
Roles for Constructive Communication and Conflict Resolution

BY KATERINA SELIGMANN

Katerina is a psychodramatist with twenty years experience working with the psychodrama method. She has recently been certified as a Trainer Educator and Practitioner with ANZPA. Katerina is a trainer with the Wellington Psychodrama Training Institute (Nelson Area). She works as a psychotherapist in private practice and conducts residential psychodrama workshops and training workshops at her home on a small farm on the South Island of New Zealand.

Introduction

Conflict is an inevitable part of life. No matter how good a relationship, sooner or later conflict arises. The way conflict is dealt with determines whether it escalates or is resolved. Escalation can produce further alienation, hurt and misunderstanding, while resolution can bring about increased understanding and respect in the relationship.

Close observation of people who are good communicators reveals that they have a number of specific abilities which facilitate their communications. These abilities can best be described using the role theory of Jacob Moreno. I have identified a system of eight roles which I have found useful in conflict resolution. They are 'Courageous Adventurer',

'Self-Accepting Encourager', 'Trust-Building Visionary', 'Creative Organiser', 'Committed Truth-Speaker', 'Reflective Meta-Communicator', 'Active Listener' and 'Naive Receptive Enquirer'. These roles are illustrated in the following case study and then described in more detail later.

Case Study

In this session, the psychodramatist works to bring out the roles necessary for a constructive encounter. Mary has come to a psychodrama workshop which has a particular focus on conflict resolution. She and her co-worker Jane have been in conflict for many months, and now Mary is seeking assistance. She thinks that she will have to leave her job if the difficulty continues for much longer.

Constructive Communication and Conflict Resolution

SCENE ONE

Scene one focuses on Mary's relationship with herself. I direct Mary to set up a psychodramatic meeting with Jane to address the difficulty. She immediately becomes tearful and expresses a sense of hopelessness. I ask her to choose a person in the group to represent herself feeling tearful and hopeless. She does this and I direct her to express herself to the auxiliary acting Mary feeling hopeless and tearful. She turns her head away.

Mary: Oh, she's pathetic!

Director: You really dislike her when she's like this!

Mary: Well yes, she falls apart, but I know how hard she's tried.

Director: So you're not just negative, you're positive as well. You know she's made a real effort to improve this relationship with Jane. Which feeling is stronger in you at the moment? Are you more positive or more negative to Mary right now, as you see her there tearful and despairing?

Mary: I feel impatient with her.

Director: So right now you're more in touch with your negative feelings. Well choose someone to represent you feeling positive towards yourself. We know this aspect of you exists as well.

Mary chooses an auxiliary who stands beside her.

Director: How about you give yourself permission to give vent to the negativity you feel towards yourself over there right now.

Mary: You're a weak pathetic wimp. I can't stand you snivelling like that.

Director: Reverse roles.

Auxiliary to Mary: You're a weak pathetic wimp. I can't stand you snivelling like that.

Mary: Well I can't help it. I've tried and tried to get on better with that woman. Nothing works. (Becomes more tearful.)

Director: Okay, now let's mirror this relationship to you for a moment.

Group members mirror Mary acting the roles of

'tearful despairer' and 'harsh rejecting judge'.
Mary stands beside the director and looks on.

Director: What comes up in you when you see this relationship?

Mary: It's not helpful to her to be so harsh. It's just how my mother used to be when I was upset.

Director: Express yourself to Mary over there

Mary (addressing herself to the auxiliary playing the role of 'tearful despairer'): I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so hard on you; you've tried really hard to get something better going with Jane.

Director (conscious that Mary has expressed the thinking and feeling components of the role, but the action component is underdeveloped): Be aware of the impulse you have to act towards her right now.

Mary (moving closer to the auxiliary and putting a hand on her shoulder): Don't give up. You've tried really hard. I promise I'll support you from now on.

Here we see the development of the role of the 'self-accepting encourager', which is essential for any conflict to be resolved.

SCENE TWO

Director: Let's see what happens when you get together with Jane now. Where are you next likely to meet her?

Mary (looking scared): Oh, this will be hard!

Director: Well, one thing I do know about you is that you're a courageous person. You wouldn't have come to this workshop, or have presented yourself to do this work if you didn't have guts. (Here the director brings to the fore the role of the 'courageous adventurer'.)

Mary: Okay, I'll see her in the office. She's always in a rush.

Director: Okay, let's see if you can set up a time and place to get together with her. But first you're going to have to warm her up to this meeting. Let's put all the difficulties aside for the moment. Imagine that we have waved a magic wand, and that you've got an ideal



relationship with her now. How would that be?
(Here the director works to bring forth the role of 'visionary'.)

Mary: Well, I can't imagine I'm ever going to like her very much. It would be great if we could just work alongside each other without so much tension.

