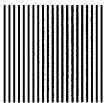


Putting Feminist Theory to Work: Collaboration as a Means towards Organizational Change

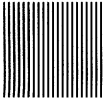
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Abstract. *This article describes an attempt to use a collaborative action research approach to enquire into the gender implications of seemingly neutral organizational practices, and thereby bring about change. The methodology draws on both the feminist critique of objective research, and thinking on participatory and action-oriented research strategies. Working with a work group in a manufacturing plant, a project was devised to establish a self-managing team on the shop-floor, with a view to shifting gendered patterns of work while also enhancing performance. Dilemmas of balancing support and challenge in the collaboration process are discussed, in connection with the gendering of collaboration. The importance of creating opportunities for feedback, reflection, and the reviewing of deep assumptions in this type of work is highlighted.*
Key words. *action research methodology; deep assumptions; gender, gendering; reflection processes*



Feminist theories, ranging from the liberal to the post-structuralist, have articulated a range of critiques of formal organizations and their relative inaccessability to women (Calás and Smircich, 1996). However, a consideration of the connections between the nature of organizational research as an intervention in itself, and the intended change is less well developed. Conventional research approaches, in treating organizational members as objects of research, run the risk of replicating the inequalities of the workplace through a researcher-researched hierarchy,



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and intentionally minimize the change-inducing possibilities of the act of research. An alternative approach involves developing action strategies, aimed at generating organizational change through the process of research intervention. One such attempt is the focus of this paper.

For over two years, a team of five of us (see Overview, this issue) worked in a large retail and manufacturing company to develop our knowledge on how to bring about concrete organizational change towards greater gender equity. Our work was grounded in a post-structuralist view of gender (see Meyerson and Kolb, this issue), which identifies gender as a diffuse and complex social process enacted across the full range of organizational policies, practices and behaviour. Many of those working in the company already had a well-developed concept of gender and talked about celebrating difference and adopting more feminine working practices. At issue for us, though, was a more fundamental shift in their understanding of their experience. We were interested in the almost imperceptible ways in which work is gendered and how these influence both men and women. This included how people read behaviours differently depending on whether women or men enact them, and how practices that appear gender-neutral, such as the identification of job competencies, can create cultures in which only one way of being is valued or, indeed, even possible. The interrogation of these organizational practices through a process of collaborative inquiry is generative—intended to enable our organizational co-researchers to analyse their experience and to bring about change by and for themselves.

In this paper, we describe our work with a group of people within one of the company's factories, in which we used a collaborative action-research approach to develop 'experiments' or pockets of change. In so doing, we trace what came to be the greatest challenge of the project as a whole; that of maintaining gender equity as the primary focus of the work. More specifically, we consider how our chosen methodology played a part in this, and the implications of this for the dual aims of our research—what we call the 'dual agenda for change'. The dual agenda suggests that, by addressing issues of gender inequity, organizations can develop strategies that lead to more diverse and integrative workplaces, and that this in turn will lead to an improved capacity to meet instrumental business goals (see Meyerson and Kolb, this issue, for a full discussion).

The Importance of Working Collaboratively

In order to help our sponsors and potential internal partners understand our approach, we needed to establish, at the earliest opportunity, a place within the company where collaborative experimental work could begin and, through this, generate examples of practical steps the company could take to enhance gender equity. Working from a feminist perspective, our research team was mindful of the critiques of conventional research, which suggest that the research process reproduces the power



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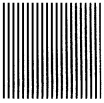
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dynamics of male-dominated social order. Our alternative approach, which was one of collaborative action research, drew on two lines of thought. The first is a feminist critique of research, which makes problematic the subjective/objective dichotomy and the voice of the distanced and disembodied knower (Harding, 1991; Weedon, 1987; Lather, 1991). The second is the growing body of work variously called participatory research, action-science, or collaborative inquiry, which strives through the research process to produce knowledge that enhances the participants' capacity for autonomous action (Reason, 1988; Heron, 1996). This in turn builds on the tradition of action research usually attributed to Kurt Lewin in the US, and the work of those at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in the UK. From an action-research stance, Torbert, for instance, suggests that such an approach requires that:

- 1 researchers are themselves active participants in the situations researched and that the researcher–situation relationship deserves to be studied;
- 2 the framework and variables of studies themselves change in the course of study;
- 3 an important way of testing the validity and significance of social knowledge is to feed data back into the setting researched, studying how this feedback influences further action (1981: 437).

