdependent" (p. 4), and that the wise path would be to "capitalize on the inherent tension between the two poles... increasing empowerment of everyone involved" (p. 8). This was the goal. I had to get everyone in the same room, working together, as equals, holding that everyone is part of the picture that got them there, and everyone would chart the course for the future (Jones, 2014).

The Plan

Knowing that examining task and the process of working together are intertwined, and best examined in tandem, I resolved to take a double task approach. As Bridger suggests, "In organizational settings the internal task [of 'self-study'] is best undertaken in conjunction with an external task. I have therefore called my approach the double task model" (1990, p. 221). The project would be: *a participatory restructuring of the co-op's committees, with the purpose of supporting the coop in re-aligning with its values and mission*. This would offer co-op members the opportunity to collectively re-imagine the co-op structure, while also flexing muscles of equity, mutual respect and shared leadership. As recent years have required centering task functions- in order for the co-op to simply continue to exist- maintenance of relationships had slipped. Moreover, there had been no embedded approach in the past to *ensure* maintenance was taking place. Perhaps the move had magnified the need, pointing out a gap. The event would provide the context to build capacity in all of these softer skills, while also restructuring the committees.

Since the co-op was struggling in both the structural (example: lack of role definition and workflow issues) and the human/adaptive aspects of its day-to-day workings (no embedded practice around feedback or checking-in), the design of the event would include activities that explicitly address both the task and the maintenance needs (Dimock & Kass, 2007) of the co-op

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at this juncture; i.e., restructuring the committees, *and* reconnection across the team. And, all the while, the event would be an experiential opportunity that will allow members to try out new behaviours that serve to re-embody and re-operationalize values that are central to the co-op.

“There is intentional interplay between reflection and making sense on the one hand, and experience and action on the other” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179). The structure of the event would offer the context and process for co-op members to experiment with each other with a number of practices they wished to embody in their organization:

- Direct communication: Naming and owning your experience, and testing inferences and assumptions with each other (Schwarz, 2013), in a safe and held space.
- Suspending business (Bridger, 1980), balancing between task and maintenance.
- The norms will establish equity, as a lived practice.
- Skillfully navigating conflict (with my support and guidance) should it arise.

The desired outcome was that the process “leaves the ideal community of inquiry having internalized not just dispositions of conceptual inquiry, but more process skills, such as evaluating examples, reasoning analogically, judging part-whole relationships, and detecting unstated assumptions” (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010, p. 11). Continuously cultivating awareness and intentionality, co-op members would engage in a reflexive practice of action and reflection, thereby learning, and then applying the very skills they wish to embed in the organization, live, and on-the-spot, throughout the event (Kolb, 1984).

To learn, an organization must value and support generative learning. It can do this by creating mechanisms and procedures for individuals and groups to share their knowledge with each other... so that everyone's knowledge and skills are accessible to the entire organization. (Gill, 2010, p. 38-39)

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The learning organization that Gill describes seems to me to be the ultimate expression of horizontality: every individual as a vital resource, centering the interests of the co-op first, sharing knowledge, and thriving. The Touskiens were proud to be a co-op, to be horizontal; it was the reason many of the members joined- because it reflected values they held dear, as individuals. Now, based on their wishes to evolve their relational and communication practices, it would seem they were ready to become a learning organization. Horizontality had tragically become keeping everyone the same. Perhaps "social values are here regarded as coping mechanisms that make it possible to deal with persistent areas of relevant uncertainty" (Emery & Trist, 1965, p. 28). "Tall poppy syndrome" was a regular occurrence; if someone came up with a great idea, but had come up with many ideas recently, they would just be shot down (L'Étrange 1710).

I hypothesize that when I met this organizational system, they were: overdue for the change process; desperate to resolve the conflict that was eating up their focus and energy; and also eager to claim the moment and assert a clear and new direction for themselves, moving forward. They had undertaken the major changes of the move, and becoming owners of a building, and what was left out of that process was the need to adaptively self-organize. It is my impression that the conflict and tensions they were experiencing was that the organization's structure and culture had not yet caught up with the move, and they, as an organization, were living in this gap between who they were and had been, and who- and how- they now aspired to be.

I wondered again about *readiness*, and how it would play out in the co-op, with the change processes we were envisioning. What I was curious about at this time was individual readiness versus group readiness. For example, if a co-op member is ready to stretch into their leadership,

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will the organization flex, and make space for this individual, and be responsive to that bold and embodied gesture that can also advance the interests of the co-op? Will old habits of cutting people down resurge? Who, and what, within the co-op structure, will drink up the change? And where will there be resistance? And will the group resistance deter the evolution of individuals? Will some individuals prevent the growth of the whole? These are some of the questions that were pre-occupying me.

Stacey describes a complex system as one that

has a holographic or fractal aspect in which the parts interact continually to recreate the whole and the whole affects how the parts interact... Throughout, the interaction between agents and systems is of a nonlinear form in which feedback on the consequences of behavior is used to construct models of the world from which rules of conduct, or schemas, are extracted. (1996, p. 19, 21)

This aptly describes the dance I witnessed between the co-op and its members, what Emery and Trist (1965) referred to as the "causal texture of organizational environments" (p. 21). I would suggest that, barring any intentionality or awareness around the organizational patterns the co-op was struggling with, at least prior to the event, they were largely being enacted in an unconscious way. Back-channelling, and the fact that everyone was complicit to this uneven distribution of power, were probably blind spots. Emery and Trist go on to say, however, that if "these schemas are then changed in light of further behavior to produce more adaptive behavior," this intentional shift moves the organization into a "learning system" (p. 21). I considered these ideas profoundly during the planning stage. The event would be the lab that would render the dance visible, and the guiding norms I would provide would both center the relational and allow for a safe

exploration into beautifully shared leadership. This was part of the intention of the interventions we carried out.

