Thriving Under Fire

Bringing Moreno into the Corporate Training World

John Faisandier

Abstract
John Faisandier describes his adaptation and use of psychodramatic principles and practices in the corporate training world. The TUF: Thriving Under Fire® programme uses action sociometry, systems analysis, role training and doubling to assist corporate staff to maintain positive relationships when facing angry and abusive customers in the heat of the moment. The author also reflects on the development of the training programme and business that he has built on Morenian principles.

Keywords
action methods, angry customers, corporate, customer service, Diamond of Opposites, doubling, empathy, Moreno, Play of Life, psychodrama, role play, role training, sociometry, systems analysis, TUF: Thriving Under Fire

> *"We aren't going to do role play I hope!" Jeanette bustled into the room and took her place with the other 11 city librarians about to begin the TUF: Thriving Under Fire programme.*
>
> *"Of course not!" I replied. "There will be lots of action though. That's why there aren't any tables in the room".*
>
> *And so begins a typical TUF: Thriving Under Fire workshop.*

Introduction

I have always worked with people, firstly as a volunteer teacher in Tonga in my first year

out of school. Then, following eight years in the seminary I spent 11 years in teaching, parish work and university chaplaincy as a Catholic priest. After leaving the priesthood in 1989 I worked in the Race Relations Office in Christchurch and for four years in drug and alcohol rehabilitation work at Queen Mary Hospital, Hanmer Springs.

Beginning in 1984 I trained in the psychodrama method and was certificated as a psychodramatist ten years later. As I used Moreno's action methods I noticed how enlivening they were for individuals and groups. When I set up my own business in 1998 I naturally brought these methods into my work in the corporate sector. After moving to Wellington in 1999, I continued to develop my ability to work with business groups in team building, strategic planning, trouble shooting and just about anything else corporations wanted me to do.

The TUF: Thriving Under Fire programme was originally developed in 1999 for bank tellers who were hassled and abused by angry customers. It was one of a number of organisational development and training activities I devised. After several years I realised that offering such a variety of programmes was unsustainable. Marketing became complicated and every new job required a completely fresh warm up and the creation of new plans and resources. I was often up until 2am printing off booklets and handouts for a training session the next day.

I had heard a lot about niche marketing and in a defining moment in October 2005 I realised that the smart thing to do was to create my niche with the TUF programme. I decided to make this one programme my brand and become the recognised expert in this area of training. I set out to read and write extensively on the topic, present at trade conferences, develop a website, get media exposure and become known in the corporate world as the authority on dealing with emotions in the workplace. It felt risky at first because I knew it would take time and effort to get established as the market leader in training people to deal with angry and aggressive customers. It meant that I would have to turn down other work that might come my way.

In the five years since making that decision TUF has become well known. I have developed its branding and marketing. I have had the programme reviewed several times by entering and winning awards within the training industry. I have delivered lectures at university and had groups of students critique the programme. I have delivered workshops to hundreds of people in many different industries and occupations throughout New Zealand. The experience I have gained has increased my knowledge of the resources people need when facing difficult clients. The programme has been expanded to include a pre-workshop e-learning module, two half day workshops, twelve monthly follow-up reminder lessons and twelve months support through email and blog communication. I have written the book 'Thriving Under Fire: Turn Difficult Customers into Business Success', which outlines the programme in detail.

As well as the original TUF for Frontline Staff, the programme now includes TUF for Managers and TUF for Teams. This means that all members of an organisation are catered for. In 2009 the TUF Licensing Plan was launched. Large organisations can now buy a license and have their own facilitators trained to run the programme for large numbers of people at a cost effective rate. As well, exporting opportunities are being explored.

Psychodramatic Principles and Practices

The TUF programme is based on psychodramatic principles and practices. The framework of warm-up, action and sharing is fundamental to the work. There is emphasis on the integration of thinking, feeling and acting and the development of roles. And group work is at its heart. In what follows six key areas of the TUF programme are described and discussed, with emphasis on the psychodramatic principles and practices that are integrated into each area.

