

Moreno's Golden Theatrical Rule

AN APPLICATION IN A PRODUCTIVITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an account of how Moreno's Golden Theatrical Rule was used to develop productivity in the New Zealand Immigration Contact Centre. When attended to, the relationship between the variables of the Golden Theatrical Rule, motion, state, and time, creates a unity that produces satisfying results. Interventions are described and commentary presented in relation to each of these variables, as well as the impact of the productivity project on the contact centre.

KEY WORDS

Moreno, golden theatrical rule, motion, state, time, unity, spontaneity, creativity, organisational development, productivity, work, stress

Introduction

I believe that it is possible for organisations to develop, for managers and union members to work together to address mutual interests and create workplaces that enable enjoyable and productive lives for all employees. My hope is that people are uplifted and inspired in their ordinary everyday experiences at work. However, an organisation tends to maintain the status quo and inevitably I am involved in working with the forces that conspire against the expression of spontaneity and creativity and that serve to control all who work in an organisation.

I want to make a satisfying experience for everyone involved in any project that I undertake. I want the project to be progressive, to address real concerns and to promote

health and wellbeing. To achieve this, I use a number of principles that I have drawn from psychodrama. They have proven both helpful and practical. In the following example I discuss how I applied Moreno's 'Golden Theatrical Rule' to a productivity project, connecting motion, state and time to achieve the greatest effect for a dramatic enactment.

An Outline of the Project

The client organisation in this project was the New Zealand Immigration Contact Centre (ICC). ICC is a national centre where Customer Service Officers (CSOs) receive telephone calls and emails from people who have enquiries about all manner of immigration matters. CSOs are warranted immigration officers who use their knowledge of immigration law, policies and procedures to assist callers to address issues that pertain to their particular situation.

The ICC aims to work in partnership. This means that the employer and union will work jointly and cooperatively to address areas of mutual interest. In this context the union, the Public Service Association (PSA), and the employer, the Department of Labour–Immigration, work in partnership to address high levels of stress, staff turnover and absenteeism as a means of increasing the centre's productivity and effectiveness.

The terms of reference for this project involved identifying and implementing productivity gains for the mutual benefit of the PSA and ICC, by building staff capability and retaining capacity through reducing attrition. The objectives were to reduce external attrition at the ICC, to increase job satisfaction and to develop staff capability.

My Interventions Begin: Asking Questions

Many organisations are problem oriented and seek solutions to fix things that do not fit with the organisation's expectations or goals. This was evident in the framing of this project. Specifically, I was asked to redesign an existing training programme and to develop an approach that would address staff stress. Immediately I was attracted to the project and wanted to be involved. As I warmed up to the work I had a raft of questions, just as a producer does at the outset of a drama.

I wanted to know about the people involved, their roles in the organisation, and their experience, ability and functioning now and in the past. I wanted to know about their warm up and how it fitted with the organisation's expectations of them. I wanted to learn about their readiness and capacity to do the work. I wanted to know how long the organisation had been in this situation, the length of time that the proposed work was expected to take, and about any particular deadlines in the project's timeframe that might have an impact on the work. As well, I wanted to get a feel for the project's duration, timing and pacing.

Moreno's Golden Theatrical Rule

In asking these questions, I was conceptualising the project itself as a drama. I was thus utilising the Golden Theatrical Rule at the very beginning of a project. The three areas of questioning correlate to Moreno's concept that the identity (relationship or connection) between motion, state, and time equates to the unity of a player and thereby affects the overall quality and satisfaction of the production.

Motion

The idea of motion includes these four aspects.

- Progression through or towards the conclusion of a dramatic enactment
- Location — where, on the stage, the action occurs, what position each of the players takes and their relative position to one other
- The movement that results from interaction and responses
- The number of phases a problem requires in its presentation in order for it to be worked through

State

Moreno's Golden Theatrical Rule highlights a person's inner state as a significant variable affecting productivity. 'The creative power of a player is expressed in his ability to produce spontaneous states and the more he is able to produce the greater is his productive capacity' (Moreno, 1983:59). State thus refers to the spontaneity of a person, in particular how their inner condition affects their ability to warm up to and maintain a spontaneous state. 'The subjective portion of spontaneity is derived from the inner condition of a person — fatigue, mood . . . (Moreno, 1983:58). Warming up to this state also requires a specific time.