Both these perspectives reject the idea of research *on* people in favour of research *with* people, on the grounds that it is politically unacceptable to appropriate people's meanings from them, and that the process of research and meaning-making is itself an intervention which changes the situation for those involved, and which should, as far as is possible, be under their control (Reason, 1994). Working collaboratively, therefore, was a central methodological precept of our work.

We began this project with the intention of establishing partnerships with people inside the company where we were working. There are at least two reasons why we chose this approach. First, we wanted to work in such a way that we left behind the capacity for the organization to continue this work without us. This suggested that a major part of our task was to build internal capacity and, to do this, we needed to work in close partnership with those who might take on this role. Second, there was a pragmatic aspect to taking a collaborative approach. Our explicit goal in carrying out this work was to bring about generative change within the organization. One of our aspirations was to enable our partners to reflect on their experiences and meaning-making processes and to understand how they might be gendered in ways that were contributing to gender inequities in the company. At the very least, this requires being in a relationship with them which enables such re-evaluation or re-visioning to take place. In order to create spaces and times in which those with whom we are working could access and question the deep assumptions that underlie their own and others'



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behaviour, we needed to establish a relationship of trust, and not one of dependency on our actions or meanings. Generative change of this sort encompasses values of equity and self-determination, and the relationship in which they are set needs to engender such values. In describing our desired approach as collaborative, we are highlighting mutuality, and explicitly pointing to the different sorts of knowledge that partners in the collaboration bring: knowledge of the gender perspective on our part, and knowledge of the organization on the part of our internal partners. There is, then, a clear difference between our approach to organizational intervention and the intervention of either the organizational consultant, whose concern is primarily with fulfilling the client contract, or the more conventional researcher, whose concern is primarily with gathering valid data.

In the discussion that follows, we identify two sorts of collaborators or partners: the first is the group Meyerson and Kolb (this issue) describe, who either were assigned or volunteered to work with us, and who acted as our gatekeepers and champions in the organization. We refer to these people as our 'internal partners'. The second group were people who were assigned to work with us on a particular project in their own work setting. We refer to these people as members of a 'work group'. We tell the story of what happened in the factory, documenting key points at which the gender focus of the intervention was at first marginalized, and then lost altogether.

Setting up the Collaboration

Our internal partners suggested we talk with the manager in charge of one of the manufacturing sites, as a likely place to begin an experiment. This manager had joined the company just seven months earlier, and had recently embarked on a programme of personal and professional development organized by the company for its senior managers. He was extremely positive about the prospect of using his division as the location for an initiative after we had explained our approach and our dual agenda for change. We began by exploring with him his business problems. He had inherited an old-fashioned and highly regulated production facility, run along very traditional lines. He felt that output could be improved, that quality standards were much lower than they should be and that people were not treated with respect. Shift patterns were often changed at short notice; there were both slack periods, when people had little to do and feared for their jobs, and very busy periods, when demand could be met only by taking on large numbers of agency staff. Morale was low—as had been highlighted in a recent staff survey. Above all, the manager felt that the people doing the production jobs had ideas for how the work could be organized better, which he wanted to hear, but the culture of the factory did not encourage people to take initiative or speak out. He expressed a view that both line workers and middle managers needed to change the way they worked. In addition,



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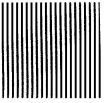
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the manager was concerned about the hierarchical sex-segregation in the factory and wished for greater gender equity in his workforce.

At our request, the manager convened a work group representing a cross-section of employees at the factory with whom we could work collaboratively to gather a story of their work experience, develop a critique using a gender perspective, and generate and implement an experiment. The work group consisted of 10 people who represented the three different grades of line workers, the other shop-floor jobs who supported them (porters, engineers, quality control) and supervisory staff—giving a cross-section of views from within the factory, and a group with enough reach to be able to generate a significant experiment if they chose to do so. The manager gave his explicit support to the initiative, but had no active involvement, making it clear that any proposals for action that came from the group would have to be approved by him and his senior management team.