Director: Feel easier in each other's presence?

Mary: Yes, and she'd let me get on with my job without looking over my shoulder all the time.

Director: Okay, so you want to be easier with each other, and you want her to stop interfering.

Mary: Yes.

Director: Okay, well we'll have an enactment now where you practise setting up a meeting with her with those goals in mind.

Mary sets up the office, and chooses an auxiliary to be Jane. The auxiliary who previously played the role of 'self-accepting encourager' stands beside her, and supports her throughout the enactment.

Mary to Jane: Hello Jane. Look, I'd really like to get together with you and talk for a bit.

Director: Reverse roles. (The directive 'reverse roles' is given after each expression. These have been omitted from the following text for the sake of simplicity.)

Jane: Oh? Well I don't have a lot of time. What is it you want to talk about?

Mary: I can see you're pretty pushed for time right now. (Mary enacts the role of 'active listener'.) But this is important to me. I've been feeling pretty tense about things here at work lately ('committed truth speaker'), and I'd like to get together with you to try and get something more relaxed happening here for both of us ('trust building visionary').

Jane (looking alarmed): Oh. Well I haven't got a lot of time. What's the problem?

Mary (noticing her alarm): You look worried ('active listener'). It's okay, I just want to have a talk. It's just so that we can work alongside each other in a better way, be more relaxed with each

other ('trust-building visionary').

Jane (relaxes a little): Okay, Well, what's on your mind?

Mary: I'd rather not talk right now. You're in a rush and I've got things to attend to too. How about we meet over lunch? ('creative organiser').

Jane: I have a lunchtime meeting. And the rest of the week's looking pretty full too.

Mary looks crestfallen. In a role reversal with the auxiliary acting the 'self-accepting encourager' she urges herself not to give up.

Mary: Well, when could you manage half an hour for us to get together? ('determined creative organiser').

Jane (cautious but intrigued): Okay, I'll meet you after work tonight.

Mary: Good. How about we go over to the park, that way we won't be interrupted? ('creative organiser').

SCENE THREE

Jane and Mary are in the park.

Jane: Well, what's this all about?

Mary: Well, I've been pretty tense at work for some time. I'm sure you must have noticed. And I'd really like to get something different happening between us so we can be more relaxed around each other ('trust-building visionary').

Jane (defensively): Yes, well, I don't like the way things are either. You're so unpleasant whenever I try to point anything out to you. I try to be sensitive but it seems I can't say anything without you reacting.

Mary begins to withdraw and the director coaches to express herself as an 'active listener'.

Mary: So it's been hard for you too. You don't like the way I react ('active listener').

Jane: No, I don't.

Mary: Well I really want to find a way of us working together so we can both relax a bit more ('trust-building visionary'). I get so touchy because it's really hard for me having you

Constructive Communication and Conflict Resolution

looking over my shoulder all the time. It makes me nervous and I feel you don't trust me ('committed truth-speaker').

Jane (annoyed): Well, what am I supposed to do? I rely on your work, and you have made some horrible mistakes! It just makes more work for me.

Mary (staying in close contact with the auxiliary acting the 'self-loving encourager'): My mistakes have really affected you ('active listener').

The director coaches Mary to enquire about the mistakes.

Mary: What mistakes in particular have made extra work for you? ('naive receptive enquirer').

Jane: Well, when you first arrived I spent a week fixing up that mess you made over the health contract, and there have been other mistakes since then.

Mary: I know that incident at the beginning caused you a lot of problems ('active listener'). But that was right at the beginning, and I was very new to the job. I'd really like to be able to put that behind us ('passionate truthspeaker'). What other problems have I caused for you? ('naive receptive enquirer').

Jane: There's just been a series of little things. I'd really like this project to go well, I think we should set up a meeting with Geoff soon to talk about the boys' outdoor activities.

Mary begins to enter into a discussion about the meeting with Geoff. The director brings to her attention that she has allowed herself to become side-tracked, and coaches her to bring the interaction back to the subject of their relationship.

Mary (with encouragement from the auxiliary acting the role of 'self-accepting encourager'): I'm really happy to talk to you about that at some other time. But we're getting off the subject ('reflective meta-communicator'). Right now I'd like to focus on getting something better going between us ('determined, trust-building visionary'). It's really not helpful for you to be checking on me all the time. It makes me nervous and I'm more likely to make mistakes

when I'm nervous! I hate it! It really upsets me. Sometimes I feel like quitting ('committed truth-speaker').

Jane: (defensively with raised voice). Well I'm sorry, but I don't know what to do. This project is very important, and I have to check your work.

Mary (defensively with raised voice): Well it's important to me too!

Mary (with coaching from the director): Look we're both beginning to raise our voices ('reflective meta-communicator'). I understand that you don't know what to do and that this project is very important to you ('active listener').

