

# Walking with Moreno in the Organisational Jungle

## Jane Morgan

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### The Beginning of the Quest

Ever since reading Hegel and Marx as a young sociologist in the 70's, I have believed that bureaucratic organizations are an inescapable and dominating form of our social structure.

And in those exciting days I did more than my fair share of hurling myself against those unresponsive walls. It was later that I came to know this as the “cultural conserve” of government and administration - the product of previous creative effort that had become stultified and although lacking in spontaneity was now accepted as the way things worked. I was left affronted and deeply perplexed by the minimal and easily corrupted changes achieved through all this radical collective effort.

In the 80's, I was introduced to psychodrama by Francis Batten and realized I had found my own personal answer to understanding and acting spontaneously within bureaucratic organisational systems. Since then I have been inspired to keep applying psychodrama in my organisational work. I particularly remember Max Clayton's sensitive understanding of the reality of taking up leadership roles in the world. He states:

*“Daring to be and to become is essential to progressive and creative living and therefore is essential to leadership. This is, of course, an enormous challenge for daring to be ensures that the leader is caught up in the willy-nilly turmoil of living and is battered and scarred. Can we dare to become something at the point of throwing ourselves into unknown territory and feeling small and exposed? Can we love ourselves to such a degree that we continue on in spite of feeling insignificant? Can we value ourselves in the midst of loneliness, aloneness, and smallness?” (Clayton 1993:87)*

These are powerful questions to which my answer has been ‘Yes’. The pathway has been through integrating psychodrama into my roles and work as a manager and leader. I have been a senior manager in large public sector organisations for the last 15 years and hope to continue in similar roles for the next 15 years. My areas of passion are the development of people and groups, a focus on the power of relationships to fuel productivity and creativity and the humanisation of organisational systems.

So, now to the question at hand: How do I use psychodrama in my work as a senior manager? In this article I provide examples to illustrate the value of using psychodrama to develop staff who work for me - both in managing their performance and expanding their capacity to sustain themselves in the organisational jungle. There are many other applications not addressed here, such as influencing my managers and stakeholders and influencing the scoping, design, implementation and evaluation of projects and services.

### Equipping Myself as a Social Investigator

A core commitment of psychodrama is to explore the whole system and map and understand the web of relationships in that system. For those of us that live and breathe in the organisational jungle, this systemic perspective is hard to achieve - and even harder to maintain. We are structurally divided into silos and hierarchies; we are culturally divided by competition for the scarce resources and rewards available in the system; we are individually divided by our sheer human diversity, be it personality, race, gender, class, ethnicity, values, beliefs or the wealth of other attributes that differentiate us one from another. The discipline of training to be a Producer in the psychodramatic method has provided me with the practical bedrock to become an influential social investigator in the jungle that I inhabit.

### Cultural Conserve as Springboard

A major turning point in the development of myself as a social investigator role was reading Ann Hale's inspired work on Moreno's Canon of Creativity. Moreno asserts that the cultural conserve is “*the springboard for enticing spontaneity towards creativity*” and that the cultural conserve is not the enemy of spontaneity (in Hale 1980). What a challenge for my change agent version of an “angry young man”! If I want sustainable change in an organisation, I come face to face with the reality that I have to develop genuine respect and understanding of what currently exists in the system.

The following is a common everyday example of the usefulness of this perspective in coaching my staff whose job it is to provide organisational development consultancies to clients within the organization (with no stage in sight). Jean comes to me feeling stuck after a frustrating meeting with an important client. She appears at my desk and asks in a demure way if I have any time to help her. I chuckle to myself since this is the part of my job I love the most and invite her to sit down: warming up in myself to the enjoyment of being a collaborative guide.

After letting her have a good vent and whinge about how impossible it is to work with these “idiots”, I thoughtfully encourage her to remember her strengths and achievements to date. I have discovered many times that people cannot do an adequate system analysis when they are “up their pole” because they are warmed up to negatively stereotyping their clients and acting out a stereotype themselves.

I then lure her into the pleasures of systemic exploration and discovery by having her explore out loud all the elements of the system that she is aware of, and adding in my own experiences. The more she expresses, the more she sees the expanded view of the system, and the more her spontaneity and curiosity grows. She moves from the role of *Damning Shiva* to *Curious Explorer*, like a *Matthew Flinders*.

As *Matthew Flinders*, she is really able to appreciate the landscape (i.e. the cultural conserve) and release her warm up to fighting against it and develop a fresh warm up to traveling with ‘what is’. In this case, traveling with ‘what is’ requires Jean to reverse roles with the manager and build an hypothesis of his world view. From here, she can grasp how his behaviour makes sense to him in his experience of the organisational jungle. Her body softens and she says: “I get it. He thinks what I am proposing is dangerous for him.” I am now redundant.