Time

The objective part of spontaneity comes from the idea that each event has an ideal duration and requires a definite time in order to be properly developed and concluded (Moreno, 1983). Time thus includes the duration required for the enactment to take its course, reach a climax and natural conclusion. It also includes the pace or tempo of the enactment and whether there is a need to accelerate, slow down or stop the enactment.

These three variables — motion, state and time — were directly relevant to this project. They provided a framework for considering the readiness of the players and viability of the work at several levels, including the organisation, the overall project, each intervention within the project and each individual involved. The unity of all these levels was desirable as it would result in satisfaction with the work. According to the Golden Theatrical Rule, unity is achieved when motion, state, and time are properly attended to, and it is useful to consider the extent to which this has already been done.

The following section describes what had been done to attend to these variables in ICC and my assessment of the degree of unity experienced.

Utilising the Golden Theatrical Rule

At an organisational level the work seemed unified. This project was part of an established and high level agreement between the Government and the PSA. The ICC had been chosen as a place where long standing issues could be addressed through partnership. Department of Labour officers had identified what they termed productivity drivers and were committed to addressing these. Resources had been allocated to carry out the work. The ICC had already progressed through several stages to reach the current situation, with the parties involved in several events and interventions that had been valued. To date, work on the project had been a little slow and the approaching financial year end heightened the time pressure to deliver results. All the players — managers, staff, PSA, related sections within the wider Department of Labour and immigration clients — were eager to see improvements.

At the project level, the work was not unified. While it was possible for me to redesign the training programme, it was not workable to accept the project as if I would design the programme in isolation from other influencing factors. Regardless of how good the programme design was, it would not deliver the desired results unless it also addressed the recruitment and selection process, the trainer's capacity to deliver the programme, the ability of the trainees, and the conditions that support them to apply the training on the job.

In considering the unity and viability of this project, I realised that if it was simply regarded as two single interventions, firstly developing a new training package and secondly providing a programme to deal with staff stress, then it would not address the issues satisfactorily. Indeed, if implemented in this way it would be likely to have negative consequences in the long term. There was considerable work to be done so that this project was properly understood and described, and specific actions undertaken. For example, the trainer's ability to deliver the training programme and carry out on-the-job follow up was crucial. This would prove far more effective than simply producing another training package. There were also other steps to implement, to achieve the aims of the revised programme. One of these was to improve the recruitment and selection process to ensure that new recruits were suited to the job and ready for the training. Another was to prepare the buddies and managers to provide support and follow up after the training.

The fact that this project brief named the issue of staff stress as 'developing a programme' indicated to me that there was likely to be little appreciation of the implications of the changes required or the work this might entail. In developing the programme to address staff stress, there was a myriad of factors to consider and none could be properly addressed without taking a systemic approach. I realised that before the unity of the project could be achieved, all of these areas would take time and that some would need to be attended to in sequence. Overall, my assessment was that this project was not yet unified and that further work was required with respect to the variables of the Golden Theatrical Rule — motion, state, and time.

Implementing the Golden Theatrical Rule

I thus undertook further consultation to establish the scope of the work. Given that the people involved were open and positive this was easily and quickly achieved. Essentially we, the Department of Labour Partnership Productivity Project Team and myself, made a commitment to work with an iterative process so that we could determine together what we would do. I could then attend to the unity of each intervention and of the individuals involved.

In this process, we identified that annual staff turn over at ICC, or churn as it is known in the industry, was running at 40%, that staff rated their job satisfaction as very low, that workloads at times exceeded the average industry workload by 20%, that annual salaries were nearly \$3,000 lower than the industry average, that there were skill and knowledge gaps, and that the ICC struggled to reach its key performance indicators. The position of full time trainer had been recently established in order to provide training for newly recruited staff. The training consisted of a three week classroom-based course that was run almost continuously. The training programme was focused on trainees learning all Immigration Department policies and procedures, in order to pass the Immigration Warrant Test that was administered at the end of the course. Not only was it difficult to recruit new staff, but they would often leave within the first few days of the training course, and those who did complete the training felt highly stressed by the experience and did not have a good warm up to the job. The ICC operated under a command and control management where staff members were reduced to little more than automatons, answering call after call. They were reprimanded for performance that fell short of the exacting quantitative measures set by the management. Rather than being the result of evil intent these symptoms are typical in contact centres that, by their very nature, tend to stultify spontaneity and creativity.