Jane (looking softer): Yes it's very important.

Mary: It's important to me too! I am doing my best, and I'm usually pretty thorough when it comes to reports. But it makes me very nervous you checking on me all the time. I'd really like you to back off a bit ('committed truth-speaker'). I'd really like us to be able to work on this together and have a bit more fun with it ('trust-building visionary').

Jane (warily): Yes, I'd like that too. Well we'll just have to see how it goes.

The enactment ends here with Mary still in close contact with the auxiliary acting the role of 'self-accepting encourager'.

Mary reported a week later that she had a short but successful interaction with Jane. They were feeling more relaxed with each other and Jane had invited her out to lunch.

Eight Roles for Constructive Communication

During this drama, Mary enacted eight roles which facilitated her communication with Jane. While not all of these roles are required in every interaction, it is helpful to have all eight available to have consistent success in difficult communications. It is not possible to decide ahead of time the order in which the roles should be expressed. Which role is expressed at



any moment depends on what is coming from the other person. However, the first two roles of 'courageous adventurer' and 'self-accepting encourager' need to be maintained throughout.

THE COURAGEOUS ADVENTURER

Resolving conflict requires engaging in difficult interactions and may mean learning new ways of relating. Whenever we leave behind old and familiar ways of being and enter into the unknown, fear arises. This fear often stops us from moving forward. To be successful in the resolution of conflicts, we need to be able to act in the face of fear. This does not mean to deny or push aside the fear. It means feeling our own heart pounding, and nevertheless moving forward with courage and acting in a new way.

THE SELF-ACCEPTING ENCOURAGER

The ability to accept and encourage oneself is basic to all healthy human functioning. Many people have an overdeveloped role of 'harsh critic'. There is a need for this to soften into self-acceptance and for us to lovingly encourage ourselves to move forward.

THE TRUST-BUILDING VISIONARY

When we feel angry, hurt or mistrustful of another person, there is a need to develop a vision of a harmonious and cooperative relationship. We also need to build the other person's trust that despite all the difficulties together, our intention is to create more ease and harmony in the relationship. We need to build trust before entering into the subject matter which is causing the conflict. And trust may need to be addressed several times throughout any difficult interaction.

THE CREATIVE ORGANISER

To resolve a conflict, there is a need for the people involved to get together and attempt to overcome their particular difficulties. Having built trust that the intention is to create a better relationship, the initiator needs to organise a time and place which eliminates distractions and offers the best chance of success.

THE COMMITTED TRUTH-SPEAKER

Having built a degree of trust in the other person that your intention is to develop a more

harmonious relationship with them, there is a need to let the other person know how you feel, and what is causing stress for you in the relationship. Often this is done in an incomplete way. For example a person might express their anger. However beneath the anger there may be other feelings such as hurt, fear, regret, and love and it is helpful for all of these to be expressed.

THE ACTIVE LISTENER OR DOUBLE

As well as bringing out our own thoughts and feelings, we must draw out the inner truth of the other person. Active listening or doubling is one way of doing this. We must do our best to put ourselves in the other person's shoes, getting a sense of their experience, and then letting them know what it is we understand about their experience. If our reflections are accurate the person feels heard and accepted. Even if we are somewhat inaccurate in our understanding, our attempt to enter the other person's world encourages them to express more.

THE NAIVE RECEPTIVE ENQUIRER

To act as a naive and receptive enquirer is important if conflict is to be resolved. This means asking naive, non-judgmental questions, with a real willingness to understand. 'How come you...?' is a more effective question than 'Why...?' because it engages the person more at a feeling level whereas 'why?' tends to engage only the intellect. Naive, non-judgmental questions draw out more of the inner truth of the other person.

THE REFLECTIVE META-COMMUNICATOR

To meta-communicate means to comment on the communication itself, bringing into focus the nature of the interaction at any particular moment. For example, if a communication starts to get heated and unproductive, a meta-communication can bring this to consciousness. 'We've both started to raise our voices and we've stopped listening', or 'We've gone off onto a different subject now' are examples of useful meta-communications. Meta-communication slows interactions down and assists people to become more aware of the process of communication, and whether it is effective or not.

Constructive Communication and Conflict Resolution

Application

When conflict exists between two people, it takes only one person to commit themselves to becoming a good communicator for the situation to improve. When a group of people are in conflict, a good first strategy is to improve the communication between two key people. The harmony created between the two

then impacts on the system as a whole.

Good communication is a complex process. The roles listed above can assist to ease the flow of communication and bring about resolution. This article illustrates how an awareness of these roles can serve as a guide in our work as directors and in our personal relationships.

The way conflict is dealt with determines whether it escalates or is resolved. Escalation can produce further alienation, hurt and misunderstanding, while resolution can bring about increased understanding and respect in the relationship.