Very rarely do I have to provide any input to the way forward or the next step. The person by this stage is reconnected to their spontaneity and is generating creative and practical ideas all on their own.

Consciously focusing on building my capacity to get with the cultural conserve (and it has been hard) has greatly increased my ability to build relationships across the organisation, acquire information not available to me before, and develop an optimistic patience to persist despite obstacles. Basically it has knocked my arrogance and ego back to a more manageable size - well most of the time. This is a very helpful outcome for a senior manager who is keen to learn.

### **Intervening in the Warm Up**

What psychodrama has taught me is that it is all in the warm-up. In my experience, organisations are notoriously avoidant of this crucial work. Almost all managers and staff want to leap to new beginnings, ignoring the endings and transitions that are needed. Then they are baffled and angered by resistance in all its myriad forms. I use the mantra “it’s all in the warm-up” nearly every day at work to focus the attention of myself and my staff and calm our anxieties. And on days I don’t use it, I often realise that life would have been a lot more pleasant and productive if I had used the mantra.

A common but important example is the anxiety consultants often develop in trying to persuade clients to take their professional advice and implement an integrated transition management strategy for a significant change. I often make interventions as follows: Terry, a consultant, has come to see me because he is deeply frustrated with a senior manager who will not listen to his advice on what they are doing that is undermining the transition management interventions. For example, being secretive and manipulative in selection activities, shortcutting agreed strategies, overriding enthusiastic input by staff. Terry feels compromised in his role and is considering resigning from the consultancy rather than appear to be colluding with the client against the staff.

The only intervention I make is to ask in a naïve manner, “What is your warm-up to the work?” He talks about his passion for managing change that engages people and wants to make a real difference to both the organisation and the staff. I am thinking about his level of spontaneity and ask, “What is blocking your energy and enthusiasm?” He sighs deeply and speaks about how deflated and inadequate he feels after each “bout” with this manager. He looks surprised and says “I feel like a schoolboy arguing with the headmaster!” Then I ask, “What is your client’s warm-up?”

I encourage him to ask the same questions of the senior manager by projecting himself into her role. He connects with the manager’s passion for her area and determination to have the business and the staff succeed and shine. He starts to feel the pressures and restrictions on her functioning in this organisational jungle.

Terry is now ready to warm up to being a capable and professional peer with this manager and make one last enthusiastic effort to build a workable partnership that might achieve the desired outcomes of the change agenda.

Terry’s roles expand. His view of the system expands. His respect for the difficult position of the client

expands. We can now move away from what is right and wrong to a more realistic assessment of how to warm the system up a little bit more, how to expand people's willingness to explore uncharted territory just a little bit more. His anxiety is lower and we are planning and engaging with a lot more spontaneity.

### **Role Expansion**

I consider that a crucial role of a senior manager is to coach people to rise above the confining trap of their current experience and distress. Many managers are wedded to the role of expert advice giver and capable fixer.

This is a very limited approach if the goal is to promote growth and independent thinking. The discipline of role training has provided me with a wealth of alternative options as a coach in the organisational jungle. Even when life as a senior manager in a large organisation is at its most soul destroying, I know that I can anchor myself in the method of role training (which I have tested vigorously for over 15 years) and weather the storm, and still do some good work.

While I seldom have the luxury to role train overtly, I regard the work of role expansion to be my most important work. I have a deep and passionate belief in the creative genius within everyone and work actively to warm people up to their learning goals and to achieving their potential. Using the principles of role reversal, maximisation, concretisation, soliloquy, doubling and mirroring provides me with robust and professional tools to be, at my best, a spontaneous producer and auxiliary to my staff and clients. And at other times, an adequate producer and auxiliary.

Since I often cannot use the overt dramatic form, I seek to apply these principles in the situations that present themselves. Often people are not ready for counseling or therapy despite the deep need they have to break old habitual patterns and reconnect with their spontaneity. For example, the following intervention is based on the Focal Conflict Model (see Whittaker & Liebermann 1964)

I recently sat quietly with Joanne and encouraged her to map (on a small piece of paper) all the roles she could identify clustered around her strong fears of living a full life (essentially the restrictive fears that are represented in her roles such as Barren Woman, Rejected, Ugly Child). Then we mapped out the roles clustered around her warm up to leading a full life now (essentially the disturbing motives that are represented by her roles such as Playful Flirt, Loving Companion).