I would ensure that each activity within the event would offer to the co-op an opportunity to explore and respond to the challenges they were facing, in constructive and generative ways, and to also be, in and of themselves, an introduction to new ways of working; in other words, to provide them with a bunch of "flat" tools they would then have had the experience to work with easily and readily in the future. Please see Appendix A for the original outline of the event.

Resistance

Resistance to the change process appeared in the planning stages. When word got around that perhaps, in the event, we would create a new vision statement- one that reflected the aspirations of the co-op *today*- there was backlash and fear. "We already have a vision; you can't just make a new vision." I just kept returning to the mental model of "Yes, and"³, sharing that I hoped that co-op member would come to the event, because we could really benefit from their clarity and passion around the origins of co-op values. My posture was *inclusive*. I repeated, as often as was necessary, that all views were both welcome and vital to what would be our work together. During the conversations I had with co-op members, I myself became the container (Bushe, 2010), the host: grounded, spacious, mind open, curious and caring. I think this really helped to cultivate trust. The day I sat at a table in the restaurant to meet whomsoever wished to speak with me, I was there to hear whatever perspectives they wished to share, whatever was important to them, and to let members beyond the ad-hoc committee know me as well. And I

³ "Yes, and" thinking is a guideline in improvisational comedy that suggests that a participant should accept what another participant has stated ("yes") and then expand on that line of thinking. It is also used in organizational work as a principle that improves the effectiveness of brainstorming, fosters effective communication, and encourages people to listen and be receptive to the ideas of others. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yes,_and...

think that was the real work getting done: they began to trust me, and to trust that the event would tend to their interests and concerns as well. Each left my table more reassured, expressing their gratitude to me, and their commitment to the project. I suppose this reassured me, as well!

On my side, I wondered, would those with more power presently be willing to share leadership during the event? Would they be inspired by the almost-immediate benefits of the equitable, collaborative processes? On the wall of the dining room in the restaurant, in beautiful calligraphy, is written, "Pas de patron depuis 2003, pas de proprio depuis 2018."⁴ Their logo is that of an activist's fist rising up- in this case, holding a fork with some spaghetti on it. This is what they stood for. I was leveraging that co-op members- even those with more power- would want to bridge the gap between horizontality being a theory in use, to being a theory in action (Argyris, 1990), fork of spaghetti, fist, up in the air!

The Intervention Event:

La Rencontre Structure, Communication, Ressenti⁵, Day 1

The highest level of trust is to assume that the environment is benign and tractable, that it is susceptible to my creativity, my projections, and my images. To trust is to believe in my unlimited powers to create the world in which I live, and to transcend what is... The high trust process is, also, to allow other people to be where they are, to join them in an attempt to see together what is, and to collaboratively look at what might be. (Gibb, 1978, p. 50)

The event would be held with this quality of intentionality. Folks would be invited into an intentional setting wherein, in the name of the healthiest and most generative work environment, wholesome team behaviours would be expected and delineated via

⁴ No boss since 2003, no owner since 2018 (*my translation*).

⁵ The event of Structure, Communication, and What is Felt (their title for the event).

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the agreed-upon *norms*. With norms such as Respect Yourself- take care of yourself, observe and manage your own judgments and projections- and, Respect Other, co-op members would have the opportunity to behave, and almost- *had to* behave differently with each other, than they had been lately. Within the parameters of this event, members would practice and repeat new ways of being and working with one another, flexing the muscles to ensuring double-loop learning (Argyris, 1993). The goal being that new behaviours would stick, and not be a “one-off”, and that the co-op would start growing habits of authentically shared leadership. It would be vital to create a container together from the beginning, for the work to be both safe and brave- an invitation for co-op members to show up wholeheartedly in the process. I invited them to commit to having all hands on deck through the completion of the work; that the process needed their full presence and engagement, and as such, to take the best care of their bodies, hearts and minds throughout- taking health breaks as needed.

The Check-In

Feeling is... the capacity of the person to participate in wider unities of being, to indwell what is present through attunement and resonance... it does not have to be discovered. You do not have to make a special psychological journey to find it. (Heron, 2010, p. 44-45)

We began in a circle. I took a couple of deep breaths, just to properly land myself in the process. Using self as instrument, I knew the success lay in first grounding myself, holding the container and modeling receptivity to the process (Cheung-Judge, 2001). I looked around the circle of people, and warmly welcomed them to the event that they had initiated. We had gotten

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to this moment. This initial circle represented the embodying of the invitation for folks to show up fully (Holman, 2010).

We began with a check-in. Referencing their line of work, in food, I asked them, "Qu'est-ce-que vous aimeriez nourrir?"⁶ The answers were varied and touching; people were already holding the process with earnestness and care.

Underneath our fears, at the most fundamental level, a part of us aspires to wholeness... (yet) showing up whole feels risky. We put out our selfhood for all to see, and expose this most treasured part of ourselves to potential criticism, ridicule or rejection. (Laloux, 2014, p. 147)

This change process invited people into their vulnerability as individuals, sharing what was alive for them, and what was worrying for them- and also into a period of deliberate uncertainty, while they innovated. Such a moment required a lot of care. Once folks had responded to the initial check-in question, I then asked them to share what words they heard others say. This suggestion, which came to me in the moment, immediately served as an interruption, a gesture to bring an even-higher quality of listening and focus. It enlivened and engaged them: they sat straighter, they started to *work*. I was working intuitively; my intention was to shake things up a bit, right away, to interrupt people's habituated ways of seeing and listening to one another, and to bring a crisp awareness into our work. "It should not be possible to change organizational routines without changing individual routines, and vice versa. Any attempts at doing so should lead to failure or, at best, temporary success" (Argyris, 1993, p. 53). My goal was to bring awareness to, and then help to *shift* the very posture with which folks were holding themselves

⁶ What would you like to nourish?