In these early negotiations and forming of working relationships, it is possible to see the beginnings of what became a recurring difficulty for us. The gender part of the dual agenda was our primary concern, whereas the business part was the primary concern of those inside the company with whom we were working. As a result, we were constantly making judgements as to how far we could go with foregrounding the gender aspects of the work without appearing to sideline the business issues or incurring resistance, which might damage the collaborative relationship. We had to create a situation in which people in the organization wanted to work with us. They needed to see the potential benefit to them, and, at the outset at least, that had to be something more tangible and comprehensible than abstract notions of gender equity. The business or work problem held out the promise of benefit to them, but only at the expense of downplaying the gender dimension of the work. If we spoke of creating a more gender-equitable work environment, or even a work environment in which men and women are more equally valued, we spoke a language that had no meaning for people. But, if we spoke of building a work environment in which there is more flexibility and everybody's contribution is valued, we seemed to be saying something of sufficient interest for our potential collaborators to want to proceed.

We therefore began to shift our emphasis in discussions with the work group, referring not to gender but to practices in the organization—decision-making, job descriptions, promotion procedures and so on—that seemed, for example, to favour certain kinds of activities while devaluing others. We framed alternatives as ways of working that might be more effective for people and the organization. This seemed to enable people to make direct connections between the project and their own experience, and to generate in them a deeper commitment to working with us. In short, our keenness to build the relationship led us to avoid references to gender and to substitute euphemisms or proxies instead. In fact, we did not even mention gender either in the initial invitation we drafted for the



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factory manager to send to members of the work group, or in the letter we sent to the wider group of employees whom the work group had recommended we interview. Gender, thus, had begun to slip from the picture.

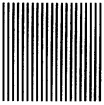
In order to reveal the day-to-day ways in which the micro-processes of gendering took place in the workplace, we asked people to tell us the 'story' of their time at work. At our first meeting with the work group, we presented both aspects of our dual agenda, illustrating what we meant by referring to previous projects that had involved some members of our team. We expressed our desire to work with them, first, to hear their story and reflect it back to them, and, second, to think through with them the implications of their story for what they might do next, emphasizing the possibility of our working together to devise an experiment that would address the issues they raised. The group consisted of people who seldom got an opportunity to be listened to by managers or to take any sort of initiative, within the rigidly hierarchical culture of the factory, and they were keen to make the most of the chance.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Feedback: Co-constructing an Organizational Story

Our first step in learning about the factory was to interview all the members of the work group, as well as others in the factory whom they suggested. In order to reach these people, members of the work group were our liaisons, explaining to their colleagues what they understood of the project. For the interviews, we used a semi-structured format, including questions about gender, which we related to the company's stated commitment to equal opportunities for men and women. Everyone was assured that, although what they said would be used to build the story of work at the factory, individuals would not be identified, either by their name or by revealing details about them. We interviewed a total of 30 people, representing about 10 percent of the staff at the factory. We also spent a day working on the production lines. We then organized what we had heard and observed into a story about their experience constructed around six recurring themes. These were:

- relationship between this division and the rest of the company;
- communication;
- thanks and recognition;
- how people get on in the company;
- authority and control;
- how men and women work.

The picture that emerged was of a strongly controlled and sex-segregated workplace, in which the mostly female production-line workers were heavily overseen by the predominantly male supervisors. In order for line workers to achieve any degree of flexibility or discretion in the timing of breaks, their assignment to lines to gain experience with different machines, or taking holiday or sick leave, it was necessary to stand out



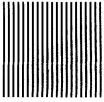
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from the crowd and become known to the supervisor. The first prerequisite of getting ahead in this environment was to be 'mouthy' (noisy, outspoken) and show commitment by doing overtime. A punctual and efficient, but quiet, worker could go for years without getting noticed or rewarded with other than a pay cheque. The absence of thanks and recognition for people's everyday contributions was widely criticized by those we spoke to, as was the apparent lack of trust of line workers indicated by the use of clocking-on and a buzzer to signal breaks and the end of the shift. Line workers complained that no one ever told them anything: they did not know what the weekly production targets were until the supervisor fed them a number and, if lines were closed down, or opened up, no one told them why. They were expected to stand where they were put and work the line, and they felt both powerless and resentful towards supervisors.

