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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on a diversity intervention that I envisioned, designed and anchored for a Multinational software product organization based in Bangalore, India.

'Breaking the glass ceiling', a personal growth initiative involved 100 women in the middle to the senior tier of leadership between 2014 & 2015.

The program design drew inspiration from diverse streams like expressive arts, process work and Pyschodrama. I endeavoured was to tenderly nudge the participants to delve into the forgotten, the unknown and undiscovered within themselves.

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This paper would be structured as follows: at first, I will articulate an overview of the intervention with high-level details of the program design and methodology across each phase. Next, I share the three themes that I focussed on while working with most groups and the way I approached them. Lastly, I recount the challenges I faced as a primary anchor as I ventured into uncharted territory.

I hope that my insights can aid to anyone who may be planning to take an unconventional methodology to an established setup. The opposition arose since the organization was logic-driven and unexposed to unstructured learning processes in the past.

I have written this paper in the first person while citing the voice of the group as 'we'. I have masked the names of all the participants to protect their identity. I have identified the quotes of the participants in *purple italics*, and the references are in *blue italics*. My journal entries are in *maroon italics*.

Keywords: personal growth, diversity, shifts, emergent, expressive arts, process work, Pyschodrama, here and now, emotions, experiments

Introduction

Leadership interventions dazzle everyone with brand new jargons and complicated frameworks. They usher in undeniable vigour and impetus to succeed to anyone

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influenced by them. Through presentations, role-play, simulation and case studies, invaluable constructs like navigating social networks, managing time, and influencing stakeholders delivered with panache. The participants hopeful of being successful feel enthusiastic about taking the learning outcomes forward. However, as time passes, the charisma of the takeaways fades and most circle back to the familiar ways of doing.

I, on the other hand, as a women leader had relied primarily on in-dwelling to ponder upon the inner truths to shape my actions. My process work journey that had begun more than a decade ago had contained me as I sieved through pain, loss and grief that life had sent my way. Through a gradual process of inward-looking, I began shedding the layers of habitual patterns and defensiveness. It was easier to question the assumptions based on which a bouquet of familiar behaviour arose. It seemed possible to comprehend the fear and anger that lay under wraps. As I began to accept myself in the 'here & now' the fort of defensiveness seemed unnecessary. This realization seeded my comfort with who I am and unearth self-love. In being myself, I was able to develop relationships sans expectations. Gradually, I revelled in taking my entire being with its glory and faults to the workplace and hoped others could too.

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Intervention Outline

Methodology

Intervention Design Overview



Interphase assignment enabled the participants to continue learning and exploration.

Figure 1 : Overview - 'Breaking the glass ceiling'.

When I was asked to conceive a growth journey for women leaders, it was an obvious choice to draw lessons based on what has helped me the most. The canvas of the intervention mimicked how I had come into my being (Figure 1).

I wanted to invoke the witness and the wise that lay within each of us. I wanted us to discern the choices in the outer world with the feelings, values and needs in the inner world. As expected, the unique invitation to explore the wondrous self beneath the skin was at first met with suspicion and later with curiosity. Unlike the leadership training in the past, 'Breaking the glass ceiling' made no promises yet generously invested in bolstering emotional safety and unconditional acceptance for the participants.

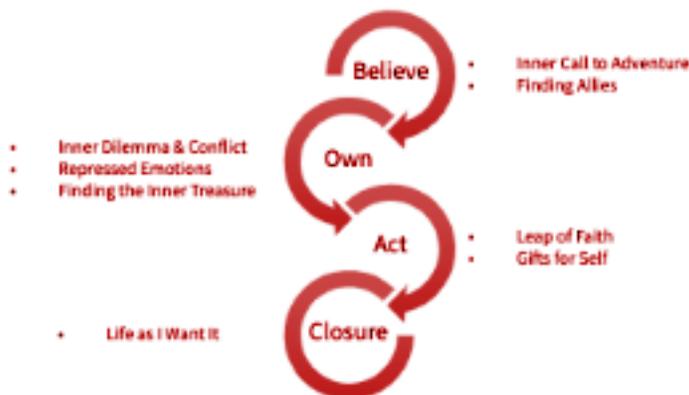
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Marion Woodman (1992) validates the tenacity needed for inner change, *"it takes a strong ego to hold the darkness, wait, hold the tension, waiting for we know not what. But if we can hold long enough, a tiny light is conceived in the dark unconscious, and if we can wait and hold, in its own time it will be born to its full radiance* (p.11).