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and each other, and to start revaluing each member as vital resource. I wanted to help to move them into both new ways of being and new ways of doing.

After the check-in, we established *norms*. "Practices don't happen by osmosis. We need to intentionally and actively initiate new behaviours" (Slade, 2018, p. 25). The norms would serve to interrupt behavioural patterns that had become entrenched. Regularly returning to these would offer co-op members the opportunity to reflect upon, and adjust their behaviours in action (Schön, 1983).

Although in some settings, I would opt to collectively create norms, in this case, I felt the co-op needed a structure they did not yet know- or have, and, given the history of conflict, our process together required a very strong container (Bushe, 2010), and a clear guiding structure. We used a combination of norms I had learned in circles of Authentic Relating (<https://www.authrev.org/>) and Relational Culture (<https://relationaluprising.org/>). The basic notions were the following:

1. Respect Self
2. Respect Other
3. Respect the Space We Are Creating Together
4. Bring Your Best. Within these.

I folded in guidelines from Art of Hosting (www.artofhosting.org), adding that a way to respect yourself is to *host yourself*, i.e. to track your inner-workings, projections and judgments, and to own and tend to these. I invited people to bring intentionality to their participation, to regularly check in to be sure they are *contributing, building, and enriching*. In "Respect Other," I brought in ideas from social justice circles I had been part of, such as *move up, move back, move sideways*, or, as Slade describes, "you will need to create the void that others can occupy and

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support others who are activating their personal leadership" (2018, p. 29). I wanted to interrupt their pattern of back-channelling- rather than addressing issues directly with the person concerned, their usual habit was to speak with someone else about it. As such, I invited the group not to speak about the process outside of the process. If they were curious about another person's actions, I invited them to own their story about it (Brown, 2018), and to check inferences and assumptions with the person directly (Schwarz, 2013). I concluded the norms by inviting them all to take on what I called the "posture de l'apprenant," the posture of the *learner*. Our work together required that they stay open, receptive and curious, and to prioritize not-knowing over knowing- in the interest of knowing better, and coming out with the most innovative plan, in the end. They agreed to the norms, and added a couple of their own, also around treating one another with respect.

One thing I observed was how the members of the ad-hoc committee absolutely shrunk in the energetic space they took up, once in the presence of the larger group. I remember one person in particular becoming a lot smaller than she was, slumping over, and giggling nervously. They seemed to be deferring their power. The check-in and the norms seemed to even out the terrain, and I did not see that behaviour again.

"Alignment is not about acquiescence to a group norm but collectively figuring out a way forward that reflects the group's diversity. Maintaining this diversity maintains the group's power" (Kubiak et al., 2015, p. 69). I was asking the co-op to embody their espoused values. It would sometimes be a stretch.

L'État des Lieux (The State of the Terrain)

"Inner work is a big part of relationships and of large group work. You can resolve outer problems sustainably only if they are resolved internally as well" (Mindell, 2017, p. 97). We

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began with a solo practice of "l'État des Lieux," an activity from the Art of Hosting canon, which, in essence, is a temperature-read of the moment in which folks find themselves, in relation to an organization with which they are intimately involved. My intention with this activity was to: let people land in the space, in this moment in the continuum of the co-op, and to land first within themselves and their own perceptions of the current circumstances; to center both the dance between the individual and the collective; to honour and utilize the marvellous, granular diversity of individual perspectives on a collective issue; and to allot adequate and important time to reflect individually, and then, to collectively harvest what is most alive and needs care. Some guiding questions we worked with were:

- What kind of moment does the co-op find itself in, now? Birth? Death? Habituated routine?
- What is really alive? What does the group need now?
- What is looking to emerge? What connects us?

We then harvested with 2-4-ALL (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013). After État des Lieux, folks paired up with one other person to share about the experience, and what insights arose, then the pair grouped itself with another pair, and then folks shared in the plenary. "Much of the communicative and power relating activities of interdependent people take the form of continually iterated patterns of repetition in which meaning and power figurations have the quality of stability which we call identity" (Stacey, 2003, p. 325). My hope, with the norms, and with every activity, was to interrupt undermining habits, and promote wholesome collaboration instead. I hoped that 2-4-ALL would generate openness and receptivity in the group, while also serving as a meaningful transition from individual to group reflection. Interestingly, what came through in the plenary was the heart of the organization's most core and most dear aspirations: to

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be a community, to take care of one another, to take care of the relationships, to take care of new members, to make of Touski a learning and development organization, to have better communication, to reconnect with our values, and to be accountable. Also, that this event be a moment of landing, a moment of healing, a moment to choose who they were going to be, now. And of course, much about the committees: fluidity of roles, better work environment, better work-life balance, investing more in HR, a system to track work-flow, etc. This data indicated a level of co-op-wide coherence, in terms of understanding the work ahead. What it also showed me was that people's hearts were in the work, and, again, evidenced the longing I had been sensing.

Keeping the goal of reconnecting co-op members with each other and re-aligning them with the central values of the organization, I had considered that it might be valuable to connect individual values with collective values. I was not certain whether, on this first night, we would do some structured story-sharing around individual values that were central to people's leadership, which would aid in bonding and bridging across differences (a key practice of Relational Culture)- or whether we would look at the organizational history, inspired by Emery's work in search conferences (1999), or whether we would do a process of auto-evaluation and personal accountability around how people have showed up over the last 6 months- and what they wished to develop. I knew I would have to read the room. I would do this by “using a combination of knowledge and experience to organize information and draw hunches, conclusions, and interpretations. This process includes multiple ways of knowing (e.g., empirically, rationally, somatically, and socially constructed)” (Jamieson et al., 2010, p. 130). To do the accountability piece, I knew the climate of trust had to be strong. My sense was that this was still fragile, and forming. The group members were just beginning to warm to each other

again. I wanted to protect that, and build on it. As the data from the État des Lieux activity pointed clearly to the beating heart of the co-op, and I decided we would move into the history.