From the perspective of our dual agenda, we saw this as a rich story. Gender inequality was clearly operating at a structural level in the concentration of women in line operator positions, supervised and managed almost exclusively by men. Despite the large numbers of female workers, the dominant model of success was a masculine one, in which workers were promoted for being ever-present, fast, individual and mouthy. Rigid working hours, a feature of many production lines, precluded people with care-taking responsibility for dependants from being able to demonstrate extraordinary commitment to their job, despite the considerable effort they put into being at work on time. 'Invisible work' (Fletcher, 1999) was unrewarded, such as providing short-term cover for colleagues; ensuring an atmosphere that made the day go more quickly, smoothly, and enjoyably; anticipating and avoiding problems; and planning. At the same time, this was a work environment that did not work well from a management perspective either. Staff turnover was high, as were levels of absenteeism and sickness, and inadequate attention to quality on the production line led to a high number of re-works.

We held a feedback meeting with the work group at which we described the picture we had gathered from the interviews and our observations. We did so tentatively, because we were giving them our construct of their experience, and the collaborative part of this intervention lay in the way they were able to claim these constructions, or substitute their own. In fact, this meeting represented one occasion on which our partners did engage in developing new descriptions of their experience using the gender perspective we offered. We suggested to them that the process of payment for absence due to sickness was one in which there was a gender dimension. Sick leave was paid on a discretionary basis, depending on supervisors' judgements of the genuineness and acceptability of line workers' reasons. In order to establish whether the sickness was genuine, the worker was obliged to report to the supervisor on the day she returned to work and explain her reason for being absent. Since the great majority of the line workers were women,



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many of them young, and all the supervisors on the day shifts in the factory were men, this often meant young women having to describe illnesses that embarrassed them to older male supervisors. Rather than do this, they would sometimes forego the explanation and risk not getting paid for the time they had been away from work. To the supervisors, it would then look as if the individual had been skiving, taking time off for no good reason. The supervisors were also uncomfortable with the situation, for which they received no training. This was a clear case of a policy which, on its face, is gender-neutral, but which has a differential impact on men and women, to the women's disadvantage both financially, through remuneration lost and, more broadly, in its framing of women as unreliable and therefore unpromotable.

As we talked this through with the work group, the women in the group began to embellish what we were saying with anecdotes and instances that supported the gender interpretation. They began also to talk about the ways women on the line support each other and cover for each other to make sure that the work gets done, when one person is sick or has to leave early because her child is sick. They began to articulate some of the many forms of invisible work that went completely unrecorded and unrewarded in the work environment. A fragile space for discussing gender was opened up and, for a brief time, people in the group tried out meanings and interpretations of events that challenged those they had long accepted, and described their own experience in new ways. The meeting ended with our asking the work group to think about what, if any, changes they wanted to make to the work environment as a result of the story, how they would communicate what they were doing to their other colleagues in the factory and how they would go about getting senior managers to support whatever suggestions they developed.

Devising the Intervention

We met again two days later after giving feedback to the work group in order to begin discussing possible interventions. Members of the group had clearly been discussing their plans in the interim and one person proposed that the group set up a self-managed team, which the others agreed was a good idea. We talked about what this would involve, how discussions about the proposal with the senior manager would take place and how they would begin to gather the practical information they would need to support their plan. Most of the people in the group were very enthusiastic about this; the supervisor—a key member of the group, whose support and involvement were crucial to lending any initiative credibility—was less so. Convincing him to support the idea became a major task of the other group members.