A redesign of the training programme was regarded as the most urgent issue. The following section describes my approach to this work. Firstly, I consider the existing programme that, amongst other things, encompasses the trainer, the trainees, methodology, organisation of material, role development and group process.

The Existing Training Programme

The training programme had been designed a couple of years earlier by someone in another part of the Department of Labour. Essentially it required the trainer to present, over ten days, the technical information in the operations manual and test the trainees' recall through quizzes and questions. This was followed by a further five day period of technological training in the use of the phone and computer systems. At the end of the third week, after the trainees had passed the Immigration Warrant Test, they would go live on the phones assisted by a buddy for a few days. After this, they were on their own and were expected to meet rigorous performance standards within a month. The programme design was thus focused almost entirely on content and the achievement of performance measures. No attention was paid to group process or the variables of motion, state and time.

The trainer was an intelligent, lively and likeable person, well regarded as an expert in immigration policies and procedures. He had himself been a CSO for a number of years prior to becoming the trainer. His flair for the dramatic, and his desire to develop the training, was an open invitation to use action methods. The trainer had set a date for training the next intake of staff and was warmed up to a state of spontaneity. In terms of motion, state, and time, I experienced a unity in this trainer. His influence contributed to the success of the work.

I sat in on some sessions with this trainer leading the existing programme. Informed by this experience, and using the existing programme content and what I know about training, I redesigned the training programme and prepared an outline for the trainer to use as a guide. I then conducted some role training with the trainer. We piloted the new programme with me leading some new sessions and the trainer applying a new approach. At the end of the pilot, we reflected on our experience. We received feedback from the trainees, training buddies, managers, and staff about their experience of the new programme and its effect. We made adjustments to the programme and the trainer felt confident to run the next programme on his own.

An Analysis Using Motion, State and Time

Changes in terms of the Golden Theatrical Rule revealed that significant shifts were made with regard to the variables of motion, state, and time. I discuss them here.

Motion

The aim of the original training was for trainees to pass the Immigration Warrant Test and use the technology correctly. In actuality, the training is intended to equip new staff to carry out their jobs. In reorienting the programme to this conclusion, I removed the centrality of the warrant test. This enabled the inclusion of various other areas not previously addressed but essential to the job, such as communication skills, relationship building, systemic analysis, risk assessment, problem solving, conflict management and sustaining oneself on the job.

In a contact centre, staff are organised in teams but their work is usually done individually. The original training programme was characterised by this individualistic approach. A mainstay of the new training design was to introduce group process, to encourage trainees to interact with one another and to develop their receptivity and responsiveness to each other. This notion of teamwork, and the establishment of strong positive relationships between people in the training course and in the wider workplace, helped integrate the training with the job.

State

When CSOs take a call in the contact centre, they initially have no knowledge of its likely content or the emotional state of the caller. The job requires that they be ready to respond to whatever they are presented with. Thus they must maintain a constant state of readiness and the capacity to warm up again and again to each new call. From my

point of view, this required spontaneity training and less of a focus on the provision of the right answers. The trainees required the ability to know their own warming up process, to understand what affects them, to generate options, and to know how to locate needed resources.

I coached the trainer to relate to the trainees and their warm up. This enabled real concerns to be addressed and thus kept the training relevant. The use of action methods assisted the trainees to experiment, to be playful, to generate their own ideas and contributions, and to enjoy the process of learning. As the trainer enlivened the body of wisdom in the group, rather than simply presenting what he knew, he helped develop role functioning in the trainees that was more conducive to maintaining a state of wellbeing.

Time

Through my interventions the duration, the pace, and the time pressure created by the need to pass the warrant test, were all changed. The course was shortened and the pace varied through an assortment of activities. A participatory training process meant that more time was spent in group activities and less time was spent learning by rote. The learning was a collaborative and self-directed process in which trainees assisted one another to achieve goals that they had set for themselves. Performance measures were introduced gradually when trainees agreed that they were ready for the pressure of such tests. The tests included handling a high volume of calls, keeping 'talk-time' down, and keeping themselves available on the phone for the maximum amount of time.