The Story of Touski

"Individual and organizational purpose go hand in hand. One needs the other to flourish... When the individual and organizational purpose enter into resonance and reinforce each other, extraordinary things can happen" (Laloux, 2014, p. 219). I invited the group to collectively tell the story of Touski because I wanted them to remember their roots, and the common interests that bonded them. I drew a timeline on a large piece of paper, and we established that the organization was born in 2003. I invited the person who had been there the longest to stand up and start recounting what he knew of the beginnings of the co-op, before he even arrived. I captured the data on the paper on the wall. I invited others to chime in when we were missing key events on the timeline. Collectively, they would construct the timeline. The shift in the energy in the room was palpable. The stories were touching, funny, crazy even. In the early days, the neighbourhood was sketchy. There was a lot of drug-use and theft; there were often syringes found in their backyard. And for a time, co-op members had to be stationed overnight to guard the fridge, because people were breaking in, and literally, stealing the bacon. The room filled with uproarious laughter at times, quiet contemplation, and even reverence for the founders of the organization, in other moments. Eventually, I invited everyone to stand up in a line, in the order they arrived at the co-op. The group, once-divided, was finding its wholeness again. I took a photo. I invited them to keep filling in the gaps on the timeline, with vital moments, and also to write on the timeline when each of them arrived. They did so, and framed their names in hearts.

A sense of place connects us not only to our desired future but also to the gifts from our past. This story has no ending; instead, it teaches us how to create

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new beginnings and how to join the stream of the larger story... In this way, we can draw from the best of our traditions and carry them forward with us.

(Jones, 2014, p. 179)

The retelling of the history enabled the triple task of: allowing the co-op to situate where they now found themselves, in the history of the organization, continuing to identify what was important to them to salvage and bring with them into this next chapter, while also tending to the relational aspect of the group.

We closed the evening with a check-out. I asked, "What are you beginning to learn?" Folks were looking at each other with a more tender gaze. Tensions were dissipating, and intentions were becoming more crisp, and specific, and less general, and problem-based. The group was engaging with its own future. By their replies, I could see their hearts were softening, and minds were sharpening. It was remarkable to witness what could transpire once we "step back from the noise of our situation, quiet ourselves down, open up, and see what we could see" (Kahane, 2010, p. 107). One check-out comment that really struck me was that looking at the timeline of events made it clear, that although the last 6 months were a small blink of the eye, in the history of the co-op, this has been a crucial time in its history. I invited the group to be gentle with themselves, to rest, to do whatever they needed to do to take care of themselves, and we closed for the evening.

Day 2

We reconvened the next morning at 9 am. There were delicious and healthy snacks throughout the events, including an incredibly yummy vegan lasagne for lunch on this day. We always ate well. Continuing with the goal of fostering wholesome responsibility for the co-op, we started the day with a check-in around the following prompt, "The story of Touski is a story

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of _____. I am now starting to imagine a story of _____." My idea here was to bring attention to the power of narrative, and that the story we are telling may be missing information, and can change (Brown, 2018). Some of the answers I heard were: a story of challenge and dreaming to a story of re-birth; a story of perseverance to a story of reinvention; and a story of adaptation to a story of experimentation. Many of these statements indicated to me that folks were beginning to engage in *possibility*. They were not *stuck* with the way things were anymore, and were now beginning to act as “active, responsible agents (that can) change the environment” (Emery, 2000, p. 625). We took the momentum and moved into Keep, Chuck, Create.

Keep, Chuck, Create⁷

I reviewed the norms so as to ensure that, as the work became more intensive, the quality of care folks would show each other, and everyone’s contributions would not diminish. With added stress and pressure, I wanted the group to succeed in working skillfully, rather than falling back into familiar, maladaptive patterns of behaviour, such as dominating the conversation and eclipsing other people’s voices. "A question to keep in mind is, 'How can my vision, skills and strategy be leveraged for the organization while inviting others into theirs?'" (Slade, 2018, p. 29).

I decided to go with Keep, Chuck, Create, rather than World Café (Brown and others, 2005) and Pro-Action Café⁸ - as was outlined in my plan- because this process combined the intentions of the two, and in a format I felt more comfortable with. I had decided this based on how things had unfolded the previous day. My intention was innovation, clarity around structures/ what was working, what was not, but also to provide an opportunity for the co-op to “mix it up a little,” in

⁷ This process comes from Emery (1999). However, my field supervisor, Riham Ahmed, uses the word *chuck* instead of *drop*. I particularly like this phrasing.

