

Re-Sculpting an Organization: A Different Kind of Family

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Abstract:

The author is not a therapist, but discovered that her work in computer science offered parallel insights into differing styles of business management. She and her husband Wayne Strider connected their understandings from both computer science and from Virginia Satir's Family Reconstruction process and applied it for the relating needs of corporate management directors.

As with family therapy, the author mapped the company's business history and the impact on the directors of the loss of the company's founders. This had caused the corporation an interim of financial and personnel chaos at the top management level. The acceptance of the new "leadership" was not unlike that of accepting a new family member. However, the business world rarely opens itself up to this type of internal discussion and thus this was a new beginning, an initial facilitation towards resolution of differences among the corporate leaders.

The article is offered as a first-person narrative. It concludes with the positive experience of the "Guide" to appreciate the actual work done by the "Stars" – the clients of the author's coaching work.

Key words: corporate relations, family reconstruction, Virginia Satir

I've been studying Virginia Satir's work for almost 20 years. I experienced a family Reconstruction for the first time in the 1989 Congruent Leadership Change Workshop with Dani Weinberg, Jerry Weinberg and Jean McLendon. I was stunned by the power of the Reconstruction. It was as if a special key had been oh-so-gently inserted into this man's lockbox of memories. His family's past came to life, in all its wonder, pain and happiness. Then, if possible, even more gently, Jean McLendon guided this man to a fuller appreciation of his grandparents, parents, siblings and finally himself. On that day, I never imagined I would ever be guiding a Reconstruction.

I'm not a therapist. I work in the information technology services (re: computers) industry. It is an industry where "hardware" refers to that plastic case with electronic circuits inside that is sitting on your desk called a PC and where "software" refers to the invisible code running through those circuits that make them tick.

Yet, every day, I experienced that "hardware" is really the shell each of us puts on to protect ourselves in that work-a-day world. "Software" is those mushy, baffling, energizing, depressing, etc. feelings covered up and protected by our "hardware". This kind of hardware and software interests me much more.

So, I have tiptoed out with some Satir tools into that information technology services world. I've used Temperature Readings as the format for regular staff meetings. Wayne Strider and I introduced the Satir Change Model in McDonnell Douglas at a time when downsizing and reorganizing were relatively new management strategies. I've worked with individuals to identify a family rule that might be affecting how they worked with others. I've helped professionals untangle some puzzling communication using the Ingredients of an Interaction. I know now that all of this was useful and was preparing me for the day when I would lead a Reconstruction.

An Opportunity for a Family Reconstruction in Business

Then, the day came, unplanned and unannounced. People come to our Strider & Cline annual Leaders' Forum looking for ways to experience and practice using the Satir Growth Model. It was during one such Leaders' Forum in Mt. Crested Butte – a special place in the history of Virginia's work - that the opportunity presented itself and I offered to guide a Reconstruction. The Star's focus was not her family of origin but her consulting company. In addition to the Star, two other company members were present. They had recently joined her company and didn't know much about the history of relationships in this company. All three were excited about what they might learn from reconstructing their company.

Two seconds after I offered to guide the Reconstruction for them, I heard this little voice inside me saying, "Who do you think you are? What makes you think YOU could guide a Reconstruction? You're not a therapist! What if your lack of skill harms these people?" All good questions. Yet, there was a second little voice saying "You can do this and you don't have to do it alone. So, what kind of support do you want to do it?" This second voice (my Barbra Streisand part, I think) won out. I asked Wayne Strider, my partner, if he would support me. He said yes and we talked about how to guide the Reconstruction together. The time seemed right for me to step out confidently and humbly.

Connecting with the Star

I sat down privately with Jane, the Star to see how she was feeling about doing the Reconstruction and to learn more about the issues she wanted to explore. Jane said she was feeling alone, bearing all of the responsibility for the company and having difficulty asking for help. We talked about the kind of support she would like for herself during the Reconstruction. From the Self Esteem Tool Kit, she selected the Heart (which Jean McLendon added to the kit) to remind her to stay in touch with her feelings and the Yes/No Medallion to help her connect with her ability to say her real yes and real no. We also agreed to post the Five Freedoms for reference during the Reconstruction.

Mapping the Company History

We started by drawing a map of Jane's company from its birth 5 years earlier up until the present time. Jane and her two co-founders Max and Caroline all came from the same

family, so to speak. They had worked at the same big consulting firm. Jane had worked with and was friends with each of them. All three had been raised in the big consulting firm with the same corporate values, work ethics, processes and procedures. They were all very smart and experienced. Max had a strong reputation as a researcher. Caroline was the strong independent strategic thinker. Jane was the glue, the “mother” who brought them together and held them together.

Max left the company after two years due to health and financial issues. This was a very painful experience for Jane. Caroline soon after took a job with one of their clients. Jane was now “mothering” this company by herself.

