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**Sameer Dua, *Declaring breakdowns: Powerfully creating a future that matters, through 6 simple steps*. Sage: New Delhi, 2016. 221 pp. ISBN: 978-93-515-0983-7 (paperback)**

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Inspired by Abraham Lincoln's observation that 'the best way to predict the future is to create it', the idea of *Declaring Breakdowns* is framed positively and proactively as disrupting and discontinuing the current situation to enable new possibilities. Essentially, as the front cover of a caterpillar metamorphosing into a colourful butterfly suggests, this book is about personal change and growth.

The author states that *Declaring Breakdowns* is intended 'for people who are committed to designing a future of choice; not for those who are committed to their excuses' (p. 7). It is a coaching book for team leaders, managers, heads of department, functions and organisations. Dua suggests that 'the real, juicy value of this book will be in you stopping and engaging with what gets provoked for you in the questions asked…about your life…not about information to remember, understand or to agree with' (p. 8).

This conversational and interactive book is grounded in the Indian author's enthusiasm for generative leadership and ontological coaching. Dua admits it is practical rather than academic, promoting his work as Founder and CEO of the Institute for Generative Leadership in Pune (with an excessive number of testimonials from practitioners). Nevertheless, it is refreshing to find a transformational text written by a non Western author. This self-leadership guide is based on an approach to coaching formulated by the Chilean thinker Fernando Flores (who was influenced by Heidegger, Maturana and JL Austin) to help individuals/teams transcend epistemological crises of modernity. The book is influenced throughout by Bob Dunham who founded the Generative Leadership Institute in the USA (www.generateleadership.com) in 1993.

Yet the author's context of India with huge inequalities in a population exceeding 1.2bn raises questions about the extent to which self-determination is possible. Furthermore, should university educators adopt airport bookshop positive psychology texts like this in their teaching? Clearly, Arianna Huffington believes the self-improvement industry matters, with the recent launch of Thrive Global (www.thriveglobal.com). While the personal empowerment trainer and best-selling author Tony Robbins sells millions of copies of self-help books like *Awaken the Giant Within* (Robbins, 2001), I am loath to include this genre in any personal and professional development workshops I facilitate, and certainly not within a university curriculum core reading list.

The book's stated objective is 'to strive to make you skilled in declaring breakdowns and in the 6-step process of creating a future that matters' (p. 9). Dua advocates practised-based learning: 'Learning, true learning, means to shift embodiment (what our body can see, attend to, do and experience habitually), to shift the capacity for action and to shift what outcomes can be produced and promised.' The author emphasises the value of practising skills regularly.

*Declaring Breakdowns* is organised in two parts. The first four chapters focus on *getting started*. Part II (chapters 5-11) details the basic six-step process (p. 62) to achieve self-empowerment and results:

      (1)   Declare a breakdown.
      (2)   Get present to 'what is so.'
      (3)   If no new action is taken, what is the default future?
      (4)   Create a new future you desire.
      (5)   Identify the missing action to go from now to where you want to be.
      (6)   Execute the missing action to achieve the future.

A summary of these steps is freely available at: www.sameerdua.com/declaring-breakdowns/#step2. Dua's TEDx talk also provides a quick overview of his philosophy (http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Declaring-Breakdowns-Sameer-Dua). It echoes Whitmore's (2009) GROW coaching model of goals, reality, options and will.

Importantly, Dua defines a generative practice as 'a conscious choice to embody a behaviour…[i]t is a commitment to a way of being in the world…life affirming, creative, and it produces a reality by how we orient to our life situation.' The author stresses the importance of breaking with practices and routines that create traps. Activities in the book are designed to raise self-awareness, pro-activity and to help the reader be open to self-rediscovery of new alternatives by consciously breaking the *status quo* and purposefully and practically creating new flow through committing to new possibilities.

Dua defines ontology as 'the study of beingness.' Ontological coaching embraces perceptions, language, interpretations, emotions, bodies, practices, culture, and personal backgrounds. The writer argues that it exposes our blind spots and helps us achieve paradigm shifts. New levels of performance and satisfaction are gained through internalising new ways of looking at

the world. The author stresses the value of taking time to challenge ourselves by moving out of our comfort zone to consider our dreams and realise epiphanies.