⁸ Originally developed by Baeck and Leoprechting. For a description of this process, see <https://st6.ning.com/topology/rest/1.0/file/get/2653315516?profile=original>

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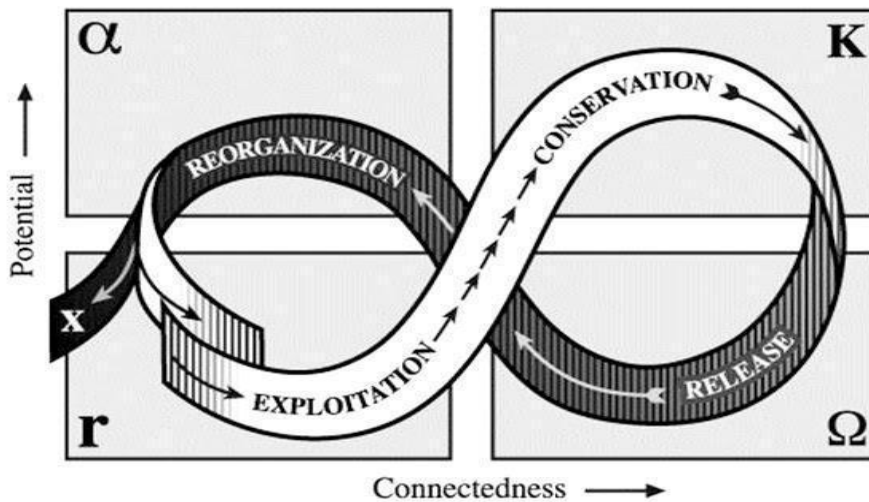
terms of working groups. The committees had become cliques of friends, and folks rarely worked with different people. I believed that these habits were detrimental to innovation, and that stirring things up would be generative, as well as team-building. "New configurations of people and activities will bring about new capabilities" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 99). I also believed they would rediscover the joy of problem-solving together, and the potency of accessing knowledge and what was not yet even known, within each person. "Co-realizing is a practice of collective, hands-on carving of new social realities" (Kahane, 2010, p. 110).

I invited the group to divide itself into smaller groups of approximately 4 people they typically did not work with, and I then gave them 20 minutes to come up with 6 bullet points on what they believed the co-op should *keep*, in terms of committees, but also, in terms of everything! They appeared nervous at the proposal, and when I asked about it, they named that they were worried about the time constraints (They were used to meetings lasting hours and hours before reaching consensus!). I assured them they could do it, that they already knew in their hearts what was working, and to just go have a conversation. Bion (1952) would suggest that dismantling the basic assumption (that if not every voice is heard, in every meeting, that the co-op is failing in its aspiration to be equitable) would release creative work energy- and it did. Each group came back, very proudly, on time, with their suggestions. We harvested those, and then did the same with "Chuck" and "Create". "Non-hierarchical work culture is... a way of working together in service of the organization's purpose. Everyone looks to purpose as the invisible leader" (Slade, 2018, p. 56).

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Once we had the three categories, although I had not planned this, I moved the data up onto a panarchy loop (Gunderson & Holling, 2002).⁹ My intuition led me to believe this visual would have resonance with the group, and indeed, it did. Folks were able to get a snapshot, and see this moment in the co-op history, from another perspective.

Figure 1. The panarchy loop (Source: <https://www.resalliance.org/adaptive-cycle>)



The loop is a horizontal number 8, an infinity sign, where one section naturally flows into another. The upper right quadrant, what is established, like old forest growth, has been solid, reliable, and working, for a long time, flows into the lower right quadrant: what needs to be released- like the forest fire, that brings everything down to nothing. This fertile emptiness flows into the upper left quadrant: new seeds, the co-op's glimpses of fresh and interesting new ideas, things that have not yet taken form, but are holding their attention. This becomes roots, the lower left quadrant: what is growing? Growing roots eventually flows to upper right again, what is established.

⁹ The panarchy loop was adapted for social systems by Frances Westley and Brenda Zimmerman. I learned of this application through my colleague, Vanessa Reid.

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In the context of the co-op, the new restaurant location is growing roots (exploitation); taking care of the group and embodying higher organizational values in the day-to-day are new seeds (reorganization); they are established, solid, and reliable in the neighbourhood, and known in the city, for their food and political and cultural views (conservation); and their wishing to release dysfunctional communication habits- along with other things (release).

Self-managing organizations “are not structured along the control-minded hierarchical templates of Newtonian science. They are complex, participatory, interconnected, interdependent, and continually evolving systems, like ecosystems in nature” (Laloux, 2014, p. 134-135). The co-op adored this framing. Perhaps, as Professor Reilly suggested, the loop helped them see that they were not stuck; things were moving (personal communication, June 15, 2019). And moreover, some things were working, really well. With the loop, things become very clear: one can begin to see how and where to act. “Co-sensing: immersing ourselves together in the complexity of our current and emergent reality... to venture beyond the comfortable boundaries of our everyday world- our habitual places and relationships and thoughts- to see afresh what was happening and was possible” (Kahane, 2010, p. 105).

We did one round, and one harvest each, of Keep, Chuck, and Create, with information around what folks wanted to Create also emerging all the way throughout- and being captured by me (Create was also informed by the captured data from the *État des Lieux* process and the morning check-in a few hours earlier). We then themed the data, and gave the themed-categories names. These categories would become new committees or new important initiatives the co-op needed and/or wanted to develop, now.

There was some tension in the room as we did this work. Aspirations and concerns were becoming tasks to accomplish, before our eyes- it was reported later that this brought pressure, as

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everyone already had so much to do, in the co-op. It was also reported to me later by one person, that working in the plenary was draining for her; she did not want to have to fight to voice her opinion, and felt, based on past experiences, that would be the direction the group would take. I did a lot of cheering-on, during this time. I named it as the “groan zone” (Kaner with others, 2014), and invited folks to lean-in, and engage with strength and presence for just a little while longer.

To create this image of our shared future, every voice is needed. When even one voice is silenced or sublimated, the world is missing a piece of the puzzle. We need all the voices for the full image of our shared destiny to be complete.

(Jones, 2014, p. 172)

Examples of the new initiatives that emerged were: a coordination committee, a "comité de coeur" to handle on-boarding and conflicts, and an initiative around working conditions. The co-op was filling-in long-standing gaps in their organizational structure- many of these responding to needs around wellness, and healthy relationships, and rendering the co-op more functional overall. "Organizational learning becomes a form of cultural development and the task becomes one of identifying the organizational features that enable or obstruct such cultural development or organizational learning" (Stacey, 2003, p. 327).