'Breaking the glass ceiling' was voluntary and structured across three distinct phases (Figure 2). It linked how we experienced ourselves and the impact we had on others. The bedrock of the program was self-initiated contemplation in-between to enable deeper diving. The pre-work included reflecting with journal writing, expanding world view with books and movies, getting authentic feedback and becoming familiar with one's strengths.

Outcome

What We Experienced



The inner journey of the participants began when they found the inner *call to learning and adventure*. The adventure was tough and emotionally intense. However the payoff was finding allies and envisioning "life as I want it to be". They began to *articulate life choices and priorities*.

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Figure 2: Program Flow

As evident above, linking each phase to the other aided personal growth (Figure 2). The first part of the intervention, 'Believe' became the entry point. It was the call to adventure designed to make participants curious about what lay ahead. Believe was run over two days and offered a mix of semi-structured and free-flowing sessions. The rationale at this juncture was attending feelings gently, sensations and interpersonal processes. Storytelling, body movements, spontaneous play and art-making were leveraged to meet the forgotten parts of us.

By day 2, interpersonal relationships and trust, the foundation for the next phase, were heightened through deep sharing and listening. Asha talks about her take away from this chapter, *"I articulated how my behaviour impacted others"*. Nivi speaks about the insights she gathered, *"I empathised by putting myself in other's shoes"*. Forming strong relationships at this stage was critical and held everyone through the rigour was to follow.

'Own' was a three-day intensive which was delivered as a residential workshop in 2014 and non-residential in 2015. At this stage, I intensified unpredictability and ambiguity with open-ended explorations and participant-led sessions. Symbolic cues, activities based on creative arts and Psychodramatic enactments were the vehicles to traverse through the arduous terrains. Through the program design, attention was paid to embrace our strengths, inner-outer conflicts and fragile or unfrozen parts of the self.

A call at this stage was to let go of emotional baggage to reclaim expression and spontaneity. Dolly sums up her experience *"something deep has changed within me; I feel energized and connected to myself"*. In witnessing herself, Tasha realized that she

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tends to mentally switch off if things were not going as per her wish or plan.

During 'Act' we immersed into one on one virtual coaching. It was a stretch of time to imagine life without inhibitions. Reflective practices lay the foundation of deliberating on the 'how come' question. By slowing down, we mulled on new choices or ways of being at the workplace and home. Each week by setting up a personal experiment helped to expand the circumference within which one had held for oneself or testing an assumption about others. These included staking claims to strategic projects, conveying difficult emotions, having trying conversations, undertaking a new hobby or completing an unfinished project.

Archana spoke about one such experience during Act, *"I wanted to do something different for an upcoming event in my team. Initially, no one was ready for it. There was huge resistance. I nearly gave up. But after the coaching session, I decided not to abandon my conviction. I spent time to understand what was making my teammates reluctant about my idea. I incorporated everyone's ideas in my approach. When I returned with an updated plan, everyone agreed"*.

The closure process included a metaphorical narrative describing the overall journey. The participants felt confirmed when family and friends reiterated witnessing their new behaviours and ways of being. Diana spoke fearlessly in our last conversation, *"I am ready to take up new challenges"*.

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Themes

In this section, I will present the themes that emerged in working with these women leaders. I have selected three out of the many since they seemed to be commonly occurring, and by attending to them, I noted most considerable leeway for transformation.

A. Barren emotive landscape

I present an extract from one of the notes I wrote. *"The pain, hurt, anger, loneliness behind her cheerful, ever-smiling, always bubbling happy face. It feels like multiple emotions are suppressed inside and held in abeyance. She spends enormous energy to make others happy"*. Like Tasha; many struggled to call out, distinguish and verbalize their feelings. On digging deeper, it was apparent that Tasha was in mourning. She simmered mixed emotions, including anger and the pain of abandonment for the past few years.

Tasha had learned early on in life, having lost her psychic protection that by being perceived as 'heartless' would be the best way to manage the hurt that came her way. Tasha did not know how to wear her heart on her sleeve. Like Tasha, most women leaders were labelled aloof or aggressive, which made trust-building, seeking support and delegation by others a tough act. Most of the participants were proud of their solo workhorse status and dismissed the loneliness that came along with it as inconsequential. Life had thrown each of them too many experiences of betrayal, abuse and objectification which they had absorbed by becoming thick-skinned and hiding their vulnerability.

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For most, avoiding emotions was a full-time occupation. Many unconsciously spent a substantial part of their potency in escaping from its messiness. One common way that everyone seemed to handle the emotional disarray was by being submerged in tasks. Additionally, avoiding ambiguity, discomfort and projecting thoughtlessness on others were often sought as coping strategies when the participants were in a pickle. A combination of using these approaches served the participants a way to disregard the language of the heart.

