

# Grappling With a Ghost from the Past

by Rollo Browne

Rollo works as an education and organisational development consultant in Sydney. He is an advanced socio-drama trainee and is on the teaching staff of the NSW Psychodrama Training Institute. This article describes the roles and sub-groups operating in a social system and explores the implications for intervention.

My first contact with Justice For All (JFA), a community organisation, was when Mary, the manager, asked if I could assist in improving working relations at their head office. Our initial conversation revealed that she was relatively new to the organisation. Toxic working relationships were affecting her effectiveness, and that of the organisation. A usually exuberant and positive person, she was feeling personally drained by the office dynamics. She had been the target of verbal attacks and other tactics that derailed all her attempts to create something different. She needed help.

Mary had in mind a facilitated day for the staff where they might make a fresh start. She hoped at least some of the issues would be 'contained', if not resolved. I clarified the purpose of such a day was to exorcise the ghosts of the past, in particular the after effects of the previous co-ordinator; move forward into workable relationships; clarify work roles and vision

and develop a positive mindset to working at JFA.

I contracted with Mary to undertake a three-phase process (Jones 1998). I would speak to each of the six other staff involved, create a team development agenda and conduct a team development day based on that agenda.

The group accepted the need for an external facilitator and agreed to the interviews. I approached these with three key questions in mind: what was happening now (in the organization's culture and dynamics), what was their desired future, and what they thought needed to happen to get there?

The team comprised eight people. Mary is the new manager. She is enthusiastic but shocked at being personally attacked as controlling by Charlie. Anne is the new administration officer, hired by Mary. She is perplexed by the situation. Lucy was

also recruited by Mary to be the legal officer. She is quite overworked but patient with the team dynamics as they do not directly affect her.

Peter is the policy officer. He passionately believes in the work and knows the state-level politics backwards. He was previously Chair of the Board of JFA and has worked in the area a long time. He just wants the whole group to move on.

Charlie is one of the two case officers who have been there a while. He is very cautious about authority structures and sees himself as a defender of the faith of what JFA is all about. Although he can be abrasive he is also articulate and charming. He worked under the previous co-ordinator and is angry and blaming about what happened. Chris is the other case officer. He is genial and is reluctant to become involved in conflict. He has looked for other jobs but none were suitable. Although he keeps his head down he is very supportive of his mates, Charlie and Emily.

Emily is the education officer. Her self-belief had taken a battering under the previous co-ordinator, Monica. In her view, justice never occurred.

From interviewing the team members I developed a one-page summary, which formed the agenda for the team development day. The summary included comments, which some individuals would recognise as their own words. One week prior to meeting this was circulated to all participants using the heading 'Staff Healing Day'.

By this point I understood the organisational structure and who did what, where the reported difficulties were and had a sense of individual perspectives on the group

dynamics. However I had not yet seen the group members interacting with each other. These role relationships became evident during the team development day.

It became clear in the interviews and even clearer during the team day that several triggering events during the time of the previous co-ordinator Monica were affecting the current situation. Monica was variously described to me as "larger than life", as "a bully who had the Board eating out of her hand" because of her ability to secure grants from the government, as "vociferous", "flamboyant" and as "having a forceful presence".

The Board had become aware of "difficulties in the office" and that Monica had polarized staff. Some staff had demanded that she be sacked. The organisation held strong social justice values such as operating as a co-operative, reflected in Monica's role being titled Co-ordinator rather than Manager. Staff representatives who attended Board meetings had keenly watched how the power issue would be handled.

When Monica was co-ordinator the Board was made up of a number of young idealistic professionals, fresh out of university, inexperienced in practical managerial issues. To them, bullying was simply not part of the culture of social justice. The Chair of the Board was Peter (not an employee then) who was having a relationship with Monica at the time. The Board was the corporate entity empowered to intervene at the required level and it was inexorably and reluctantly drawn in to the day to day management of the JFA head office. Inevitably the Board did not handle the matter well and while Monica did eventually leave, it was on a technicality and took some time. Crucially, justice was not seen to be done and the whole issue of

bullying and the Board's failure to confront it, remained.

In order to address this I asked that the current Board itself attend the Team Day but this was not practical as they all had day jobs, and the staff wouldn't work on the weekend.

### **Key Role Relationships**

A number of significant interactions occurred during the Team Day which displayed some of the key relationships between individuals and subgroups.