The intervention at Touski gently compelled the hand of the organization to put guidelines in place around communication, relationships, and conflict resolution in the future. And one initiative, which I found particularly exciting and inspiring, was called "welcome & norms." The norms, as a code of conduct, came through as a vital component people wished to embed, structurally, and officially, in the co-op's culture, moving forward. Perhaps this was their way to safeguard wholesome inter-relational conduct, beyond this event. And they would put it in

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writing, too! There was talk of a co-op-wide training in non-violent communication (Rosenberg, 2003)- or some other approach, for the purpose of having an agreed-upon way to address relational tensions. I invited folks to take on the initiatives they felt passionate about, and teams for these new committees came together fairly easily. The teams then worked on their projects for about 30-40 minutes, dreaming what was possible, and fleshing out what was needed, in practical terms, and then they came back to share proposals in the plenary.

I invited the teams to meet at least once in the next two weeks, for the purpose of simply keeping the thread alive- to offer a space, a moment, for ideas to deepen and grow. We then did a check-out. At the end of each person's check-out, I acknowledged and thanked them for positive qualities I witnessed them bringing to our work together, and then opened the floor to others, who may also wish to appreciate the work of this person. I was modeling appreciation (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010). Again, I was acting intuitively. What I came to uncover was that, along with a lack of constructive feedback, the co-op might have lacked positive feedback, as well. At first, they were very quiet. Appreciating each other explicitly, naming the positive contributions of each person, seemed a foreign concept to them. But by the end, everyone wanted to chime in and name some of the great things about each person. Receivers were surprised and delighted. Perhaps they had never heard out loud the positive impact they were having on the group. "It is not sufficient to give people time and space and rules for practice. You must also pay attention to creating a culture of practice, helping people adopt the spirit, intentions and mindset of practice, rather than performance" (Kegan & Lahey, 2016, p. 124).

An Important Email from the Client

Four days after Day 2 of the event, I received an email from a member of the co-op. She said she was not speaking about the process outside the process with other co-op members- still

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upholding the norms! But she felt that she might be speaking now for the concerns of many. It appeared that the co-op members were struggling to advance their new initiatives, as there had not been official co-op-wide consensus around accepting them. It was a fascinating occurrence to me. I replied that this predicament must feel quite uncomfortable, but that it was a good sign. Decision-making was already an issue in the co-op, and I believe it came up organically in the aftermath of our first event, because it needed care, too. The co-op was paralyzed by their rigid decision-making processes. I invited them to hold the whole thing very lightly, but to meet, and allow the projects to keep taking form, and that we would explicitly address decision-making in our next session together.

Day 3

Transformational change is more emergent than planned. Transformational change cannot be planned in the way change management attempts to implement changes toward some rationally predetermined outcome. Rather, transformation requires holding an intention while moving into the unknown. Attempts to plan and control are more obstacles to transformational change than resources. (Bushe & Marshak, 2015, p. 18)

My last event with the co-op, as part of their "Recontre Structure, Communication, Ressenti" would take place 2 weeks after the first two days, on a quiet, warm Sunday evening at the end of May. For this evening, I had planned 3 activities. The first was to be an auto-evaluation on how folks had shown up in the last 6 months. My rationale was to give folks the chance to own their own shortcomings during the move- as a first step in embedding feedback into the organizational culture and practices. I thought to do a solo version of Keep, Chuck, Create, and then have folks share in the plenary as a commitment practice. The commitment

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practice would support the organizational wish to have greater accountability and follow-through. Next, I wished to do Wise Crowds (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013), in order for co-op members to have a chance to help each other solve problems and address challenges they were facing in developing their initiatives. And lastly, we would do a fishbowl, with the goal of making some headway in restructuring the co-op's decision-making processes.

At the starting time of 5:30 pm, there were only 7 people there. There had been 16/17 for the first two days. We ended up waiting 30 minutes for folks to arrive; folks were texting and calling absent members to see where they were- perhaps there were important reasons for the delays- but no. Folks had other plans, and would not be coming. Finally, we just had to start the event. Some of those present were demoralized by the lack of attendance, including myself, especially seeing as how people had confirmed they would be there. One person said it was "typical Touski"- not following things all the way through, inconsistent commitment in general. And one woman, who had been part of the ad-hoc committee just cried. I said that I appreciated the expression of her true feelings on the matter. And then we got on with it. Those who were there were those who needed to be there (Holman, 2010), and the process needed to go on.

Unfortunately, we did not have enough of the co-op population in attendance to do an accountability and commitment process. And that work would need to be done, at some point; I suggested they do it in their next Annual General Meeting, which would be in July.

We proceeded with Wise Crowds. Fortunately, even with the smaller number of participants, there was at least one member of every new committee or initiative present to share the challenges they were facing. Because the group was already very small, rather than break the group up into smaller pods, we simply all worked together. One person at a time, shared their challenges, and the rest of the group generously offered advice and guidance. Because this

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organization had a history of lengthy deliberating, getting stuck in problems, with meetings taking way longer than they needed to- and also having no agency to make decisions- I encouraged them during this process to just "Solve it!" They really enjoyed working this way. One person told me later, in the closing meeting, that it was incredibly helpful to work with an approach wherein folks could not argue or dispute the suggestions. The form offered a spacious and generative experience.

