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Masterclass Ba concept as a co-creation space by Emiko Tsuyuki

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Emiko Tsuyuki is a sociologist working at the Chuo Graduate School of Strategic Management (Business School) in Tokyo, Japan. She teaches business students most of the time, but she does not teach rigid concepts. Instead, she works with the concept of collective learning and the 'Ba' concept. Her main interest is creating a work place where we can work together and make something creative.

What is Ba?

Ba is a unique word. Ba is the context shared by those interacting with each other, and through such interactions, the context itself evolves to create knowledge. Ba participants are committed to Ba through action and interaction. We usually communicate with other people through words. Our thinking is based on this way of communicating. When actually, we often communicate what we feel as well (through body language, tone etc.). Ba is a combination of verbal communication (visible Ba) and emotional communication (invisible Ba).

Everybody is in Ba. Each individual brings their own qualities to the Ba. It is also influenced by the physical setting, the time, and other context. These things are in the background; the Ba itself is more about the direct contact between people. The Ba is less present here on Zoom, but you can still see people and get a sense of what they are thinking and how they are feeling.

Creating a good Ba

Emiko is working on a book about Ba in organizations. In it, she discusses some conditions that are necessary for creating a good Ba. One of the conditions is psychological safety, which means that people trust each other and feel free to speak their minds and interact. That is very important to making a good Ba. Another important aspect is to look for diversity and recognize it as an added value. Every person has a different background and brings different things to the table. This creates a diversified Ba, which is one of the most important factors for creating something new. Everybody has different ideas and if they can share them honestly that is a basic principle of the co-creating Ba.

Some people find it difficult to express in words what they are thinking and feeling. This can make it hard to tell what someone is really thinking. It can be helpful to do things together, like going for a walk, making a drawing, or even sweeping the floor. If the focus is on the doing and not on the

people, the contact is less direct. This can be a good way to get in touch with each other. The physical aspect is very important for the emotional communication; people can say things they cannot express in words. Asking small questions can help people express their feelings. You need to give it time and make an effort.

It is not always necessary to translate feelings into words. Sometimes people want to express what they really feel, but they cannot. In that case, we can work together and help people translate those feelings into words. That is the challenge: to work together in the Ba.

Patience is key

You do not create the Ba but you can become it. Sometimes people try to make the Ba, but this intention prevents the people in the Ba from being together. Just letting people be is often a better approach. Then people can slowly get to know each other, start feeling it is safe and do creative things together. To grow these emotions, we need to have patience. To make a good wine, we have to wait one year or two years, sometimes ten. During this time, we cannot take any direct action to make the wine better. We have to wait. What is a good Ba to some, can be a bad Ba to others. Some people might be controlling the Ba, and feel good about it, while other people are getting controlled and don't feel good about the Ba. To make a good Ba naturally, we need to wait and try not to control. It is a contradiction: we try to make a good Ba, but can't try to make a good Ba.

What we can do, is being open to good Ba. It is a challenge for everybody in the Ba: there is no leader. The idea to control is attractive; but if we want to make a good Ba we cannot control; we have to wait. It is a difficult concept (especially for westerners). We have to be open and accepting and we have to wait until it is going to be. Everybody needs to be sensitive to what is happening. It is about putting the feeling into the Ba together; then something starts happening. To show your emotions without trying to control.

Some people are more sensitive to the emotions of other people than others. One of the participants experienced that other people's emotions can be too heavy to carry and wonders what to do if being in the Ba becomes too much. Emiko thinks that if the Ba becomes too heavy, the only thing we can do is change the Ba. This can be done by changing the physical place of the Ba to create a new space. If you cannot physically leave the place, you can protect your Ba by taking some distance mentally. You don't have to do, fix, or solve anything and can be an observer of the Ba.

Western culture vs. Japanese culture

In traditional western thought, there is a focus on the individual. The Japanese (and other East-Asian cultures) have a different idea of the self. This can be explained through the concept of the movable self. People are more sensitive to the context: the 'I' changes in relation to other people. The self is constantly shifting; relationship with others define the self. Ba is a very common word in Japan (it has no philosophical origin). It is a unique word, because it contains this aspect of Japanese culture.

Conclusion

Everyone has their own good Ba. It is important to share it. Everyone has their own idea of a 'good' space. It is important to share and work together to create a good Ba together. The creation of a good Ba is not the task of one leader. Everyone is involved in it. Sometimes you want to control and have too much intention to create a good Ba. You have to be a part of the Ba; that is what is important. Then you can rely on it, help and be helped by others.