Now, each time we get together, Joanne gets out this map and we discuss what practical changes she has implemented and what has emerged for her. Then we consider the next piece that stands out for her and she decides on the next step. Quietly sitting in her own seat, she reverses roles, soliloquies, maximizes her experience and expands her world while I do the best I can to double and mirror from my seat. She is starting to light up to life again after a number of years of feeling depressed, unwell and resentful (and very judgmental of others). This is the beginning of her realising her work potential.

Acting as a stable auxiliary in her life, our relationship is clearly important to her. She says to me that: "I just cannot lie to you about how I feel. How do you do that?" I guess Joanne feels mirrored and doubled adequately, so she cannot any longer lie to herself.

### **Leading without Creating Dependency**

I use these methods extensively with my staff and their feedback substantiates my own assessment of their effectiveness. They are individually and collectively a delight to collaboratively work with. I am very proud both publicly and privately of their performance. I have worked very hard over the last five years to find a way to lead that does not create a dysfunctional level of dependency. My goal is that, if I left, the group could sustain itself and their important work.

This is a very difficult tight rope for a strong personality. Two years ago I had the wonderful "learning experience" of nine months of cancer treatment, including chemotherapy. My boss and work group supported my desire to keep working through this period as much as possible - but my functioning was pretty ordinary. So, I focused on maintaining relationships and supporting people as best I could. They just got on with the job. They performed so well that most people did not even realize that the group did not have a dedicated manager through this period.

I understand the crucial role of modeling for a senior manager. To do this well, a manager must be able to elicit and stay open to challenging feedback. This is potentially a very dangerous activity in the organisational jungle. I also understand that it is vital to be able to forgive oneself for inevitably failing to be perfect and learn from these failures. Over 15 years of training as a psychodramatist has assisted me to expand my roles as learner, leader and self nurturer particularly in the areas of robust feedback taker and struggling self acceptor.

And thanks to the Goddess I probably have another 30 years to keep working on expanding my roles to an adequate level in this arena. I cannot stress strongly enough the importance to my development of

having been a member of a loving, challenging and nurturing peer group. This unique group of committed fellow travelers sustained me in the organisational work I do for 10 years and was a joy in my life. Because we were together for such a long period of time, we could work at a level of intimacy and acceptance that felt like tapping directly into the wellspring of life. They generously nourished me to return equipped for the next installment of the organisational fray. I am still grieving for the unexpected loss of this group and am slowly exploring ways to fill this gap.

### **The Challenge From Here**

I have accepted Moreno's challenge that we are all Godlike creators of our worlds and must actively "plant the seeds of a diminutive creative revolution". As Moreno said: "*In the beginning was the doer, the actor, in the beginning was I, the Creator of the Universe.*" (Moreno 1983:13)

I have chosen large organisations as my stage for action. As the Canon of Creativity so beautifully demonstrates, spontaneity launches creative engagement with the cultural conserve. Ann Hale nails the organisational challenge:

*"Spontaneity exists in the here and now and is related to the readiness factor of any act. Spontaneity can become distorted. When the imagination is contained and the person's desire to move into action restrained by others (or conditions) the energy committed to the new creation and which has been mobilized will need to be dispelled. Following the imagination, preparing for a novel or useful application now ceases to be the controlling factor; rather, the concern becomes simply the release of energy. This phenomenon has been termed 'act hunger', the main ingredient of pathological spontaneity. Should the creative process continue unencumbered toward the direction of usefulness, novelty and adequacy, the release of energy is spontaneous, producing completion of the creation."* (Hale 1980:6)

All of us who work thoughtfully in the organisational jungle witness daily the distorted release of energy in self defeating and fragmenting acts that isolate the person or group and close off future opportunities to that person. Extreme examples of this behaviour have often been built up over many years of offended disappointment and recurring experiences of not being seen and valued in the system. This is the goal of my work: to play my part in collaborative work with others to release this 'act hunger' in organisations - to unencumber the expression of creativity and generate real and lasting change in the organisations that shape our lives.

And of course this means that I have to continue to release the three decades of 'act hunger' that I have stored in my journey through the organisational jungle. Psychodrama has provided the safe and confronting stage for me to unpack my backpack of resentments and disappointments and reclaim myself as the Creator not the Robot. Rate of difficulty: bloody hard. Satisfaction quotient in the long term: beyond measure.

As long as I have the luxury of replenishing myself from the generous sustenance of the psychodrama community and the method, I am confident that I can make a small difference in the strange world of the organisational jungle.

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