We then did a fishbowl around decision-making. I set up 3 chairs in the middle of another circle of chairs, gave the guidelines: only folks in the middle are speaking, they are only speaking with one another, and at any time, someone from the outer circle could tap out someone from the middle, and take their place. Before getting started, they asked me how they should use the time- should they try to come up with a solution? I said, "Yes! Solve it! Figure out a decision-making process that works for you! You have 20 minutes! Go!" This approach directly disrupted their habitual ways of making decisions, and addressing issues. Each person had *power*. They loved the fishbowl, and planned to use it as a tool in the future. They found it to be a liberating and interesting way to problem-solve, that allowed for new pairings of people, and many voices and ideas were supported to come through.

Our last check-out was meaningful and emotional. People spoke of where they now found themselves, at the end of this entire process. One woman said that the work we were doing was changing her whole life, that she wasn't the same. In fact, conflict had erupted at a recent kitchen committee meeting, and it was named in a timely manner, and addressed: no longer driven underground, as it had been in the past (Argyris, 1990). Folks felt confident; they named that change was afoot, that enough people wanted it, and were enacting it. There was some talk about

how many members would soon be leaving the co-op, and that these changes would be put in place for future co-op members.

Often the future we aspire to cannot be achieved within the span of our own lifetime... The future is also a story that must remain incomplete because it is not only for us to write, but for others to share. We are making space in the future for others to occupy. (Jones, 2014, p. 172)

A couple of people cried. My contact client exclaimed that it wasn't about the co-op, or the restaurant- that he could care less about the sandwiches and the falafel- that it was about the community, and taking care of that. That it had always been about the community.

Reflections

Between the establishment of guiding norms for our process, and the activities that allowed for a collective and intentional evaluation of the current moment of the co-op, I believe I was able to, at least temporarily, successfully interrupt some of the co-op's defensive routines (Argyris, 2010), and enable members to practice a posture of receptivity, curiosity, and learning: *la posture de l'apprenant*. Hierarchy needs to be unlearned. People need rails, and they need a supportive context in which to experience for themselves "the differences between behaviours that support a hierarchical or non-hierarchical mindset" (Slade, 2018, p. 4). The event brought co-op members, once divided, back onto the same page: back into the heart of the organization. They reconnected with their purpose, and each other. They embodied shared leadership, and reaped the benefits. The event allowed the co-op a chance to land, to situate itself, and to decide: who they were, who they wanted to be, and where they were, and where they wanted to go. And they did the work *together*.

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A month or so after our final meeting, I received an email from a member of the co-op, letting me know about their recent AG meeting. In it, she told me that, inspired by our work together, two members designed and facilitated the meeting, which lasted 3 hours. The co-op broke out into smaller groups to flesh out and approve of/ or disapprove of the new committees and initiatives that had emerged in our work together. Apparently they all worked very well together, and virtually all of the committees and initiatives were approved. I felt this was a very powerful outcome- that a high ratio of the ideas that arose was being carried forward. And, although I accept where the co-op is, and I feel great work has been done- and continues to be done- I remain troubled by two things. There seems to still be this "extra step" of legitimizing that is required. These *are* significant, structural decisions; it is true. But what kind of decisions will co-op members be trusted with and able to make, moving forward. Lastly- and again, I could be wrong- as a measure for improved communication, I have learned that the co-op is implementing, or perhaps re-implementing, as these have been used in the past, (more) hand-signals to be used during meetings. These work like a kind of silent code, across tables and rooms, so that no actual interruption takes place, and the conversation moves along in a respectful manner. And while this is certainly a more civilized approach than, say, yelling at one another, I worry that this measure is one of *skilled incompetence, self-sealing* (Argyris, 1990) an organizational culture that, in the interest of "protecting relationships" the co-op is unconsciously preferring a competing commitment (Kegan & Lahey, 2009) by choosing, once again, an approach that helps them to avoid direct communication and steer clear of potential conflict. If this is the case, they may find themselves in unmanageable conflict again in due time. Perhaps we should have worked directly and explicitly on feedback.

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They did not do a process around accountability and commitment in this meeting. It was not mentioned at all. Perhaps they are still rebuilding trust, or perhaps the container is still not strong enough. Or perhaps this is more conflict avoidance.

Conclusion: D'un Îlot de Chaleur à un Îlot de Fraîcheur

When we recounted the history of the organization, on the first night of our event, I learned that in its early days on Ontario East, the co-op had been part of a recognized heat zone on the island of Montreal. The backyard was asphalt. Over time, they planted trees and a garden, and the area became a cool zone, an "Îlot de Fraicheur." More than just offering nourishment, the co-op would now also offer much-needed shade- something basic to our fundamental well-being as living creatures.

When I met the co-op, they were in dire heat- suffering and struggling. But even then, they knew, they needed to offer themselves a moment of shade- they just were not completely sure how to do it. They waved for help. And by their own efforts, they found shade again, and began to see clearly once more, to re-member who they were, and to decide, conscientiously, with a perspective that only perfect coolness on a hot day can bring, how they wished to move from there. "It is the whole group that, through its internal processes, creates the semi-permeable boundaries within which transformational change can take place" (Bushe, 2010, p. 11). The co-op intervened on itself to change its own working environment, from an "îlot de chaleur" to an "îlot de fraicheur." It's hard to think, in the stifling heat. The co-op was able to give its clientele exactly what was needed, a welcoming atmosphere, with yummy food, espousing powerful values. And now, they, too, would enjoy the shade.

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Appendix A: Original Event Design

Sunday evening:

Welcome.

Introduction to the event, by 1 or 2 members of the HR committee, introduction of the facilitator, overview of the event and the agenda. Members will have time to sign written consent forms, and will be made aware that they will have the chance to submit feedback on the process at our closing session, one month after the event.

Norms: Respect Self, Respect Other, Respect the Space we are creating, and the Space we are inhabiting, Bring Your Best.

Transfer-In: How are folks arriving?