In the meantime, Karen had joined the company at Jane’s invitation. Karen was a friend of Jane’s also. Karen was highly intelligent, had a commanding and demanding work style but lately she had become critical of the client and Jane’s management of the company.

Then along came Alice. Jane adopted Alice from an earlier client company. Alice was an independent free spirit who didn’t like too many rules. Not long after Alice was adopted, she recommended adopting a co-worker and friend of hers, Susie. Susie was a very responsible person who would never consider rocking the boat or asking for anything for herself. Alice and Susie were pretty tight with each other and shared common experience from their previous organization. Since Alice and Susie weren’t there at the founding of the company, this map filled in some missing background for them. The map gave me ideas for guiding sculpts of several key events in the life of Jane’s “family” that I thought would give her some new perspective on her issues.

The company Reconstruction was a work of art as I find all family stories to be. Virginia’s Reconstruction process served us well with some support from our Self-Esteem Tool Kit, the Five Freedoms and the Interaction Model. We sculpted 4 key scenes from the company’s history.

Sculpting the Birth of the Company

Jane described and sculpted the birth of the company with Leaders’ Forum participants in the roles of herself and her two founding partners. I asked each of the three founders to talk about their dreams, their hopes and their wishes for their new company, for their relationships and for themselves. I asked each founder to describe the feeling of risk involved. Then I asked Jane how she saw herself in this sculpt and what happened for her as she listened to their dreams, hopes and wishes. She said the scene brought back and made real again her long forgotten dreams. She smiled as she watched and remembered. She also saw how she had set herself up in the role of “mother”.

Sculpting the Departure of a Founder

I then guided Jane in a sculpture of the three original founders’ struggle two years later with the reality of their company and their search for a workable direction. It became

apparent that each person had a personal bottom line that had not been expressed at the birth of the company.

Jane's bottom line was that she expected each of them to market their company services and bring client business to the company. Caroline and Max had not realized the degree to which Jane was expecting them to do this. When they worked for the big consulting firm, the marketing and sales department took care of this and clients just appeared with no effort on their part.

Caroline's bottom line was that she wanted to work at the strategic level and not have to deal with details such as contracts, bookkeeping and billing. But then who would take care of the details necessary to keep the company running? This work by default had fallen to "mother" Jane.

Max's bottom line was that he needed a certain amount of financial security in terms of income which he did not currently have. He was also experiencing some stress-induced health problems. Max decided he needed to leave the company. You could see and feel Jane's pain as she watched the sculpture of Max announcing he was leaving. She recalled feeling responsible for his health and financial well being. I asked her if this was a familiar feeling for her. She realized in that moment the similarity to her family of origin, where she felt responsible for taking care of her sister. She was able to acknowledge that Max was taking care of himself and had not asked her to take care of him. He was using his freedom to choose what fit for him.

Sculpting the Ties that Bind

Jane physically felt ties binding her to Caroline and Karen which no longer fit for her. So we sculpted these relationships using ropes to demonstrate how she was connected to them. I asked her to choose a person to represent Caroline and then sculpt her connection with Caroline by choosing the length and tautness of the rope between them. Then I asked her to do the same with Karen. Once she was physically connected with them both, I guided Caroline and Karen to tug on the ropes, so that Jane could physically feel the ties binding her and experience the effect on her and her balance. I asked them to add words along with their pulling, that would express their needs and expectations that Jane take care of everything for them. When I asked Jane how this felt, she realized that the tugs and pulls came from her close personal friendships with these two people as well as from their difficult working relationships. Asking her how she would like to relate to these two people in the present, she very clearly changed her physical position with them to a more comfortable one by loosening the ropes. She told them that she wanted to maintain her personal friendships with them and she also wanted to make some changes to improve her working relationships with each of them. She was no longer willing to bear all the responsibility.

A short while later Caroline left the company to take an executive strategic planning position with one of their clients. She was now Jane's customer, instead of her partner and friend. Jane was now the lone remaining founder with one employee Karen.

Sculpting the Company's New Status Quo

Jane then brought Alice into the company and things changed even more dramatically for Jane. Alice was more like an adopted child than a new born. She came from a company that had been a past client of Jane's and where they had worked together. She had grown up in a company with values and culture that were very different from Jane's. A short while later, when Susie was adopted from the same company, the balance of power shifted. Jane, the company founder, found herself on the outside of their relationship with each other.

I asked the three of them to sculpt themselves in their current relationships, again using ropes to represent their connections. I asked them what they noticed about their relationships. They remarked that Jane and Susie were each connected to Alice but they were not connected to each other. Alice said she felt like she was now in the middle and she didn't like being between Jane and Susie. They realized their connections were not what they wanted them to be.