Readers with technical and quantitative backgrounds in particular might find this book rather New Age. Dua's self-disclosures about his business and temporary marital failures may appear like a Jerry Springer show. However, one issue I experienced demonstrating coaching in China a decade ago about discomfort felt in collectivist societies by executives on MBA programmes with using management tools focused on the individual is tempered by Dua's enthusiasm for consulting with his friends on his goals and his appreciation for how coaching can be used with teams.

The reader may be cynical about positive psychology and promises of personal transformation in a turbulent world. Yet if we are to retain any degree of self-respect and authenticity amidst managerialism and chaos in society, Dua's exhortations for us to figure out what really matters to us personally and to go with the grain of our values, learn from failure, make sense and choices within the bounds of rationality and our context. Responsibility for personal change, challenge, a sense of purpose and resilience are valuable takeaways from the book. Processes of developing soft skills in life changing conversations are critical for redesign and action.

For workshop facilitators and self-study, there are useful activities called 'generative practices' at the end of each chapter with notes for further reading. There are helpful diagrams throughout. Appendix 1 summarises elements of a new paradigm of responsibility, Appendix 2 provides space for the reader to write specifically on the six steps, while Appendix 3 is a glossary of key terms. The author's biography at the end of the book clearly indicates Dua's background as an entrepreneur, trainer, coach and philanthropist.

The seven questions Dua poses to the reader capture the book's core messages (p. 192):

1. What do you care about?
2. Are you satisfied with how you are taking care of your cares?
3. If no new action is taken, what is likely to happen in this area of your care in the foreseeable future?
4. Does this default future work for you?
5. If the default future does not work for you, what new future would you like to create in this area of your care?
6. Are you taking responsibility in achieving this new future, or, in other words, will you cause this future to happen?
7. What is the next missing conversational action for making this future happen?

The first chapter of *Declaring Breakdowns* states the benefits of doing so, the need to question and disrupt the established order of things, especially as pre-emptive measures before it is too late to avert a real breakdown such as business closures or rifts in relationship that might have been retrievable. Dua stresses the need actively to solve problems, lead changes and uncover blind spots to achieve more desirable outcomes and avoid drift.

Chapter 2 explores the significance of conversations for their generative power, moving together through language, whole body responses and shaped by cultural practices towards new understandings, actions and 'living a good life.' Drawing on Sartre's belief that 'commitment is an act, not a word', Dua argues that conversations create the future through 'language, moods and emotions, body reactions and experiences' (p. 17). Here the author acknowledges cultural differences based on ethnicity, nationality, family and individual backgrounds that shape our behaviours. The focus on conversation in the second chapter is vital, especially Boroditsky's (2001) idea that language shapes thought. Dua writes about Zaffron and Logan's (2009) observation that generative language can create new possibilities and vision. In the same vein, the philosopher Austin (1976) noted that 'speech acts' demonstrate future commitment.

Chapter 3 on transparency is about uncovering the obvious. Mindfulness and seeing beyond everyday routines to reframe and pay attention to new futures by pausing and reflecting are clearly essential for change. Dua remarks that 'what we 'see' is a function of what we go 'looking' for' (p. 35) and 'once the veil of transparency is lifted, you have new awareness' (p. 33). While this is self-evident, the actual process of unveiling is clearly complex, to break out of old habits and innovate.

The fourth chapter considers interruptions as breaks in the established order. Being sensitive to disharmony allows for possibilities to be made visible for us to perform future actions. Dua introduces the notion of a 'disclosive space' (Spinosa et al., 1997), defined as 'the way the world occurs to you' and the games you are playing. He adopts a social constructivist approach. Essentially, he is proposing we view interruptions as opportunities and breakthroughs rather than negatively as problems − a matter of semantics.

Part II emphasises that self-initiated or externally created interruptions mean that an individual can choose to 'declare a breakdown.' In chapter five, *declaring breakdowns*, focuses on meaningful actions and having authority. The author admits to using the word 'care' over 200 times in his book. He stresses that 'you can exercise leadership only in an area of your care.' Dua talks about making a stand from a position of being centred, taking responsibility, and being an author rather than

victim. He also refers to team breakdowns and shared conversations rather than for the team leader alone to declare a breakdown.

In chapter six *entitled what is so*, Dua distinguishes between assertions and assessments, i.e. facts compared with subjective statements. The reader is asked to consider the stories they tell themselves and not to confuse their assessments with assertions. The reader is asked to be present, to be alive in the moment by 'letting go and with letting in' to see things that would otherwise be invisible. The concept of somatic coaching (Strozzi-Heckler, 2014), the integration of mind and body to gain wholeness, underlies this chapter.