The defensiveness triggered during the group process seemed to unpack the feelings that had piled up over the years. We befriended each emotion delicately with care. At the beginning, we just learnt the names of these emotions. We checked-in to ask what purpose they were serving at the time by not showing up in their real avatar. We listened and paused each time, a feeling, made an appearance. We focussed on 'staying with' a sensation and letting it envelop us viscerally. We learnt to take ownership of our emotions by making 'I' statements. We explored intersubjectively stating how other's feeling impacted us. We played by painting, self-disclosing and dramatizing a range of moods. Through these ways, we acknowledged our innate capacity to sense, notice, communicate and integrate our feelings.

By asking open-ended questions like, '*what are you feeling?*' or '*what can allow us to stay with this feeling?*' helped to find comfort within the chaos. As everyone started to feel comfortable, we unfolded by going to the lower substrata to locate - agony, anguish, loss, grief, anger and sadness. Group members cushioned each other with their benevolence, respect and grace when they discerned unannounced helplessness in the other. We hugged the confusion, frustration, resistance, criticism to bring to light the

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critical voices that had been served in the past as warnings to cloak these emotions. We relied on rituals to bury the painful moments of lost childhood, abandonment, rejection and illegitimacy.

Betty looked proud upon taking baby steps in revealing herself, *"I tested a belief that I could never truly express myself to anyone. I tried, inserting feelings into my expression. I realized through trial and error that I could open up when I feel safe and unjudged by others. Even though in this instant, I am not particularly liberated or ecstatic, I know I have taken a baby step."*

The gifts of emotions gained inroads as soon as we slowed down to tread lovingly. Bit by bit, tears softened the inhospitable land sprouting the seeds of humanness and uncertainty.

B. Deprived self-worth

The impoverished terrain of the inner world took on many facades. Self-doubts were seen in attention-seeking behaviours or by expecting validation from the power centres. Low self-esteem returned each time, a yes was said to something that was meant to be a no. Diffidence manifested when struggling to voice an idea with conviction. Timidness arose in accommodating or when being extremely cautious. Sweta called it out fair and square, *"people's opinion matters a lot to me. I know why I am doing something, I need assurance from people in authority. I need buy-in and need likeability from others to feel confident in my actions"*.

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We delved further into this theme by acceding to the social conditioning associated with being a girl child in a patriarchal upbringing. We chronicled the 'can / cannot' that had been etched in our hearts and paralyzed our minds. We became mindful that achievements, rewards and accolades had over time become an indicator of self-esteem. We admitted that self-doubts aesthetically concealing behind the triumphs. We realized the outpouring of shame each time we gave in to our longings or desires.

It was by enacting the unrestrained future self that we got in touch with our fantasies, wishes and dreams. At other times, we dramatized our bucket list and personal vision as if we lived in a perfect world. Acting on these stimuli affirmed, voiced and brought ownership to what each of us valued. Betty probed on her essence to realize that she has been living in the shadow of her dead brother. For Betty, taking charge and being over-prepared were ways to mitigate the dread of the irreplaceable loss. By being accomplishment driven, one after the other, she had forgotten to acknowledge herself. The past had cast its irreparable shadow on her present. Betty found colours in her future projection self-portraits in comparison to the greys and blacks that she had sketched before. As she celebrated being re-born to herself, Betty dared to say, *"I am worthy and can put myself first"*.

Laila spoke eloquently about losing her inner-child amongst the many roles. *"In every role, she (women) is expected to behave in a certain way - an obedient child, the protective sibling, a devoted wife and the omnipresent mom. In trying to mould myself in each role, the core of this girl (me) started fading, and I felt caged. I dissolved the once lost girl and emerged as a carefree bird. I saw some of my colleagues metamorphose as amazing storytellers, a few bold fighters and one of them a confident explorer. Yes! I have discovered a new me."*

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The 'self' began to heal when the group members cleansed the scabs of hurt, pain, loneliness, worry and insecurity. We added delight and flavour to ourselves with elements like spontaneity, creativity and imagination. Divya learnt to walk with her head held high after closing the painful chapters of rejection from her past. Divya stumbled a few more times on her newfound path until she could steady herself.

The self was scaffolded when group members nurtured its uncelebrated attributes. Naina broadcasted that she was amazed to learn that others perceived her as a strong and assertive woman with many hidden talents. We redeemed our being by holding our head high appreciative of our gifts and flaws.