Perhaps because they moved so quickly to agree on a way forward and seemed so energized and excited by the plan, we did not discuss in detail the impact of this proposal in gender terms. We were aware that, in itself, a self-managed team would not necessarily challenge the current config-



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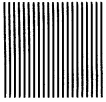
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urations of gender. The extent to which it might do this, rather than generate another sort of narrowly defined conformity, would depend on exactly how it was put into practice and the quality of the process which would precede it. Maintaining collaboration, at this point, seemed to us to demand that we, the external team, find ways to support this work group to progress with the development of the bold initiative we had worked with them to invent. They were certainly going to need help in preparing and selling their plan to their managers, since they were inexperienced in operating in this way at work. But, because we did not explicitly ground the proposal at this stage in its gender effects, as well as its effects on the business problems, we began to lose sight of gender. Here, again, we had to make an on-the-spot judgement about whether to build and sustain our relationship with the work group, or risk it by exploring the unarticulated assumptions and constructions of gender implied in the plan, which had no resonance with them and might increase their resistance to working with us. We chose to prioritize the relationship building.

As we took the plan forward, we faced a practical problem: the work group wanted things to progress at a time when none of our team could be present for a few weeks. So we invited one of our newly established internal partners to help. In so doing, we solved a problem in one way, but created others. With her support, members of the work group met their manager and asked for time to prepare a detailed proposal to set up an experimental self-managed team in the factory. He agreed. One of our internal partners in the company then facilitated three off-site, one-day meetings with the work group to work on the plan. The first two of these took place without any of our project team present; the third included one of us, but by that time the gender framing had almost dropped from view. Although our internal partner understood the gender orientation of the project, she had substituted it with the more proximate goal of team-working. To some extent, this was a success because team-working was counter-cultural in the factory. However, it lacked a gender analysis, which could have differentiated between team-working that would help overcome gender inequities and team-working that would not. The significance of failing to develop and apply such an analysis did not emerge until later in the project.

During these team-building sessions, the group listed their hopes for what they might gain from working in a self-managed team. They named:

- making their own decisions;
- planning their work day and solving their own problems;
- achieving the targets that were set and meeting business needs;
- being able to discuss things with managers;
- being part of something new;
- increasing their job satisfaction;



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- all pulling together;
- fairness;
- feeling good;
- being motivated;
- increasing their self-confidence;
- having flexibility to set their own targets.

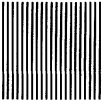
The business side of the dual agenda was clearly explicit in these goals, but the gender side was implicit at best. For example, a self-managed team might challenge entrenched gender patterns by enabling:

- people to make different accommodations for their out-of-work lives;
- less mouthy people to still acquire a range of skills and experience and so get promoted;
- people who do the invisible work that holds a workplace together to be recognized, since more priority would be given to interpersonal than to command-and-control skills;
- people to develop more positive images of themselves as people with autonomy, and hence to be able to articulate their contribution and their needs more clearly;
- the emergence of a new kind of supervisory role outside the existing command-and-control model;
- people to challenge their received stereotypes of men and women at work, and to develop new models of how they might act.

The extent to which these possibilities would be realized, however, would depend on the concrete details of how the self-managed teams were put into practice, and the extent to which they challenged assumptions about how men and women work, how authority is exercised, what commitment to work looks like and so on. It was in the micro-processes of implementation, in other words, that they would challenge traditional gender patterns—or not—in this experiment.

Bringing Others in

Over the following months, the work group met weekly to progress the proposal. These meetings were facilitated by one of our team or by one of our internal partners. During this period, a negotiation process took place within the work group as to how radical the proposal should be—how far the self-management should extend. They used the reactions of the supervisor in the group, and, to a lesser extent, the human resources manager, who were the only staff representatives, as measures by which to judge what would be acceptable to the wider management group. The tension we had experienced between participation and collaboration, on the one hand, and resistance, on the other, was apparent among the work group members; the strongest proponents of the self-managed team idea found themselves giving away some aspects of autonomy in order to retain the participation of these two potentially resistant but high status and crucial members of the work group. For instance, the notion that self-



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managed team members would deal with their own absences and sick-leave, which had clearly been an element in the gender critique which preceded the proposal, was abandoned when the human resources manager said her boss would never agree to it. More generally, the idea that the team would not be supervised in the normal way became increasingly weak so as to quell supervisors' concerns that the experiment might threaten their jobs.

