

Restoring coherence through systemic clarity

Example of minding
optimization gaps

NGO, education,
culture gap

Optimization
 Gap



Client Request

The managing director of a national NGO in Africa reached out with a complex request: **"We're full of potential – but something's off."**

Team dynamics were fraying. A long-standing conflict had begun to ripple through the organization. Despite deep commitment and shared values, the NGO was stagnating. The director sensed that without meaningful change, burnout, turnover, or deeper cultural fractures could follow.

He wasn't looking for a quick fix.

He wanted someone who could see the deeper system, navigate complexity, and work at the roots, not just the symptoms.

Client's understanding of their challenges

The managing director described the team as passionate and deeply committed, but increasingly frustrated by a sense of stagnation. They felt they had plateaued - despite putting in significant energy and care, they weren't moving forward.

- **Internal communication felt misaligned**, with unresolved tension and inconsistent feedback loops. A long-standing conflict involving a manager had started to affect the wider team. Several formal complaints had been filed.
- They saw themselves as **"too deep in day-to-day work,"** with little space to reflect or align strategically. Leaders acknowledged they were immersed in operations and **lacked clarity and language to address deeper issues around power dynamics** and team culture.
- They were well aware of their **complex cultural context**: the NGO's mission involved **breaking racial stereotypes and advancing equity**, and they knew the risks of reinforcing unconscious associations between leadership, excellence, and whiteness. The managing director - a white European man - was respected and trusted, but worried that bringing in a facilitator with a similar profile could send the wrong signal.
- They understood that **issues are not personal, but organizational** and believed that a short but **meaningful intervention with an external facilitator** could help surface tensions, create clarity, strengthen team cohesion and unlock their potential.

What we discovered

Working with staff members and leaders, we co-designed a one-week program combining collective discovery, workshops, and 1:1 follow-ups. This allowed us to surface and respond to systemic patterns in real time. The core issues were deeply rooted in post-apartheid legacies, internalized power dynamics, and organizational structure.

Power was misunderstood and mismatched, largely influenced by post-colonial and post-apartheid history:

- **Power was often equated with dominance.** Team members see themselves as either entirely in control or entirely subordinate.
- **Delegation and shared authority were unfamiliar patterns.** The staff defers and goes quiet after a senior person speaks.
- **Managers wanted to empower** but we witnessed them increasing control under pressure, creating mixed signals.
- **Leadership patterns were influenced by an unhealthy hierarchy of colonialism:** authoritarian models dominated, especially among staff leading educational work or managers.

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What we discovered

Systemic blind spots were reinforced by hierarchy, largely due to NGO being established as a highly formalized education organization:

- Even though they are a small NGO, **hierarchical distance masked certain behaviors** and dynamics. Some staff members showed softness with the managing director while showing authoritarian behavior elsewhere.
- The NGO's structure, built for educational stability, **unintentionally was blocking innovation and reinforcing traditional authority**.

Deeply internalized narratives around power and leadership were **shaping staff behavior**, often in ways they didn't recognize themselves:

- Leadership **identity was shaped by post-apartheid narratives**. Local black staff, in particular, often saw themselves as implementers, not leaders.
- Staff was **surprised to realize they already held authority**, especially in roles with children or logistics. Even the security officer was not seeing herself as a decision-maker.
- **Low-key introduction built trust in this team** - how I was introduced turned out to be a game changer in staff opening up: those who were present for it engaged, those who were absent remained guarded in the sessions.

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Interventions



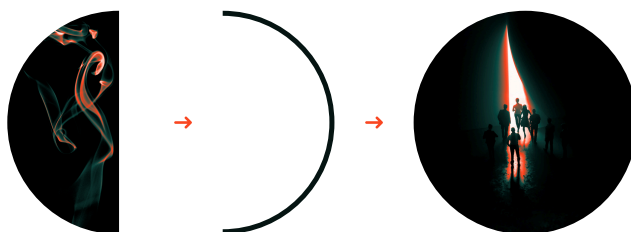
- **Systemic Clarity** - I facilitated structured reflection to help the team step out of the day-to-day and see their dynamics through a systemic lens - linking personal roles to organizational dynamics and sectoral context.
- **Power Dynamics in Practice** - rather than theory, we explored concrete moments where authority and ambiguity clashed - highlighting the unintended impacts of well-meant actions. We surfaced key leadership questions like: "Does this work because of me - or despite me?"
- **Contextualized Tools** - I introduced tools like delegation boards and game-based diagnostics tailored to their environment - striking the balance between hierarchy and humanity, structure and emergence.
- **Cultural Repositioning** - we reframed long-term tensions not as individual failures, but as systemic conditions, allowing difficult conversations to be had without blame. A pivotal shift occurred when we repositioned a team member and realigned accountability.

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Interventions

- **Created Channels for Deep Exploration** - I showcased how several interventions can generate value in workshops within 1-2 hours. Those interventions were further explored by NGO leadership: mind maps for team building, delegation board for practical empowerment, insights about conflict for creating communication protocols and agreements, etc.
- **Designed light, gamified methods to engage the staff and shift dynamics faster** than formal training, while gently breaking non-desired narratives about hierarchies and leadership.
- **Lived Empowerment** workshops were designed to position the team members in the center. Asking for their needs and pains, their concrete situations, their current interpretations and solutions, how they would implement a newly discussed framework or insight. Asking them to vote and decide, fishing for disagreements, providing the space to try, err and learn during the workshop together.

Any outstanding issues were addressed in followups the same day, showing that their voices are valued.



Intent

Conditions

Outcomes

When we identified the conditions which shape thinking, relating and deciding, we can shift them, and outcomes improved.

Results & Impact

- A deeper, shared understanding of power, structure, and ambiguity - and how these played out in real moments.
- Repositioning of team members, easing chronic tensions and restoring empathy, solidarity, and shared purpose.
- Team members recognized their own leadership and influence, even if they hadn't named it before or thought that they had any.
- The organization gained what its managing director called "two extra years of peace." Internal culture shifted from frustrated stagnation to stability, safety, and renewed cohesion.
- Foundations laid for embedding a national child safety policy - amplifying both organizational integrity and impact.
- Most importantly, this clarity and alignment created not just a more productive team - but more emotional safety and well-being for the children they serve.
- A set of repeatable movements (processes and workshops) and tools they could use to continue their transformation journey.

Conclusion

This engagement wasn't about fixing dysfunction. It was about surfacing the unseen forces that were shaping the team's behavior and helping them see that those forces could be changed.

By working systemically, lightly, and with real respect for the team's complexity, we restored a sense of coherence and possibility. The team gained tools to keep evolving - not just to manage conflict, but to lead with intention and care.

Most importantly, the organization became safer for the people who matter most: the children they serve.

"You were able to see dynamics on every level: top, down, middle, individual and group - and show them to us in real time.

With that, we understood that it is not about who failed but rather about the conditions - what is the system set up to produce. You shouldn't just mind the cake in the oven, but the oven itself: temperature, its setting etc."

Managing director

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Ready to
—— explore yours?

We will go into your context, sense the gaps and consider if this may be the right partnership. No cost. No pressure. Full confidentiality.

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