Overview: The event will be divided into 4 parts: Sunday evening: Reconnection. Monday: Visioning and Building. Sunday (2 weeks later): Refining.

Sunday evening: Reconnecting:

Activity A: This will be a non-verbal reconnecting exercise, an opportunity for members to consciously and fully arrive in the present moment with themselves and each other. Calming music will be playing, and participants will walk around the space slowly, stopping in front of one another for a minute to make eye contact, and then walk again, and connect with someone else.

If there is extra time, I will follow this exercise with Lencioni's strengths and weaknesses. Co-op members will speak, in no particular order, simply naming, in no more than a few words, the strengths they felt they brought to the move, and where they feel they fell short.

Activity B: Individual Values: Resonance: An active-listening, highly structured story-sharing practice.

In small groups of 4 or 5, one person at a time, shares a story about a value that is central to their leadership. Included in this story are: challenges faced that led this value to be so dear and important, and supports: what supports were there for you/ people, places, projects, that were there during the challenges and/or have been instrumental to centering this value in your leadership?

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Depending on time constraints, each person will share a story for 5-7 minutes. Those listening are practicing active listening.

Following the story, the listeners will then give the teller "resonance": they will reflect back to the teller the moments they remember of the story, careful to preserve the language used by the teller. At the end, we will harvest the experience in the plenary, inviting whoever wishes to speak about the experience of the Resonance process to do so.

Monday: Visioning & Building:

Folks can arrive as early as 9am for croissants and coffee.

The day's event begins at 9:30am.

If any new folks arrive that had not been at the event the previous evening, I will introduce the consent forms and ask them to sign.

Activity C: We will use a "Fishbowl" process to draw connections between personal values and co-op values. There will be an inner circle of 3 chairs, plus an outer circle of chairs, for the remaining members of the group. 3 people at a time will begin to have a conversation. The people who occupy these seats will stay in them as long as they like, and will be gently "tapped out" by other co-op members who will then replace them in the center. Participants will be invited to recall the values that emerged for them as important in the Resonance practice the night before. Keeping that in mind, we will work with the question, "What is it about Touski that inspires you?", and to start to imagine what form these ideals could take in terms of workflow and day-to-day interactions. Using a dialogic "Yes, and" approach, folks will be invited to allow their individual ideas to evolve, and for a collective view to be built. One or two members of the co-op will capture the vision on flipchart paper, as it emerges. In this way, the group will collectively surface a current vision statement for the way they aspire for the co-op to operate.

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Activity D: Introduction World Café (Brown and others, 2005). Norms will be repeated.

The group will be divided into smaller groups, each at a table. Each table will have a host who will stay at the table for the duration of the process. The other participants will switch tables after every question, or so/ TBD. For each question, a piece of flip chart paper will be allocated, upon which the host, and other folks at the table can write, and capture ideas.

Examples of questions that will be asked:

What do you appreciate about the way the committees function right now?

Where do you notice energy or time lost in the way the committees are presently structured?

What haven't we tried yet?

If you could change one thing that would optimize the way the co-op works, what would you change?

We will then harvest themes in the plenary. Themes will be captured on flipchart paper.

We will then do a dot-mocracy process, folks will make a dot with a marker near the harvested themes that feel to be the most pressing to them.

Lunch.

Activity E: Pro-Action Café

A similar model to World Café, with the purpose of surfacing an actionable plan.

20 minutes. Host will *briefly* (in a sentence or two) outline the idea

Question 1

What is the quest behind the idea? How does this support the functioning, growth and expansion of the coop? Go deeper to explore the implications of the project.

5 minutes Cross pollination time / Welcome new guests, share names and a recap of the conversation from that table

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20 minutes Question 2

What's missing or hasn't been covered? What is needed for this idea to become more complete / more possible and a reality for the co-op?

5 minutes Cross pollination / Welcome new guests, share names and a recap of the conversation from that table

20 minutes Question 3

What next steps need to be taken? - Who needs to do what? What resources are needed? Who else can support this work? What kind of timeline do we need?

Harvest:

20 minutes

What? What stands out for you from these conversations?

So what? What does this say about furthering our collective and collaborative transformation?

Sunday May 12 or May 19, 2019:

Activity F: Refining:

If any new folks arrive that had not been at the previous event, I will introduce the consent forms and ask them to sign.

This session will serve to track the impact of the event of April 28/29, to observe how “new ways of being”, and the structures for the committees are being implemented.

Norms may be repeated.

We will begin with two rounds of 1-2-4-ALL:

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Round 1: “What shift have you noticed in the last couple of weeks within yourself and around you?”

Round 2: “What questions haven’t we asked yet?”

The process begins with individual journaling, followed by sharing in two’s, that then join another pair to become 4, then all ideas are shared in the plenary.

From the plenary harvest, we will surface 4 main themes around what now needs to be tweaked or addressed.

Leah will then ask for volunteers who will make a case for each theme, in a Liberating Structures practice called Wise Crowds (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013. See <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/13-wise-crowds/>).

Each volunteer will then sit at a table in the room, covered in flip chart paper. The rest of the participants will make the rounds of these tables. The volunteer will play the role of client, and the others will be playing the role of “consultants”, charged with first, asking the “client” (the volunteer speaking for the challenge) open clarifying questions, and secondly, to make recommendations, during which the client takes notes. The client will then share their take-a-ways, and the consultants will then disperse to serve other clients. We will then harvest in the plenary to hear possibilities and solutions from each client. From there, the co-op members will decide how they wish to implement these refinements to the committees restructuring. I will also invite them to continue with this iterative process of co-inquiry, perhaps every few weeks at first, and then eventually, once every 1-2 months, asking what is working, and what can be refined.