

# Conflict Resolution Through Encounter

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Ask a range of people what it is that attracts them to psychodrama and the responses given are likely to focus on the valuing of relationship and community where the expression of vitality and freedom is especially fostered.

However the development of the ability to live with vitality and freedom inherently challenges all of our reserves, not only mine but yours as well. If we are to navigate this tension we must learn to engage non-defensively with difference and conflict. This is the demanding work that partners any development of spontaneity and creativity.

## **Engaging with Difference is Inevitable**

Staying in relationship is not straightforward and inevitably differences and conflict will emerge especially once we endeavour to live an authentic life. Being involved in psychodrama is therefore an invitation to enter this world - read the fine print!

Conflict is an ordinary part of life and yet it is one area in which we are often the least equipped. To successfully enter into an interpersonal difference presupposes an ability to hold clearly and gently to one's own knowing whilst reversing roles with the other person.

This is not an easy task. Defensive behaviour is frequently resorted to and without the aid of good coaches, doubles and mirrors will quickly become entrenched. Moreno, through his focus on the encounter, offers us a way that is much more expansive.

Much has been written about what is needed in conflict resolution with the main focus being on good communication skills, in particular the ownership of feelings and difficulties. The basic communication skills involved in making "I" statements, listening and paraphrasing holds well when there is a misunderstanding. One or two projections and even the odd outlandish assumption can be worked through using these skills, but when the conflict is more complex these basic tools fall well short.

We need a way to go forward that pays heed to the difficulties and complexities that are at play in ongoing inter-personal conflicts. The following six-step process is drawn from the experience of an ongoing training group where we grappled with personal differences. Luckily we had access to good coaches, doubles and mirrors. The six step process will usually require some extended time before there is adequate resolution of the conflict. Of prime importance is the need to SLOW DOWN the process and to

have realistic expectations. Racing on, at these times, frequently produces more dissonance and a consequent re-wounding is likely to occur.

### **Step 1: Recognize Your Anxiety**

Discord frequently produces anxiety and discomfort. Inevitably a person will attempt to manage their discomfort by adopting a variety of coping defences. This avoidance results in premature assessments being made, assumptions dominating, and a host of defensive coping roles coming into play. The classic styles of withdrawal, attack or supplication can be observed in all their various guises. All this only serves to maintain an equilibrium that is ultimately restrictive. Solutions will be offered that are effectively just a deflection from the discomfort. It is at this point that we each need a good double who assists us to recognise our anxiety, lets us know that we are not alone, that we need to slow down, and that something better is possible.

### **Step 2: Own Your Projections and Prejudices**

This stage is complex, difficult and is often rejected in the quest to make the other person accountable for their actions. The triggering of early social atom experiences, often still unconscious, compounds hurts that have recently been sustained. Separating the two is delicate work. The present situation is real and so too are the unresolved experiences of early life. Placing greater attention on the early social atom wounding can run the risk of the protagonist feeling once again unheard and unseen in relation to the present conflict.

Each protagonist, in the conflict, needs good doubles who are also willing to mirror the present behaviour that is problematic. It may be enough for each protagonist to identify their family of origin impasses for a new warm-up to be mobilised.

*A trainee is upset. She experiences the trainer as*

*hostile and mean in the manner of the trainer's response to an e-mail the trainee sent her. With good coaching and doubling from her peer group, the trainee is able to approach the trainer to check out the situation. Clarity is soon gained, the old projections quickly drop away and the automatic pattern of withdrawal is overcome.*

For others, more social atom repair work is needed in order to heal this first wounding, so that the hurt that continues to sit inside does not keep being acted out in the present conflict.

This step is a time when, as members of a group, we are all called on to mobilise our greatest spontaneity, particularly if the shame, for example of being unseen and unrecognised, is to be healed. Many different doubles are needed because when shame is present it is often difficult to accept being doubled at all. Only by being successfully doubled will the old coping roles drop away, giving an opportunity for new life to emerge.