The work group prepared a presentation to be given first to their managers, asking for their support to set up an experimental self-managed team, and then to all their colleagues in the factory, letting them know what they had been doing and eliciting their support—as well as volunteers to join the new team. We, the project team, had originally envisaged feedback as a crucial part of this process of meaning-making and the building of continued collaboration. As the group and our internal partner worked on this, however, it increasingly became a high-profile presentation with the emphasis on the business benefits of the self-managed team, and only a passing reference, at our prompting, to the critique and story from which the idea had originally come. This presentation was a completely unprecedented action for this group of staff to take; in the process, they took on roles they would not previously have taken, and communicated with authority across vertical and horizontal workplace divisions in a way that was counter-cultural in the factory. However, by this time, we had all lost the gender focus of the project to such an extent that every time we raised it by asking them what their approach had to do with advancing gender equity, they simply looked at us, puzzled.

Here we came to appreciate the important role of feedback in collaborative work and in holding on to the gender focus of our work. We began to realize that the work group's communication process to the rest of their division was an advocacy of what they wanted to do, rather than a way of letting people know what they had been discovering. Those who had been interviewed but were not part of the work group gathered no information on the connection between their earlier participation in the project and the plan that was presented to them. The form of engagement offered to them did not involve asking them to test their meaning-making against the story we had constructed, but rather to volunteer in a potentially risky venture as a member of the experimental self-managed team.

Implementing the Intervention

Following the presentations, there was a transitional period of about three months during which our internal partners recruited and prepared staff for the new self-managed team. The members of the work group had decided not to join the new team themselves. They acted as liaisons, but progressively disengaged from the project. During this period, responsibility for acting as our internal partners in support of the initiative was



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delegated twice, each time to less senior people. This marked discontinuity in our internal partners' involvement in the initiative—and therefore crucially the initiative's grounding in the gendered experiences of those involved—further weakened the opportunity it afforded to generate meaningful change. Just as in the wider culture meaning can get lost or appropriated as the original storytellers disappear, the more accessible 'business effectiveness' part of the rationale for the initiative came to replace the more obscure 'gender equity' part. By the time the new team came into operation, its members were seeking to measure its success on the basis of output alone; other indicators that might have been developed from the gender analysis had been put aside as meaningless.

Throughout this period, we had continued to talk the language of gender with our partners. But by this stage we were seriously hampered by a lack of specific gender-related indicators that could help provide resistance to the on-sweep of the business-only case. Having left open at the start of our work with the work group what advances in gender equity might look like in practice, and having not pushed early on for the development of indicators of success in achieving gender-equity goals to take their place alongside indicators of success in achieving production goals, we found ourselves without hooks to hold on to as gender slipped away. In the everyday conversations between our internal partners and the work group, between managers and the work group, between our internal partners and the members of the new self-managed team, the language of gender fell away unless we were present to hold its place.

Conclusion

We have reflected here on one part of a larger project, in order to elaborate some of the dilemmas of working towards gender equity in organizations as a collaborative action-researcher. Our team's learning about how to do this was considerable, whilst our success in working with our partners to institute lasting change in the organization was less than we had hoped.

Working on gender issues inside organizations is difficult: it is difficult to change entrenched systems of power, but it is also difficult to engage people in addressing an aspect of organizational life that is pervasive. Changing is uncomfortable and threatening, in different ways, for all concerned. People prefer not to talk about it, or to keep the discussion at the policy level, with gender equity as a distanced concept. Raising issues of gender in organizations appears to be introducing something that did not previously exist. We learned that, unless one takes active steps to keep the gender focus of such change efforts explicit, it slips from view; the concept gets lost.

From a feminist perspective, we believe attempting to work collaboratively as part of an action-research approach is morally, strategically and



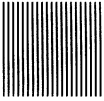
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practically essential. Collaboration both as a principle and as a strategy is central in bringing about generative organizational change. And, yet, our experiences within this project suggested that our attempts to work collaboratively also exacerbated the tendency of gender to disappear from the change agenda. We found ourselves treading a careful path, on a moment-by-moment basis, between building and maintaining our relationships with our internal partners, and explicitly naming and addressing the gender dynamics of the organization in the face of their resistance. We needed to find a way to work *with* people on something they preferred to overlook. At times, we clearly did not get right this balance between maintaining and challenging the relationship.

