



# talking about...

August 2009

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

## Creating Shared Meaning

***"There is a profound difference between information and meaning."***

... Warren Bennis (1925 - ) US educator, futurologist, advisor and writer

One of the key aspects of the spatial leadership approach lies in the creation of shared meaning amongst the group being led. Although this would seem like a very obvious and straightforward thing to do, it seems to be done rather poorly in most organisations. Why is this and how can meaning be better shared?

To understand the challenge in developing shared meaning, it is important to initially understand just what is meant by "meaning". The word "meaning" refers to the gist or essence of something or some situation. The word can also refer to the significance of something. From a leadership perspective, both of these meanings are important. Clearly leaders want others to get to the shared basic understanding of any given situation and to share the significance of that understanding in relation to how the group does what it does.

You may recall from previous newsletters that in ontological coaching, we distinguish the linguistic action of making an assessment. An assessment is an interpretation we make of something, someone or some situation that we use to determine how we respond to a given circumstance. As interpretations, they rely on placing our observations into the context that is there for us at the time we are making the assessment. The same observation in a different context will likely generate a different interpretation or meaning.

To understand this better, let's look at an example. Say you look through the window of a house and see a shabbily dressed man getting a child who looks about ten years old to inject him with a needle. You have just been told that there is a big drug problem in this neighbourhood. What meaning do you make of this situation? Given the recent context that has been established, you may well see this as a situation where an adult is involving a minor in the drug world. However, if a man walked past you, saw you looking disgustedly in the window and told you that the man was a diabetic then you may well change your interpretation of the situation.

The key word here is "context". The context can be seen as the frame of reference in which interpretations are made and a context ALWAYS exists. The key to developing shared meaning then lies in developing a shared context that can be readily applied in any given circumstance. If we are to develop shared meaning with those we lead then we must create a shared context for them. This is where leaders often fall down. They neglect to consider the context and often do not know how to effectively create it.

We have found the most effective way of creating a shared context lies in simplicity and consistency. The context has to be simple because it has

to be easily remembered and easily applied. This is important because people are making interpretations constantly and simplicity allows people the opportunity have an easy reference point to which to come back. Consistency is about frequent reinforcement to ensure that the context sticks with people. Applied together, simplicity and consistency provide the basis to create a solid frame of reference leading to a shared context and greater shared meaning.

***"The whole of life is symbolic because the whole of it has meaning."***

... Boris Pasternak (1890 - 1960) Russian novelist and poet

## A Few Anagrams ...

*Thanks to Julie once again for these gems:*

DORMITORY rearranged becomes ... DIRTY ROOM

PRESBYTERIAN rearranged becomes ... BEST IN PRAYER

ASTRONOMER rearranged becomes ... MOON STARER

DESPERATION rearranged becomes ... A ROPE ENDS IT

THE EYES rearranged becomes ... THEY SEE

GEORGE BUSH rearranged becomes ... HE BUGS GORE

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THE MORSE CODE rearranged becomes ... HERE COME DOTS

SLOT MACHINES rearranged becomes ... CASH LOST IN ME

ANIMOSITY rearranged becomes ... IS NO AMITY

ELECTION RESULTS rearranged becomes ... LIES LETS RECOUNT

SNOOZE ALARMS rearranged becomes ... ALAS NO MORE ZS

A DECIMAL POINT rearranged becomes ... IM A DOT IN PLACE

THE EARTHQUAKES rearranged becomes ... THAT QUEER SHAKE

ELEVEN PLUS TWO rearranged becomes ... TWELVE PLUS ONE

AND FOR THE GRAND FINALE:

MOTHER-IN-LAW rearranged becomes ... WOMAN HITLER ... with apologies to all the wonderful mothers-in-law out there!

***"... focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity but in doing it."***

... Greg Anderson (1964 - ) US basketball player

## Something on YouTube

Every now and then I see something that puts me in awe of the talent of which we humans are capable. Kseniya Simonova is a Ukrainian sand artist and animator. This video shows her winning performance in the show "Ukraine's Got Talent" and tells a story of love and loss in World War 2. I found it compelling. You can see it at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=518XP8prwZo>.

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