

An Application of Sociodrama in the Training of Middle Management

by Elizabeth Synnot

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Précis: The group of 21 middle level managers have been together as trainees on two previous occasions for one week at a time. The participants are fearful of self presentation and joining with each other. They are eager to be "good managers". This short article presents a series of moments in the group when a control paradigm of coercion/compliance shifted to a paradigm of internalized purposes being collaboratively pursued i.e. a shift from an external focus of power to an internalized motivation or vision being the driver. This is a recurring theme in training groups in the public sector. Internalized purpose is not part of the bureaucratic system. For the flowering of internalized purpose in the public sector, a shift from the system of roles in the bureaucratic system to a vision driven, purposeful system of roles is required. It is not the predominant practice of organisational and management development to ap-

proach the dilemmas of the public sector from a role analysis and systemic viewpoint. The state of the art is to move from a single charismatic or authoritarian visionary to an elite of senior manager visionaries. This is done from the paradigm of an analysis of the overall environment and a planning and consultative intervention. This is increasingly accompanied by an awareness that the culture (core values) require alignment with the new direction. Looking at the situation from a role system perspective, the predominant practice means a shift from a coercive fear driven system of roles (vignette 1) to a participative compliance and reward driven approach (vignette 2). This article recounts an enabling way forward (vignette 3). Vignette 4 presents the emergence of roles of a Purposeful Public Service System which is driven by each member's own internal vision. The author is presenting vignettes 3 and 4

as an enabling solution to present public sector dilemmas, that is, as the 'new art' of Strategic Management. It is the application of the sociodramatic method that enables the integration of the new system of roles, thus moving from the area of ideas to integrated knowledge.

I have been engaged to conduct the third week of course work in an 18 month Middle Management Program. The 21 participants have had two separate weeks of training and have just completed their first work placement of 9 months. Their second 9 month placement begins the week following this workshop.

These middle managers are two or three levels from both the top level in the hierarchy and the operational level of the hierarchy. They earn about \$55,000 per annum. They manage one of five or six functions in a Region of an Australian Public Sector Department. Most have responsibilities for a budget of up to \$1 million and around about 50 staff. Three in the group provide policy advice and supervise staff of around 10 professionals.

We have come to the morning of the third day in the workshop. The theme of taking control and loss of control has been recurring. This view of their work has been brought forward in sharing after earlier sociodramas and in other more general discussions. Leadership difficulties with subversive subordinates and mindless, self serving superiors have predominated in the two earlier sociodramas. Viewing the role of manager as purposefully leading the group has begun to be considered as an alternative view point. As well as the desire to work collaboratively together in the group there emerges an overriding anxiety to enter into relationships with each

other. One restrictive solution that is repeatedly sought by the group is to have "input" sessions from "entertaining experts". There is also an expressed fear that they will be "caught short" in the future and will not be up to date on "best" management practices.

The scene for the sociodrama is one of a bus driver collecting passengers. It begins with three vignettes being enacted. The warm up to the enactment includes a guided fantasy, the drawing of pictures and the use of story, metaphors and songs. Each person, through this warm up, regains and develops their vision for Australia. Once this has been achieved the whole group work together to devise a draft 'reason for the existence' for the Australian Public Sector in contributing to the fulfilment of their vision. Everyone gets involved and appears enlivened. In less than an hour the draft Mission Statement is accepted by all. (This is a surprise as past experiences include taking up to two days to reach this point of consensus.)

Several group members discuss the application of a vision oriented organisation at the operational level. In response, the Director decides to present the same operational scenario from three differing role system perspectives. The vignettes unfold in turn and are all on the stage at the same time. The Director's experience of the public sector is that the approaches in vignettes 1 and 2 are the present approaches taken, i.e. an accurate description of what is. Vignette 1 displays the Classical or Traditional Bureaucratic System of roles at the operational level, viz., the vision is seen and kept at the top of the organisation with coercion or fear being the predominant force. Vignette 2 displays the Renaissance Bureaucratic System of roles at the

operational level, viz., the vision is seen and kept by an elite of senior managers with participation, for ownership, in operational planning throughout the organisation and with compliance or reward being the predominant force. State of the art management and organisation development is concerned with the shift from Classical Bureaucratic System of roles to the Renaissance Bureaucratic system of roles. Vignette 3 is a new approach. It is the Purposeful Public Service System of roles, viz. the vision is from within each person in the organisation and the Mission (core function) of the organisation is collaboratively created. Individuals then enact their role in the organisation while their driving force is their internalized vision.