C. The uncertainty avoider.

When participants were asked to venture out of the comfort zone, they required direction, preferably by someone in authority. Even in non-judgemental spaces with low stakes, the fear of failure didn't seem to melt. In the beginning, walking blindfolded with a partner felt terrifying. Similarly, moving freely in response to the internal impulses was paralyzing. Another context in which uncertainty was visible was when vocalizing a differing point of view. I noticed that unpalatable words were either dovetailed or diverted. Sometimes a difference of opinion manifested as a tough stance or in trying to jump to another's rescue when someone felt upset.

I often saw discomfort when participants dealt with the absence of order, structure and directions. Unfortunately, most women did not want to look foolish and were perceived by stakeholders as non-risk takers. Due to this impression of playing too safe, they abstained from vital roles. Most didn't have a promoting sponsor who could advance

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their growth and development.

We initiated the dialogue on treading the undivulged path by personifying growth and speaking to the camouflaged barriers. We learned by enacting the impediments and inner conflicts to find the source of the unease. We called out our inadequacies and fear of being harshly judged that made trying exhausting. Through probing Psychodramatically, we met our inner-critic in flesh and blood. At other times we recognized the familiar voice of the fear belonging to an authoritative figure in our past life. It was through cathartic moments that we got in touch with the adventurous, curious and careful parts of ourselves.

When it was time for re-scripting, we proceeded by trusting our instincts. We tried to favour the efforts over the results. Later, the experiments evoked during Act taught the participants to cross thresholds by having faith in oneself. We used our strengths for grounding before embarking on an unconventional trail of adventure. These included having difficult conversations, doing something new, interacting with someone different in a non-transactional way, gaining visibility, presenting a paper and not taking constructive feedback personally.

Maya spoke about a self-limiting belief she reconfigured. *"I would go out of my way and do things for others whether the other person needed it or not. After reflecting on this aspect, I realized I am doing a lot of things that are not needed. I started making a conscious effort to stop unless I checked in with myself and the other".*

The three themes presented above talk about how we make ourselves invisible as a

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way to survive in the world. Without a mirror, we can continue to diminish our presence. I relate to the quote by Brene Brown about taking ownership. *"Owning our story can be hard but not nearly as difficult as spending our lives running from it. Embracing our vulnerabilities is risky but not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love and belonging and joy—the experiences that make us the most vulnerable. Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light."*

Embracing structure with unstructured

The culture of the organization was top-down; embracing the instructor-led outcome-driven approach. I, on the contrary, was offering unstructured, self-led experiential learning using the group process.

As expected, I braved tremendous push back from the participants. I felt it strongly in working with the first few groups. There were countless moments when the participants were not willing to be inconvenienced and unsettled by the 'new'. They expected quick resolutions and didn't believe in 'trusting the process'.

Lata looked annoyed with me and held on to everything I had spoken with cynicism and negativity. I expected Lata not to return to phase 2. However, she came back with a higher force. She didn't miss any opportunity to oppose me. I wondered if Lata was a rebel without a cause. I tried to be gentle and inclusive until I realized that her need for attention had started to overshadow the group process. I challenged her to remain an observer. She took it on and even elected to wear a blindfold for the upcoming

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sessions. It gave me and the group respite from her and allowed me to pay attention to others. Taking a pause allowed Lata the much needed time to gather herself. I noticed that she looked settled as her angst scattered away from her. I complimented her the next day when I saw her in the role of a calm listener and empathic team member. On that day, Lata smiled and awkwardly joined the table I was sitting on for lunch. She completed the entire program, learning to trust people in authority and ask for herself instead of shooting from others shoulders.

The quote below by Lao Tzu is inspiring and addresses having faith in the process.

"Do you have the patience to wait

Till your mud settles and the water is clear?

Can you remain unmoving

Till the right action arises by itself?"

On the other hand, being mindful of my fears and insecurities kept me above water. I consciously paused while debriefing with my colleague and in reflective writing. These conversations late in the evening became ways to remind me (us) of the values and intentions that the program upheld. The shift in my (our) thinking instantly echoed in the group energy.

An example I cite from my notes is, *"I seem to be putting too much pressure on myself. Why am I getting preoccupied with the need to be liked by the group? I think it's making it hard to be authentic and direct?"*. The approach of challenging myself guided me to

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trust the group and be inclusive at all times.

In another such instance, I reflected on my presumption to freely self-disclose. When I looked back on the day, I noticed not being a role model. I found compassion by remembering the difficulty of trying something new for the very first time. It helped me to relieve myself of the burden of intimacy I was expecting from the group. The next day, the group awkwardly began sharing feedback. I added in my notes, *"while some volunteered information about themselves, others acknowledged their difficulty in getting in touch with their emotive world. I see it is a good sign indicating everyone is persevering"*.