#### **a) Emily and the Group**

Emily expressed to the group her intense distress at having been humiliated by Monica. "You have no idea what Monica was like. She would sit in some of my presentations to our client groups and after a bit would yell out "Boring!"... It was debilitating." Others in the team met Emily's story with stunned silence. They were empathic listeners, role reversing with her to imagine what it might have been like. At the same time they did not know what to say. It had happened. It could not be undone. No one there was responsible. Emily had clearly been traumatised repeatedly and was speaking openly. The key issue emerging in this interaction was the acknowledgement of abuse in a social justice organisation. As in most abuse situations the subject is often avoided. People do not speak out because of the fear they might be targeted and also because it is shameful to have to admit that they could not stand up to the bully. There is often an unspoken collusion to remain silent that unwittingly sustains the perpetrator. In this case the organisation as a whole had been unable to stand up for what it believed in. See Diagram 1 on page 50.

#### **b) Peter and Emily**

In response to this Peter expressed exasperation at Emily saying, "Why can't you just move on? It's over. It all happened a while ago." Emily responded angrily "It's not over". The key issue emerging in this interaction was the need to be listened to. Peter is the one person in the room that represents in any degree the failure in leadership by the previous Board over Monica's behaviour. He represents that part of the system where Emily feels most unheard. I intervene and say to Peter, "Can you see that demanding her to move on is one of the things that keeps her where she is?" Peter nods faintly and goes silent. See diagram 2 on page 50.

#### **c) Mary and Charlie**

Later, Mary is confronting with Charlie about his behaviour to her as a manager. "You treat meetings as if they are a personal insult. When I say it is not workable, you walk out." Charlie responds angrily "Who made you the boss? This is supposed to be a co-operative. I'm not prepared to work with anyone taking power over me." This interaction surfaces the issue of authority relations between the manager and one of her staff. Charlie is refusing to admit the legitimacy of Mary's authority and is highly sensitive to losing any autonomy. The history of Monica's misuse of power dominates this relationship. See Diagram 3 on page 50.

It was clear to me that these three issues would need to be addressed for successful resolution of the team relationships.

### **Analysis of the System**

There are three significant sub-groups in the JFA team – the Fallen Leaders, the Survivors

