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Groups That Thrive

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Who's Haunting You?

Ghost Roles in team coaching interventions

Team coaching is a powerful and effective method to leverage the combined strengths of members in an organization, government or family. However, there are some interesting dynamics that emerge when a coach engages an entire team.

In Relationship Systems work, we often talk about Ghost Roles, by which we mean people who are no longer physically present, but who nonetheless are still 'haunting' the system. They can be friendly ghosts (a beloved former CEO) or troublemakers (the accountant who was fired for embezzling). There may be an uncompromising company policy developed because of that person (checks require *two* signatures) or a wonderful tradition left in their wake (the annual company picnic). Sometimes the ghost is an event – for example, a downsizing that involved a massive lay-off. Anything outside the current team or system that continues to have an impact.

“Ghost Roles often keep a team ‘stuck’ in old patterns or beliefs, dampen innovative thinking and imbue fear into the new and unknown.”

Not long ago I worked with an organization that hired me to help clarify the roles of its executive director and board members. In the two days we worked together, the names of people no longer on the board of directors kept coming up.

So there we were in a room full of ghosts. At first we called them by their given names, but then we explored



how 'roles' are not the same thing as 'people.' In systems work, it's key to remember that people inhabit the roles that are most closely aligned with their responsibilities, personal traits and system demands. Look for the qualities of those roles that are "haunting" the system.

For example, Mary is a controller who typically says "No" first, no matter the request. In Mary's last three jobs, she played a similar role, and describes herself as the 'overly strict parent' on a team. Ghost Roles often keep a team 'stuck' in old patterns or beliefs, dampen innovative thinking and imbue fear into the new and unknown. It was vital for this team's success that we do a little "ghost busting" of our own.

Our cast of characters included:

- The Wicked Witch – an obstructionist with a grating communication style, who cast a dark cloud in every meeting.
- The Young Know-it-All – an arrogant, unseasoned and aggressive colleague who rarely elicited feedback and direction from the team.
- The Greedy Landlord – a grasping and miserly 'scorekeeper' bent on getting what was due to him.

The first thing we did was separate the people and their names from the qualities of those roles that were

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The logo for 'choice Village' features the word 'choice' in a blue sans-serif font above 'Village' in a larger, bold blue sans-serif font. Below 'Village' is the tagline 'IT TAKES A VILLAGE' in a smaller, blue, all-caps sans-serif font. To the right of the text is a colorful illustration of a village scene including a hot air balloon with a yellow and blue striped canopy, a red car, a red house, green trees, and blue buildings.

corporate leadership

‘haunting’ the system. I reminded the team that the Wicked Witch probably didn’t use that name on her business card, and that what they objected to was her cruelty, her thoughtlessness and her brusque emails. Then we set about exorcising the Wicked Witch (or at least her traits) from the group.

‘Witchy-ness’ is a normal component (or role) in most systems. So we discussed how it typically manifested in the group, before designing an alliance around how the team would address that quality when it emerged. Sometimes it was as simple as making a joke: “I think the Wicked Witch is in the house!” or, “The Flying Monkeys are landing in the board room.” Other times the group needed to convene in order to coach each other through the scenario, remembering

“The first thing we did was separate the people and their names from the qualities of those roles that were ‘haunting’ the system.”

what the team agreed to do when the qualities re-emerged. Because they will come back. Not the people, but the qualities: witchy-ness, know-it-all-ness, greed, or disrespect. In every instance, though, having a shared vocabulary around those occurrences empowered the team.

So the next time you’re coaching a team, you may want to ask directly, “Who’s haunting you?” •