I wasn't sure where to go next, so I held a brief huddle with my support partner Wayne. We decided to encourage them to use their freedoms to express what they wanted and needed from each other.

I asked them what they might do to change their relationships and encouraged them to make explicit their wants and needs including their personal bottom lines. Alice said that she wanted more freedom to express her ideas and not be bound by the previous "big consulting company" norms. Susie was able to tell Jane how much she admired her and had placed her on a pedestal. She wanted to relate to Jane more as a person and to understand more clearly how she could contribute to the company. Jane used her freedom to speak to ask Alice for some help. She asked for some time to develop her relationship with Susie, so she could feel connected to both Alice and Susie and not so alone. They also shared with each other their hopes for their future together.

Star Practice with Ingredients of an Interaction

Jane felt it was now time to change her relationship with Karen. She wanted to end their work relationship but still remain friends. She was concerned how Karen might respond. Jane asked for the opportunity to practice what she would say to Karen about their relationship. I asked her to select a person to represent Karen. I then invited her to say what she felt in her heart to Karen and Karen could respond. I let her know that she didn't have to do it perfectly the first time. She could try multiple times until she felt she was speaking her real yes and her real no. With the aid of the Interaction Model and some tears along the way, Jane practiced until she felt understood and until she understood how Karen might respond.

Opportunities for Commenting After the Reconstruction

We ended the Reconstruction at this point, having explored the issues. I checked in with myself and the star. We both felt that we had done enough work for now.

I asked Alice and Susie to comment on their experience during the Reconstruction. Susie said she had a deeper appreciation for Jane, how alone she felt and what she has been through to bring the company to this point. She felt she had taken a risk on her own behalf to speak up about her needs. For the first time since joining the company, she felt really seen and heard. Alice said that she appreciated the opportunity to speak freely about her needs. She had not realized how constrained she felt until she experienced being physically bound with the ropes during the Reconstruction. She also had not fully realized how important her freedom to express herself in her work was to her satisfaction with the company.

I then gave the Leaders' Forum participants who had played roles in the Reconstruction an opportunity to comment. The man who played the role of Jane in the sculpt of the company's birth was very touched by his experience. In the sculpt, as he talked about feeling the risk of leaving a safe job and starting the company, he felt the loss of missed opportunities in his own life because he chose to play it safe rather than take any risk on his own behalf.

After a short break, I gave Jane the opportunity to share her insights from the Reconstruction. Jane said "My vision for my company has always included bringing together the unique individuals with whom I've had great working relationships into situations where they work with each other, melding that incredible diversity and talent. The Reconstruction took me from a place where I was feeling bad about what had happened to a place where I reflected on what I learned as I brought people together and what made sense for the future. The Reconstruction helped me see how my relationships needed to change in order to preserve friendships while growing a business." She also realized that her friendship with each person was more important to her than she had acknowledged even to herself.

I followed up with her several months after Leaders' Forum and she said "I was able to go back and have the (sometimes tough) conversations that enabled me to connect differently for a better result. It helped me to ask more easily for what I needed from others. The (Reconstruction) techniques also highlighted the fact that I could think through and sculpt the future connections in my head before enacting them for real!"

I also followed up with Alice and Susie. Susie said "It has been 8 months since our company Reconstruction and I still get a very special feeling when I think back to that morning. Something very powerful happened in a very compressed period of time that could not have been possible through (everyday) conversation or action. It was powerful and positive in helping us start to grow toward a different level in our working relationship."

My Learnings on Guiding a Reconstruction

I learned first hand that “guiding” isn’t about leading; it’s about following. It’s about following the Star. I experienced being fully present with the Star and recognizing a meaningful path to follow. Yes, I had a few moments where the path to follow was not clear to me. Inside I could feel myself getting a little anxious. Then, I reminded myself that this was a gift for the Star and not about my own performance. I gave myself permission to be patient and her path became clear to both of us. Knowing Wayne was there and supporting us all gave me great comfort.

I look back now to my first experience of a Reconstruction and recognize that the seed was planted then. I’ve been watering and feeding that seed for many years. I’ve continued my studies of the Satir Growth Model with Jean McLendon and others. Wayne and I have developed Leaders’ Forum into a gentle, safe, supportive place for others and us to practice and learn. I’ve discovered I much prefer to work with the support of one or more partners in this kind of work. And I’ve found many great partners including Pat Snipp and Wayne.

And what of Stars? I used to think we referred to the person whose family was reconstructed as a Star because that person was the focal point. But during the guiding of this Star’s Reconstruction, I realized there is another reason we call them Stars. They are MY guides. I now realize the importance of following the Stars that appear in my life. They appear when I’m ready and have the courage to follow them. The Stars are my teachers. I trust they will continue to appear and guide me down the path that bears my name. And especially, I thank this Star for her gracious guidance.