The scene in each vignette is the same, *a bus driver collecting a young woman with two children – a baby in a pram and a young toddler*. It is 11.00am on a Wednesday morning on a sunny day in Brisbane.

Having set the scene, members of the audience choose the roles they want to take up and the vignettes are enacted accordingly. The story follows the enactment. There is no role reversal.

Vignette 1

Vignette 1 shows the driver, Jo, having been directed to be “*customer driven*” by his boss. Jo doesn’t like this idea because he knows he will be punished for not running the bus to schedule. He sees “*customer driven*” as the latest plot by management to make him work harder. “What about the schedule?” He is then given the implicit threat that if he doesn’t do this he won’t get to drive the routes he prefers. At the same time, Jo knows that what matters is whether the bus arrives on time at Bus Stop 16 (2 stops later) where the inspector is.

So, the driver is cursory with the woman. Angrily he tells her to “get your act together” and begrudgingly and quickly helps her on the bus. Immediately the two children cry and continue to do so for the next few minutes. Jo is clocked by the inspector as on time.

Vignette 2

Vignette 2 shows the driver, Jane, being cajoled and talked to by her supervisor about putting the customer first. All Jane’s ‘what ifs...?’ are met with ‘this is your new job. Do this and you will be doing a good job’. Jane is told that the inspector is there to help her and collect information for improving the schedules. Jane is not sure about this but decides to give it a go. In the enactment we see Jane lose sight of all else except for the woman and children who she goes all out for. Two passengers later become angry because they are now running late. She is clocked in by the inspector as 10 minutes late.

Vignette 3

Vignette 3 shows the driver, Eugene, chatting with his supervisor having absorbed that it is his job to provide a friendly, courteous and reliable bus service. As they talk it is evident that Eugene links the bus time table with the train and the ferry schedules. In the enactment he provides assistance to the mother and her children. At Bus Stop 16, he is 3 minutes behind schedule. At the stop he talks to his supervisor recounting the story of the woman and her children and discussing the likelihood of such passengers at this time of day.

In vignettes 1, 2, and 3 the scene has been set by the Director and the auxiliaries have enacted the vignettes, i.e., a prepared or leader directed

sociodrama. This changes when Daryl, a group member, begins to frame the sociodramatic question for the group. His expression is, "How do you shift a driver from the first vignette to the third vignette?". This is a critical moment in the group. His question is one that is echoed by other group members. We are all about to enter into the drama unknowing and warmed up to a higher level of spontaneity than has been present in the group thus far. The sociodramatic question is enlarged and now states "How does the middle manager shift an operator from a Classical or Traditional Bureaucratic System of roles to being an operator in a Purposeful Public Sector System of roles?"

He agrees to let me teach him and the group in my own way, i.e., through the use of sociodrama. In itself, this is a major shift in the group to being adventurous learners rather than dependant of fighting learners whose orientation, thus far, has been to have the 'expert' tell them and then to argue if they disagree! I am aware of the requirement for me to model a

new way of teaching. In turn, it can be used by these managers with their own staff and as a model for others with whom they come in contact.

Daryl, the group protagonist, discusses with the group whether to approach the bus driver in the scenario from the position of Inspector. Without an enactment, Daryl and the group decide that this would not produce a change and would get stuck with the manager becoming the 'Sadistic Overlord' in a mutually negative relationship with the bus driver as 'Harried Serf'. In the mind of the Director, she views this as deciding that there will be no movement if the manager approaches the operator to shift from the same system. She supports the group protagonist when he decides to approach the operator from the role of 'Trainer Educator'. At this point she is not sure if this will be enacted by Daryl as a Renaissance Bureaucracy trainer/educator or as Purposeful Public Service trainer/educator. Either way she sees the possibility of movement in the operator in response to a role enacted from a different system.