Beginning the Group

Over the years I have noticed the many people who turn up to corporate training events without a warm up to connecting meaningfully with others. Most expect to state their name and where they are from and that will be about it. Sociometry is thus the first principle that I apply in the TUF programme. I know that strong connections between participants are prerequisites for success in the interactive group sessions that follow. The first activity is therefore aimed at engaging group members in an active exploration of the sociometric connections between them. The participants share, in action, the organisational areas in which they work, the duration of their time there, their experiences of confronting angry and upset customers and their perceptions of their abilities to deal effectively with them. Sometimes countries of origin or associations that participants have through birth, migration or marriage are included in the sociometric mapping activities. These can be an excellent way of sharing experiences and valuing cultural diversity, and all add to the building of a productive working group.

Working from Strength

The TUF programme values and builds on learners' previous knowledge and past successes, an important principle of adult education. Using Play of Life[1] figures and objects, participants are invited to recreate past scenes where they have been confronted by difficult customers and have resolved the conflicts through their own efforts. They concretise three qualities that assisted them to reach that resolution and further concretise four people from their lives who have helped them to develop those qualities. On completion, participants share their sculpture and its significance with a neighbour. The effect is to increase the confidence and positivity participants feel towards their own abilities, towards their fellow group members, and towards the training that they are about to undertake. A good warm up is underway which strengthens the likelihood of success in the coming activities.

Diamond of Opposites

When they attend TUF sessions, many people from the corporate sector simply want a 'quick fix' for the angry customer conundrum. The first task, therefore, is to develop an appreciation of the complexity of human interactions. The Diamond of Opposites model, first developed in Chicago by Linnea Carlson-Sabelli and her husband Hector and popularised in this part of the world by Ann Hale, successfully lends itself to this purpose. Participants score themselves on a series of criteria: the tension experienced in

attending the TUF training day which includes the pull to attend and the pull not to attend; the inner conflict involved in dealing with a difficult customer which involves the pull to stay and serve and the pull to walk away. This paper-based activity assists participants to become more conscious of contradictory pressures in many situations. In the sharing phase, group members come to appreciate more deeply the many inner conflicts that they experience throughout a normal working day and the way in which these opposite forces affect their thinking, feeling and behaviour.

Systems Analysis

Continuing the theme of complexity in human interactions, we use a static sociodramatic presentation to explore the system of an angry customer. Group members warm up to a typical difficult person with whom they come into contact in their work, and then contribute to building a kind of sociodramatic profile. The Play of Life figures and other objects are used to represent different aspects of that person's life. We concretise family, social, educational, medical, financial and historical circumstances, and include what participants often call 'the person's baggage' carried from childhood, school and adult life. The systems analysis of the representative difficult client also includes episodes when the person has interacted with the participants' organisations. This exploration is often a significant time in the group, the moment when experiential learning comes into its own. The participants reverse roles with their customers for the first time and realise that customers have problems and worries much greater than they ever realised.



An example of a static sociodramatic presentation exploring the system of a typical difficult customer using Play of Life figures and objects.

One city council group was exploring the system of a 38 year old Samoan woman with whom they had difficulties. They set out the system, her five children, her parents who lived with her, her absent husband, the medical conditions she suffered, the difficulties she experienced at her children's schools and with social welfare, the police and other authorities. They looked into the church to which she belonged including the support she received and the obligations she had to fulfil there, her own schooling, the cross cultural conflicts she encountered every day, her lack of money, the night time cleaning job she undertook in the city and many other elements. A group member, Daphne wiped the tears from her eyes and said "I will never look at this woman the same again. I have been so narrow in my thinking and feel guilty that I have been mean towards her. No wonder she is so pushy when she deals with us". Others were deeply moved and echoed Daphne's sentiments. This part of the programme might be called empathy training.

Doubling

While participants are developing empathy towards the typical customer, they also struggle with what to say. "But how do you respond to them when they are so angry and abusive?"

I introduce them to a simple form of doubling. I explain the Action Perception Emotion (APE) principle. When customers are upset and complain, their presenting behaviour includes an action, a perception and an emotion.

Action	My delivery is late.
Perception	You have caused this lateness.
Emotion	Annoyance, distress, frustration, anger.

Faced with this situation people immediately warm up either to the role of *Ms. or Mr. Fix-It* and attend to the action first, or they want to justify themselves and try to correct the client's perception. However, the most effective thing to do is to acknowledge and respond to the emotion because that is the most prominent aspect of the angry client's experience right now in the moment. Saying sorry can be the first acknowledgement that the other person has been upset by what has happened. Then one might say "This really has been terrible for you" or "You have been inconvenienced by this" or "That's certainly enough to make you angry". These are simple acts of doubling.