Results from the revamped training programme were remarkable. New staff said that they felt properly prepared for the job, had enjoyed the training, and that it was hands-on and practical. Existing CSOs noticed that the new staff seemed more confident on the phones, had a greater appreciation of the purpose of the work and were therefore better able to apply their product knowledge. These CSOs envied those receiving the new training, noticing that they were having a better experience rather than cramming to pass the warrant test. New staff felt relaxed, ready and confident about sitting the test and had completed it within eleven weeks of training. All had passed on the first sitting with marks ranging from 78–99%.

As a consequence of this success, staff confidence in the overall project increased. The CSOs got to know me and felt able to talk with me about their experiences. In terms of Moreno's Golden Theatrical Rule, the pace of the project had picked up, and the work had progressed through sufficient phases for all involved to be ready to broach the subject of staff stress.

Stress

Stress relates to a person's inner condition, or state, that affects their wellbeing. It is a generic term that belies the system of forces causing strain. Stress embraces the relationship between the working environment, individual experience and perception, changes in body chemistry and their physiological consequences. Moreno's Golden

Theatrical Rule tells us that in addition to the person's state, the overall unity of a person cannot be considered without also looking at motion — the work itself, the people involved, the relationships and interactions between people, and what has already been done to address staff stress — and time — the effect of the pace, duration and variation of tempo experienced in the work.

Considering stress in general, various studies have shown that task specialisation produces a lack of challenge, a chain of command increases dependency and shortens time perspectives, and a span of control produces passivity (Argyris, 1964). Research also shows that employees experience deteriorating health in jobs where there is insecure employment, monotonous and repetitive work, a lack of autonomy, control and task discretion, an imbalance between a worker's effort and the rewards they receive, and an absence of procedural justice in the workplace. Excepting job security, all these factors were of significant concern at ICC and thus defined the requirements for my second intervention.

Interventions to Address Staff Stress

I conducted a series of focus groups with the ICC staff. Essentially this provided staff members with an opportunity to speak freely and frankly about stressful factors in their work. CSOs, enthusiastic about participating, noted that simply having time off from the phones to talk through their concerns had eased the pressure and they felt valued through the process. In itself therefore, the use of focus groups was an effective intervention in alleviating stress. The themes that emerged highlighted ten areas that, if addressed, would ease stress and increase job satisfaction.

- Provide a career pathway and development opportunities for CSOs
- Develop Immigration Managers' capabilities and functioning to ensure a consistent management approach
- Shift the focus of performance monitoring and measurement away from quantitative measures
- Make the CSO's job more varied
- Develop training to address actual requirements of the job
- Provide ongoing training to keep product knowledge up to date
- Establish a full complement of staff
- Improve the technology available to CSOs

- Address issues of non performance that have not been dealt with
- Address the pay discrepancy between ICC and other call centers

The staff determined that developing the Immigration Managers' capabilities and functioning was the highest priority, because the managers had considerable influence over all the other factors. A three day residential workshop, individual coaching, and follow up on the job were designed and implemented to develop the managers both individually and as a team. Again, the results were remarkable. The managers developed a new approach, and within a few months had addressed each of the areas identified by staff members. They have since established systems and procedures that will ensure that this positive development continues.

Conclusion

The adoption of an approach where the staff had more control and autonomy was significant. Staff members considered that they had been fully involved in this project and that their concerns had been taken into account. They saw the results of their plans and immediate improvements. In particular, the CSOs said that the managers were more compassionate and no longer seemed intimidating. They said that there was a general feeling of cohesion in the workplace and that they felt less stressed. This was reflected in other results which showed that at the completion of this project, absenteeism had dropped twenty percent and attrition had decreased by a third. The project concluded with a conference. Through dramatic enactments, staff members celebrated their achievements, appreciation of one another's contributions, and reflections on their learning and development. They willingly shared their ideas for increasing the productivity and effectiveness of the ICC, and regarding how each could contribute to bring this about. A case study of the project is now available on compact disc as part of the Department of Labour's Workplace Productivity Toolkit.

This project resulted in a high level of satisfaction for everyone involved. Put in the language of Moreno's Golden Theatrical Rule, the unity of the players resulted from attending to the connection between motion, state, and time.

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