Vignette 4 – Enactment

- P (Protagonist) Cajoling Suggester
"I want you to take a bit more time with your passengers. Think of your customers more."
- BD (Bus Driver) Suspicious Defender
"I have a timetable to keep."
- P Correct Instructor
"We can shift the timetable around so it works better for you and the passengers."

Director's Process

This is a Renaissance Bureaucracy initiative. It is telling and selling what is required.

This response is to be expected from someone who has worked in a Classical Bureaucracy all their working life (and prior to that has been in an educational system based on fear and shame).

I am struck with how the Renaissance Bureaucratic System puts the requirements of the operator in the picture. This is a significant shift from the Classical Bureaucratic System. (A Dysfunctional Bureaucratic System

- BD Suspicious Knife Thrower
 “You can say that but it’s not your decision. We’ve tried to get the times changed before and nothing gets done.”
- P Water Treading Negotiator
 “This will be different.”
- BD Angry Confronter
 “But if I’m late I’m the one who cops it! It’s all very well for you to say it’ll be different!”
- P Dithering Searcher
 (Head bowed, hunched shoulders, furrowed brow)
- D (Director) Warm Confronter/
 Coach
 “Daryl, you’ve forgotten your vision. What are you setting out to create here.”
- P Troubled Reflector
 (Shift in body posture to weight on two feet. Still frowning.)
- D Prompting Coach
 “Take your time. Let your picture of the kind of world you want to live in become clear to you.”
- P Quiet Seer
 (Another shift in body posture. Open expression on face and eyes lit up.)
- BD Angry Rejector
 “You’re setting me up! You’re like all the others. I’m going to get knocked off. Who the hell are you?!”
- P Open Inviter
 “O.K. I’ve dumped all that stuff.
- doesn’t even have the passengers in the system.)
- There is an evident truth in what is being said from a Classical Bureaucratic System viewpoint. It’s systematically impossible to influence how things are done from the operational level.
- Daryl is now ‘coping’.
- Again the ring of truth from this systemic perspective.
- Daryl is now ‘disabled’. In his present role state he is not able to pursue his purpose.
- This is the crux of what is being taught. To be in touch with their own vision is enlivening and *enabling*. The roles that emerge from their self at this time are roles that *enable* the pursuit of their purpose and the creation of their vision. This teaching requires internalisation for their integrated learning of the Purposeful Public Service System.
- Integration is beginning.
- The auxiliary takes up the role from before and provides a role test for the Protagonist.

Let's go and sit down. We'll have a drink of coffee and find out what you really want to know."

P Collaborative Adventurer
"Let's both give this a go and see where we get."

BD Reticent Experimenter
"O.K." (spoken quietly.)

I pause the vignette here. Daryl says he's 'got the message'. I see that he has passed the first role test.

The audience were engaged throughout this process. I feel pleased with this progress. While the enactments are ordinary and simple they are also significant in the learning that has taken place. I have been able to stay with my own vision of learning being integrated rather than the group's orientation to 'learning about organisational vision and 'state of the art' management theory. I have been able to operate purposefully in learning collaboratively. I have been able to model my vision. This has been in the face of a group of managers who primarily function from the Renaissance Bureaucratic System of roles and sometimes the Classical Bureaucratic System of roles. I am encouraged to continue working and developing as a teacher in the public sector.

This morning session has begun the process of the group operating out of a purposeful system. Immediately after the break one of the group members initiates the group conducting the rest of the morning for themselves and at the same time practising and developing their roles as leaders and group members. While many of the roles that were enacted were underdeveloped, it is clear that the roles they are developing are emerging from their own vision of themselves in a purposeful public service system. The group persevered with teaching and coaching each other. They have taken up the

opportunity to integrate what they learnt in the morning by practising this with each other throughout our time together. These middle managers already have significant influence and are seen as the likely senior managers of tomorrow.

It is the author's experience that the integration of new roles that emerge in a new system have a recursive impact on the former system. This has been observed by the author and reported on by former participants. Her experience suggests that the work of the group will have significant impact in the larger system in which these middle managers operate.