### **Step 3: Stay True to Yourself**

As the projections are worked with and owned, a deeper appreciation of each person's experience is gained. It is from this place that each person can then name clearly what they want and how they feel. This is particularly challenging for two reasons. It takes time and some discernment to know what one wants and feels. What is first identified may not be the essential thing. The time needed may be a few minutes or it may be much more extended over many months. The challenge continues when the naming of what is truly wanted is likely to be perceived as hurtful by the other person. This calls for a good ability to stay differentiated. Again the role of the double is critical to assisting with this, as each party needs to be doubled well.

*Rhonda's offer of friendship fills Jim with dread. There is nothing that Jim can say that has much meaning in the present reality. All he knows is that he experiences great intrusion. Whilst he is closed down and struggling to articulate his*

*experience, he nevertheless is able to be clear about what he does not want. He is not yet able to say what he does want. This is a new position for Jim and his role development, though still embryonic, must be recognised and supported. Rhonda is hurt by the rejection and keeps trying to find a way to understand why she is not acceptable. Rhonda is intent on resolving this whilst Jim has asked that no more be asked of him.*

This is a universal situation, which occurs in many relationships. Each person is hurting. Each person needs to be doubled well. Jim is in particular need of doubling and Rhonda is in particular need of mirroring. At this stage both protagonists are caught up in acting out their own life dramas. It is critical that others who are present are thoughtful about what is occurring, as the role relationships are complex and multi layered.

#### **Step 4: Recognize the Complexity of Holding Relationship**

We are half way through the process of rapprochement and now it is possible to consider role reversal. Only now is this a timely option as without the previous steps a meaningful encounter will not occur.

There is often a pressure to resolve difficulties so that things can move on. A common expectation is that if the usual communication skills are employed then a resolution will be found. This minimizes the complexity that is present in situations where both parties are hurting and are struggling to find their equilibrium. Both people are frequently at different stages in the process of owning their projections and education can be needed to alert the group and the protagonists to the many things occurring.

#### **Step 5: Be Sorry for the Hurts You Have Caused**

Saying we are sorry isn't an easy thing to do. People often fear a loss of face and do not

recognize the repair that occurs to oneself, as well as the other person, when we live from a place of integrity. Of course we do harm to each other, harm that can be intentional yet is more often a consequence of reactivity, hurt and defensiveness. Unless the harm that we have done is owned, we cheat each other.

Saying sorry is often withheld and is used as a bartering tool only to be given when the other person also agrees to be sorry. This is ultimately restrictive. When sorry is said from a place of integrity there is recognition of the other and the beginning of role reversal. When someone reverses role with us we are seen and understood. The fight has a chance to stop.

#### **Step 6: Embrace the New Life that Emerges**

When role reversal takes place empathy is also present. In Tibet the word for empathy is 'nying je', which when translated encompasses love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit and warm heartedness. This is the emergent new life, which comes from being able to now reverse roles. Initially this new condition is often felt in relationship to the other but it will also be there in relationship to oneself. This transformation is available to both protagonists. Auxiliaries who act as good coaches and doubles can assist in the valuing and strengthening of this embryonic new life.

It is only at this stage does Moreno's motto of the encounter come into play.

*A meeting of two: eye to eye, face to face.  
and when you are near I will tear your eyes out  
and place them instead of mine,  
and you will tear my eyes out  
and place them instead of yours,  
then I will look at you with your eyes  
and you will look at me with mine.*

(Moreno 1977)

## **Conclusion.**

This framework for resolving conflict through encounter is demanding and, though there is no quick fix on offer, the benefits will be lasting and transformative. When there is a stuck and conflicted relationship, the spontaneity of many people is needed. Auxiliaries who will generously double, mirror and coach, help to establish a culture that is not solution focused and where everything can be valued. •

## **References:**

- Moreno J L (1977), *Psychodrama First Volume*, Beacon House, NY.  
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