The seventh chapter on a *default future* discusses what will happen if you do not change your actions. The reader is advised to be the author of their own games by gaining awareness and making choices. Chapter 8 discusses *creating a new future* of your choice that is purposeful despite the inevitable struggle. This is not just once for a long-term future but through a series of interruptions. Dua argues that despite not knowing quite how or being fearful about this future, you need to remain curious, excited and alive to possibilities. The author refers to the founder of scientology, L. Ron Hubbard and his views on being purposeful in life.

Chapter 9 considers *identifying missing actions* and conversations which are necessary if you are not achieving the desired results. Commitment and agreement, rather than the task itself, are regarded as key. Dua repeats his belief in a somatic approach that the body and emotions shape interactions in conversations. He talks about the coherence of 'SELPH' in conversations, i.e. elements that are Somatic and based on Emotion, Language, Practice and History. He emphasizes listening for dissatisfaction to highlight what needs to be done differently to achieve results. The writer distinguishes conversation for relationship, for possibilities and for action. He warns of individuals listening for evidence to justify what they are seeking (to reinforce their views) rather than listening for possibilities. Dua observes that if we want to change the results, we need to change the conversations we are having.

The idea of *conversation for action* in Chapter 10 is based on the work of the Chilean entrepreneur and politician Fernando Flores (www.conversationsforaction.com/fernando-flores). This chapter is about gaining commitment through a structure of making requests, negotiating a 'condition of satisfaction' (COS), executing promises and confirming completion and (dis)satisfaction or cancelling/revoking requests and promises.

The final chapter entitled *Execution* oddly states that 'this book does not dwell much in the domain of execution after the conversational action is taken.' It tells us to be 'on the court' of our life not on the side lines, to act in fulfilling our promise, learn from failure and not to give up through inaction. It invites us to create new rhythms of conversations with ourselves and actions to generate our desired future.

What I like about this book is the author's passion for avoiding drift, knowing your purpose and the need for self-initiated changes. It avoids fatalism and blame and advocates keeping a daily journal for reflections. The strengths of *Declaring Breakdowns* are its personal, thoughtful perspectives, helpful end of chapter summaries and activities, appendices, and web materials. Readers are encouraged to start their own 5am club (www.sameerdua.com/5am-club) as a forum in small groups to discuss their own future goals.

The book could be improved by including a more comprehensive glossary and list of references since many citations are missing in the notes. There is scope for Dua to unpack in greater depth the theoretical models of generative leadership and ontological coaching. As Pune is home to a long-established meditation resort, the Indian author could incorporate Indian philosophy to enlighten readers into his own rich culture.

All coaching books should carry disclaimers about the real dangers (Berglas, 2002) and politics of opening up cans of worms, unleashing frustrations and dreams, revealing sensitivities, and the ethical difficulties of making life choices and poor decisions. I disagree with many of Dua's statements on p. 32 such as 'declaring breakdowns is a leadership move that not many know of. ' While we might not use this terminology, we are familiar with newcomer managers and politicians who announce breaks with the past to achieve bright new futures. Similarly, the notion of embodiment as part of the learning process and leadership is hardly revolutionary (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010).

*Declaring Breakdowns* is not a scholarly work nor likely to be a self-help blockbuster. Much of the content is familiar. Overall, however, I commend Dua's sense of 'can do' but remain cautious about the book's claims to transform the reader's life in six simple steps. I also question what kinds of students would have the patience to read the detailed discussions of each step compared with a faster-paced book like Goldsmith and Reiter's (2016) *Triggers*. While rather repetitive, the book has useful activities and a serious message about self-leadership. I would consider using it for young and junior employees, in developing countries, and for those returning to work or study who need confidence building during times of transition

and life crises. I would not be inclined to use this book extensively for assessed degree level programmes or with senior executives.

Any revised edition of *Declaring Breakthroughs* would benefit from a critique of ontological coaching. A new version could include contemporary peer-reviewed literature on leadership and generative practices (e.g. Hazy and Uhl-Bien, 2015), as well as references to theories such as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and goal setting (Locke and Latham, 2002). Links could also be made between individual and organisational learning (Swart and Harcup, 2013) and identity crises over the life span (Erikson, 1959; Golembiewski, 1978).

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