Diagram 1: Emily and the Group

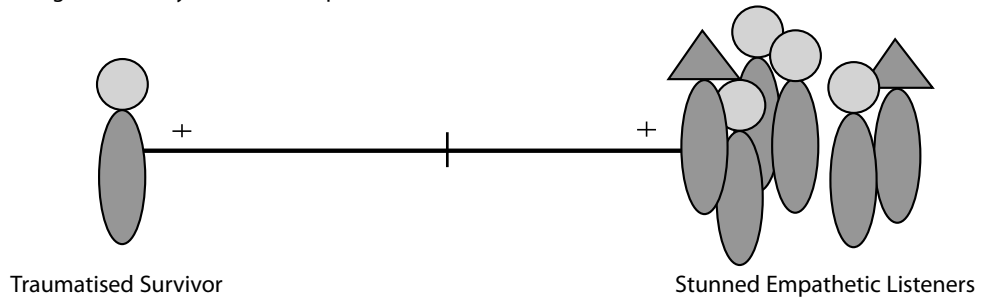


Diagram 2: Peter and Emily

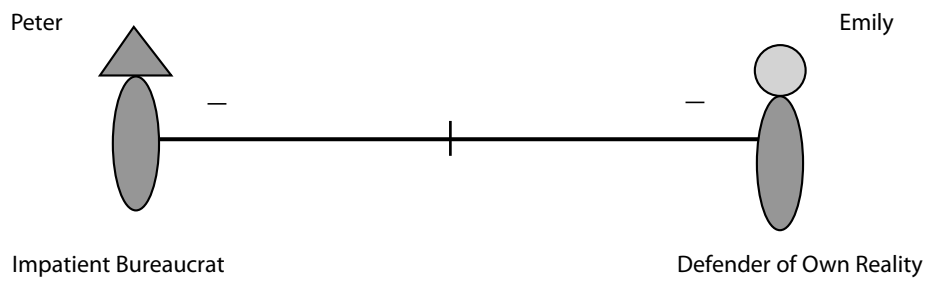


Diagram 3: Mary and Charlie

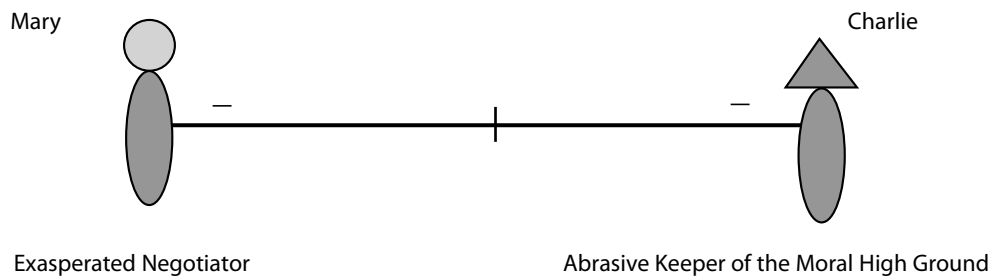
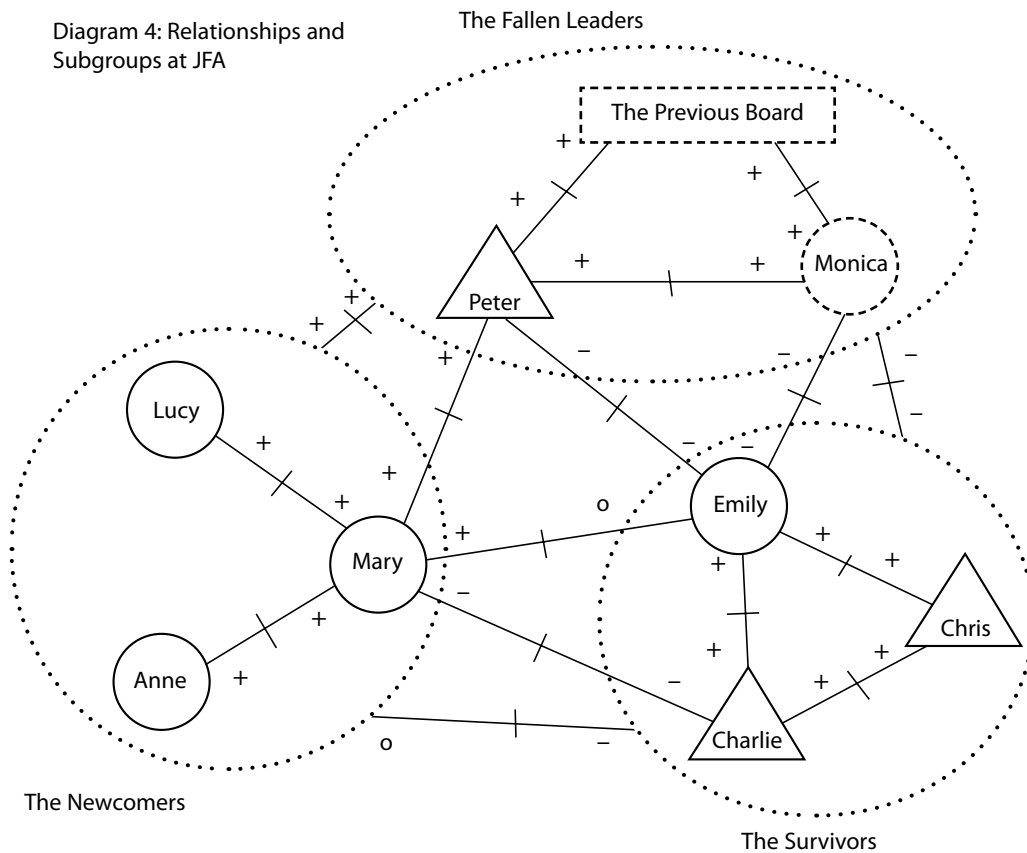


Diagram 4: Relationships and Subgroups at JFA



and the Newcomers. These subgroups have become entrenched and no one easily moves between them. This is a world in which the term team building might be used to mean, “you join our subgroup”. The following diagram shows the subgroups and the tele relationships between key members of these sub-groups. See diagram 4 on page 51.

In the Newcomers subgroup Mary needs support to do her job. She seeks allies and finds them in Peter and those she recruits.

Charlie operates as the ‘gatekeeper’ or informal leader for the Survivors subgroup. Emily holds the hurt for the group. Charlie’s antagonism to power structures skews his appreciation of Mary as a positive force for change. He tries to undermine her as the leader. This subgroup has a valency towards fight/ flight (Talamo et al 1998).

I hypothesise that Charlie is fearful that Mary will replicate Monica’s power and that staff will become marginalized again.

As one of the Fallen Leaders, Peter’s part in the Board’s inaction and incompetence in its response to Monica’s bullying is an unresolved issue. The Survivors blame him for his involvement with Monica. He does not acknowledge anything about himself and Monica and will only focus on the future. He is currently aligning himself with the new Manager and the Board.

At a systemic level there is a lot of stuckness, fear and blame between the subgroups. This gets enacted in Charlie and Mary’s relationship and between Emily and Peter. I hypothesise that these dynamics replicate the pattern of shame which is often found in abusive systems. Individuals feel shame for

not having stood up for themselves. There is a tendency to get isolated and blame oneself and stay silent, thinking: "If I do speak about it now, will anything really change?"

There is also shame that as a group and as individuals in a social justice coalition they were unable to stand up to a domineering bully to protect each other. They find they did not speak up until it was really bad and then only to find that the leaders were unable to deal with it. Meanwhile silence and inaction served the perpetrator. Some staff (including the Board and Peter) are likely to feel shame because they didn't want to believe it was happening and avoided forcing the issue. They were seduced or seduced themselves into compromising their integrity.