After a few months, the word had gotten around, and the participants seemed prepared for the unexpected. I tried to genuinely bond with everyone and influence them to notice the process. I remained inquisitive and asked open-ended questions in the 'here & now'. It helped get the participants to sidestep their touchiness, logical and linear thinking.

The fragility of the raw emotions in the space touched me deeply. I earned my ribbons by staying true to my feelings. Working together to unravel, the self became our sacred gift. I learnt to be at ease with myself during troubled times to stay afloat. As time went by, the participants not only came to learn about themselves and connect with others but also to experience the process itself.

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Conclusion

Even after so many years, this program has furthered the trust in the process. The overall approach, program design and the intentions supported each person to feel empowered and behold parts of themselves. A participant wrote the poem presented below affirming the textures, hues and qualities of their experience (Figure 2)

रेगिस्तान का सफर है
इन यादों की रेत को मुट्टी में न जकड़ो
रेत तो फिसलेगा ही बस उसको फिसलने दो
दास्तान तो कई है |
सुनी भी और अनसुनी भी
बस दिल के पैगाम को लफ़्जो से सवार दो
और अगर लफ़्ज काफी नहीं तो यह अशकोह में बहा दो
दिल थाम के आगे बढ़ों
तूफ़ान अभी भी है बाकी

Figure 3: Participant Ratna shares a poem

I was thrilled that five years hence; participants confirmed that the program had carved a special place in their life (Figure 4).

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"I" hold "MY" remote.

I was introduced me to the whole range of emotions that dwell within

It helped me to do a lot of self-reflection and become more self-aware.

Breaking the glass ceiling for me was the start of my journey inward.

Instilled the value in how important it is to stand up for myself and place myself before others.

I opened a way of confidence on how to handle difficult situation and come out in a pragmatic way.

offered me a window to peek into my own mind, helped me understand that my vulnerabilities are ok to be presented to the outside world and made me realise my strengths.'

It did open my eyes into believing I am empathetic people caring person

The session which help to do more of deep dive within ourselves.

I approach people without perceptions and it really helps and I am happy about it.

TESTIMONIALS - 5 YEARS LATER

Figure 4: Participants view after five years

Reflection

It has been five years since this intervention conducted. I noticed even in retrospect how empowering it was for me to take forward my convictions as a process work into a corporate space. My background and prior HR experience was a plus as it helped me to relate to the challenges of the workplace. I also noticed that I carried the process work tenets lightly and let them be my companion rather than holding them too tight. It helped to stay with the belief of profiting from unstructured work. I reminded myself of this sentiment when I felt submerged by resistance. One of the most significant learnings that I carry with me is the attention and time to build rapport and safety. This point has to be considered since unstructured processes bring up many emotions. As a facilitator,

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it is essential to go slow and find ways in which people can dip their toes and take control of how far and how much they want to go. Being a believer that process work is in service of the participants and must give people a choice on how much and how quickly they progress. Strikingly, neuroscience studies confirm this approach to how safety precedes all inner explorations.

The breadth of the engagement gave me a vast learning ground. I was able to take risks and study how some aspects of the design worked better than others. I noticed that in the beginning, a lot of my energy went in managing the attention-seeking participants. As time passed, it seemed useful to balance the group constitution by reinforcing the underdogs, so multiple voices were being recognized.

Since the program was voluntary and over phases, only those who were ready to continue their journey moved forward. Some participants were not emotionally prepared dropped out in the first year and returned the following year. A flexible entry and exit point reinforces the need for unstructured processes to offer options and promote ownership.

As a process worker, the faith in 'here & now and remaining on the threshold of being safe but not too safe helped the program design to offer disquiet but not be excessively provocative. It also helped to keep notes on how each person was travelling in their journey. The documentation was beneficial to acknowledge and affirm the tiny noticings that each person was making. I found that the leap of faith was episodic. Some participants were ready to take risks after 'Own', whereas others took a few weeks into 'Act' when distance helped the dots connect.

Taking such a novel process to a new setting needs a management buy-in. For anyone. Since a lot of times, programs that hit treacherous waters are called off based on initial feedback. Even though the first group bombed my relationship with the training manager helped me to keep going by including some checks & balances.

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The great gift in such a process is when self-reflection becomes a culture and is not dependent on the facilitator. I became silent when others started to hear their voice and valuing their being.

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