Our internal partners also experienced this balancing process, which our use of the dual agenda heightened. The business piece of this approach had greater legitimacy than the gender piece: it enabled our partners to understand and explain what they were doing in terms that had currency within the organization, but it also consistently swamped the gender piece. Whenever our partners took an initiative forward without us present, gender dropped out of the picture, despite the fact that they understood the gender connections when we were present to explicate them. In the experiment, team-working became a proxy for gender, which proved problematic, since its relationship to gender equity was contingent on the circumstances of implementation.

In undertaking this work, we gained first-hand awareness of some of the gendered meanings associated with working collaboratively in this company culture. In collaboration, the relationship between partners is the means through which expertise is exchanged. Creating and maintaining that relationship is key, but, in order to work well, the relationship must be based not merely on agreement, but also on mutuality and trust, so that things not normally discussed become available as topics for dialogue. This involves relational work (Fletcher, 1999), which is routinely devalued in organizations, and which often has different meanings when men and women carry it out. In a work environment in which reward and recognition are based on individualized achievement and concrete results, participation in such a collaboration may have substantial costs: it takes time and produces at its best outcomes that are not attributable to anyone in particular. We soon found that the low status attached to collaborative working in this particular environment meant that the most senior managers, who welcomed us in and supported the goal of helping them build a more gender-equitable company, nevertheless chose not to commit the time necessary to build collaborative relationships with us and instead delegated this work to more junior staff. This not only disrupted our relationships, but also meant that the shared understandings of gendering processes we had begun to develop with them were disrupted, and were not easily and quickly transferable to the new arrivals.



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Beyond Armchair Feminism

Collaboration involves a relationship in which some degree of power-sharing must take place. It does not necessarily mean establishing equality or consensus among the parties involved, and it is important to recognize those interests that are shared and those that are not. Indeed, working across differences is one of the most challenging features of collaboration. Our relationships with our partners spanned many identity differences, including those of class, nationality and gender, as well as role differences. The implications of the experiments were not the same for us as external researchers as they were for them as employees, and we brought different sorts of relevant knowledge to the relationship—ours of a feminist organizational critique, theirs of the inside workings of the company. We shared the broad values of the dual agenda: that gender equity was in itself desirable, and that organizational change that helped the company meet its business goals was also desirable. It had been our intention to pass our ‘gender lens’ to our partners, for them to apply to their own everyday experiences and work practices in their efforts to change the company. This proved difficult to do. They had a hard time connecting the gender analysis with their experiences and practices at work. We learned that to do this required *considerable opportunity for reflection*—time for people to interrogate their own perceptions, judgements and assumptions. The quality of the interactions between members of our team and our internal partners was a crucial factor in allowing this to happen: for this process to work, we as researchers needed to be able to ‘disrupt’ the normal workings of the company and create spaces within it in which reflective discussion could take place. But, to do this, we needed both to have established trust with our partners and to have been prepared to confront them, disagree with them and deal with their resistance.

Clearly, we needed to have made more opportunities to give and receive feedback on what was happening—what both we and they were discovering—over the course of our collaboration. Our failure to do this is perhaps the single most significant factor limiting what we were able to achieve. We were working within a commercial environment, in which tangible results and visible action were priorities. Indeed, the tendency to move straight from identifying a problem to fixing it, without ever really reflecting on it, was one of our principal observations of the organization’s culture. But to enact our vision of generative change required resisting this aspect of their culture and, instead, taking time to reflect with our partners both on their experiences and our tentative interpretations—to work with their understandings of gendering processes, to have opportunities together to reject or rework our suggestions, to be active partners in the process of attributing meaning to the work we were all engaged in. In effect, we needed them to collaborate in the theorizing, as well as in the doing. Where we were able to do this, most notably with some of our internal partners, we all noticed a significant deepening of trust in our relationships. At these points, we developed a



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sense of mutuality, of being able jointly to own the outcomes of our work together, rather than simply our interpreting the data they supplied.

We have learned, then, that the form of collaboration that is most effective is one in which we challenge more and agree less, disrupt more and acquiesce less, while at the same time building and maintaining trust. This, we learned, is far from easy.

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