

## Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

December 2017



This month Gro Emmertsen Lund, Ph.D., Taos Associate, author and consultant shares with us her reflections on what working with stories can do in organizations.

### Positive Change through Organizational Storytelling

By Gro Emmertsen Lund

Over the past year I have been consulting with an orphanage that has struggled with a series of challenges. The leadership team discovered how stories from earlier times still strongly influenced relationships and communication in the organization. These stories centered on the former director and her negative ways of dealing with the employees. The former director had cared passionately about the children living in the institution, and had high expectations and demands for the professionals working there. The stories emphasized how employees felt overruled, offended and intimidated by her especially when she felt that the children were not cared for properly. Even though many employees had not been working at the institution at that time – the stories still had a powerful effect on the staff. This made them tentative and reluctant to engage with the new director, especially in fulfilling his wish to create a more mutual and progressive collaboration with all of them.

As consultants, we gathered the employees together for a meeting. We started the day by introducing to the group the idea of the storytelling approach. In small groups they started sharing the stories they knew about the time of the former director. They reflected on each other's stories: What are these stories telling us? How have we let the stories influence our relationships and ways of collaborating? What have these stories made possible? What have these stories made impossible?

The storytelling and sharing of reflections were very energizing and allowed for many experiences among the staff. The funny thing was, that many different stories popped-up, showing a variety of perspectives, experiences and voices. In addition, to the negative stories about the former director, many positive stories about working with the children were shared and responses of appreciation, acknowledgement and connectedness arose. As a surprise to the leadership team, the stories about the former director were less important to the staff than the stories of working with the children. After sharing rounds of these findings, we arranged for a short interview with the leadership team.

Based on the narrative model of "the 7 P's" (see \*note below) we began the interview. The leadership team shared how it had been for them to start working at the orphanage, how they had wanted to develop a very different kind of leadership, and how they had tried to invite different voices into the dialogue. They told how they appreciated all that the employees did on a daily basis and how they would love the employees to feel safe, to contribute more ideas as well as critiques if needed. The employees listened attentively and showed great interest. After the interview it was time for questions. In pairs, employees helped each other create some narrative questions: What was the story about? What social world was it inviting us into? How can we connect and relate in order to "live" this story? The leadership team responded to all of the questions with careful consideration. The whole group worked together to create a shared narrative about working together at this institution. The day ended with a "funeral ritual" for the old stories and a celebration of the new one. All who participated seemed excited about the new possibilities lined up for collaboration and communication in the organization – and they were filled with hope about how this scenario would benefit the children and young people living there.

As an organizational consultant working with inspiration from social construction and in this case with narrative practice, my experience shows that it is possible to bring forth the multiple voices, set free energy and appreciation in the work community and create pathways for staff to co-create a shared vision for the future.

---

---

\*Note 1:

***The 7 P model is a way of working with understanding a narrative, understanding what it creates and how it is or can be constructed.***

1. *The first P is the Personal Perspective*
2. *The second P is Public/Audience*
3. *The third P is Punctuation/starting point*
4. *The fourth P is the Person/the figures in the story*
5. *The fifth P is Positions/roles*
6. *The sixth P is Plot/main thread*
7. *The seventh P is Point/key message*