I hypothesise that the team is stuck because of insufficient acknowledgement of the trauma they experienced and has no way of talking about it without re-igniting unresolved issues. This will require role development in the participants, particularly those who worked with Monica, to publicly name the abuse situation and then recognise that they are now in different relationships. The newcomers will need to recognise the extent of the abuse and how it affects the survivors now. In other words there is a need to role reverse with each other and in so doing to rise above personal concerns.

This analysis confirms the relevance of the goals set for the team development day. These were to exorcise the ghosts of the past, move forward into workable relationships, clarify the roles and vision and develop a positive mindset to working at JFA.

Unfortunately the team day was my only opportunity to work with the group. Mary asked the group if they would meet for a second time but the survivor group would

not agree. "They just didn't want to continue with the work."

### **Interventions**

I have since wondered what I could have done to more effectively work with the group. On the basis of the exploration completed I have identified several further interventions to progress the agreed goals:

#### **Sociometric Diagram**

Drawing up and circulating the sociometric diagram (Diagram 4) would have been very helpful. This conclusion is based on the Morenian principle that laying out the sociometry is in itself a significant intervention. It would raise the awareness of participants of the culture they contribute to and allow subgroups to see the effect they are having on the larger system. Then they can more easily understand the roles that individuals are playing on behalf of the system.

#### **Sub-Group Meetings**

Arranging for a meeting with each subgroup would allow discussion of the sociometric diagram and naming of the core dynamics. It would have been important to work with each subgroup separately. Getting a fresh perspective on the situation is less likely while individuals are on show, in an adversarial context, advocating for their positions in public. This was apparent when Charlie resisted Mary's leadership and when Peter demanded that Emily move on.

#### **Warm Up to Association**

The subgroups have become isolated, entrenched and at this stage are incapable

of reversing roles. They need to create a new warm up to association. The use of discussion in subgroups would enhance the trust level and increase the prospect that alternate perspectives will emerge. Spontaneity would be increased by a purposeful external leader and having sufficient structure to reduce the anxiety and fear of encounter in the large group.

### **Aligning Ideals and Practice**

Naming the core dynamics includes recognising that the shame must be spoken of and that the organisation failed to address it. This might be initially done in the subgroups and then addressed in the larger group.

There is also a systemic issue here that will have to be addressed at some time. In organisations there is often a gap between their 'espoused' values, what they say they do, and their 'theories in use', those values expressed in what they actually do (Argyris 1993). The situations or events that are avoided, not spoken of or addressed fall into and operate as the 'shadow' of an organisation. It is easy for organisations to fall into the trap of operating in ways that contradict their own values, for example, a customer service organization that ignores its own workers; schools that are run for teacher convenience; and hospital nursing hours that are punitive to staff health. In this case JFA is a social justice organisation that cannot protect its workers from abuse.

I believe it is possible to create mechanisms that ensure ideals do not become separated from practice. One way of doing this and sustaining the change is by building ownership so that what is put in place is a creation of those involved. Ultimately those involved are the best designers of such

changes (Weisbord 1987, Owen 1997). This might mean involving staff in a process to work out the structure that would best allow JFA to meet its goals.

### **Facilitated Meetings**

There would be value in facilitated meetings between Mary and Charlie and between Peter and Emily. Both of these relationships are stuck and it is evident that the roles required for progress are weak in the context of unresolved tension. Specific role development is needed in the key relationships between Mary and Charlie, and between Emily and Peter. This is particularly important as Charlie is the gatekeeper around the re-negotiation of power. He is the protagonist for the group in a sociodrama on authority issues. Likewise Emily is the holder of the feeling of trauma in the Survivor subgroup and is the protagonist for the group on issues of abuse. Peter is the group member most identified with the issue of accountability and avoiding responsibility.

### **Larger Group Meeting**

The whole group can be recalled once there has been some movement in the roles and relationships. Unless there is change in the role relations the existing dynamics will reassert themselves. Once the work is done in smaller groups, participants can join the larger group with a warm up to more progressive roles and a consciousness that they each have a part to play in creating a new dynamic.

### **Conclusion**

A lot of good work was done to bring about a fuller appreciation of the depth of the situation. To an observer the whole system was enacted in the group and it would have

been clear what the subgroups stood for and the roles individuals played in keeping the system stuck. However the individuals who were in it could not see this unaided. Some common ground was established in understanding the role Monica had played. I did name the issue of shame in the afternoon but in hindsight believe that the relationships were not strong enough to stop the group fragmenting around feeling ashamed once the session ended. On reflection it would have been possible to ask the protagonists in the key relationships if they were willing to work separately and if the answer were yes, to organise for that to happen.

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## REFERENCES