There is often resistance to this idea. Some participants will say "This won't work with the people I have to deal with and anyway it sounds patronising". This then is an opportunity for me to model what I am teaching. Rather than trying to convince them, I double them! "You really don't want to sound patronising do you and you want something that will work with the kind of people you have to deal with". "Exactly! It'll never work where I am". Participants may not realise that I have doubled them, but they do change as a result. They are more open to attempting a doubling statement themselves, and I coach them to do so naturally using their own unique expressions.

Role Training

I use role training so that participants can practice making a natural doubling response to customers who are angry and upset. The form I use removes the embarrassment often experienced when role plays are enacted by two people in front of the whole group.

First we make a list of challenging statements that difficult customers actually say such as:

You don't know anything.
I'm a tax payer. I pay your wages.
I can't afford to pay that fine.
I want to speak to a man/woman/manager.
Doesn't anyone do any work around this place?
This place is no use to anyone.

Next we generate the underlying feelings being expressed through these statements:

Frustrated
Annoyed
Worried
Anxious
Pissed off
Desperate

Group members often contribute words that describe personality characteristics. These are recorded in a third list:

Domineering
Stupid
Aggressive
Arrogant
Self-righteous

I repeat aloud words from the second and third lists so that participants can experience the different impacts. They get the point that words that reflect feelings are much more likely to build a positive relationship than the judgemental and critical words from the third list. There is further modelling of possible helpful responses.

The participants are then organised into pairs, A and B. A is the customer making typical statements as strongly as possible to B, the staffer. B practises responding to the emotion first with a doubling statement. A comes back at B with an even stronger response and B is encouraged to continue doubling. A and B then reverse roles. This activity is repeated in different pairs two or three times, with pauses for reflection. Much essential learning takes place during this activity. Participants become acutely aware of the difficulty of responding to people when they are highly emotional, even when they have a template of what to say. They realise the importance of taking one's time before responding, responding not reacting, not taking it personally, being genuine,

keeping responses short. They also realise that a few customers will be habitually negative no matter how one responds to them.

To lighten up proceedings, I sometimes initiate a round of 'politically incorrect' responses. Participants can say whatever they like. This activity certainly increases the spontaneity and laughter in the group. It also assists the learning because it confirms the poverty of an ineffective response. These activities are always followed by sharing, processing and activity book work.

Developing a Programme

The TUF: Thriving Under Fire programme is a practical application of the psychodrama method in the corporate training situation and I am proud of it. In a larger sense it demonstrates how psychodramatists can use Moreno's theory and techniques to develop programmes in all kinds of fields and on many different topics. The process does require reflection, steady practice and refinement. It is probably best to begin simply with small refinements to existing programmes, and then gradually build up competence and confidence to develop a stand alone programme. Regular supervision with psychodrama peers and close collaboration with colleagues is essential.

Building a Business

As for building a business, and branding, marketing and selling the training, I suggest getting alongside and gaining help from other professionals in organisations such as the New Zealand Association of Training and Development (NZATD) and the National Speaker's Association of New Zealand or the Australian equivalents. I also recommend a business mentor. People associated with these organisations taught me specific skills to operate well in the business world, and also to trust that what I had to offer was worthwhile.

Conclusion

Moreno's action methods create experiential learning. They provide participants with a unique experience unmatched by any other training that they do. TUF: Thriving Under Fire enlivens people. It challenges them. It reaffirms their goodness and their ability to make positive relationships with all sorts of people, including the difficult customers that they encounter in the corporate world.

It is ironic that as TUF expands, I find I have less time for the kind of involvement I have had in the past with the Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association (ANZPA). I am, however, satisfied that I am fulfilling one of ANZPA's aims in taking Morenian principles into the world so that people everywhere may experience increased spontaneity and creativity in their relationships and in their lives.

Acknowledgements

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The book 'Thriving Under Fire: Turn Difficult Customers into Business Success' is reviewed in this edition of the ANZPA Journal.

More information about the TUF: Thriving Under Fire programme can be found at www.tuf.co.nz

End Notes

1. Play of Life ® is a methodology developed by Dr. Carlos Raimundo. It uses small toy figures and objects to set out people and the relationships that connect them. We use play mobile toys and other simple objects such as coloured stones, ice block sticks and pipe cleaners to represent the relational system. Dr. Raimundo sometimes refers to this at 'petit psychodrama'.

References

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