

***“The play’s the thing
Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King.”***

Act II, Scene ii, Hamlet. William Shakespeare

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF CONFERENCE DIRECTOR*

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nurtured my thinking.

One way to look at a group relations conference is as a play within a play, like the strategic device fashioned by Prince Hamlet to catch his uncle, King Claudius, in a state of guilty recognition of his murder of his brother, Hamlet's father. In the case of a group relations conference, of course, we are generally not trying to ensnare a guilty conscience, but rather to capture something much more elusive – the collective unconscious elements of a temporary working system. The similarity of a conference to the dramatic device of embedding a play within a play, however, is striking. We organize our conferences within the larger context of "real life" organizations in order to teach ourselves about that larger context. We do what Shakespeare did so artfully in a number of his plays: organize a play within another to draw the meaning of the broader entity to a point of clarity, to bring forward themes and information which in the larger context may remain hidden or at least unexplored. We are after a kind of distillation of "real world" life in organizations which we can learn from, beyond the veils of political and social correctness, denial and defense. This paper will focus on two key elements of the role of the director in this "play-within-a-play" we call a group relations conference. For much as in a different kind of drama, where the roles are pre-scripted, the conference director's interpretation of the art form, and his/her role behavior, indelibly stamps the enactment in particular ways.

In my view, there has been a tendency for conference directors to translate their individual experience and conclusions about how to carry out the role into a prescriptive approach. In May of this year I had the opportunity to be the associate director for an experienced consulting colleague who was making her debut as conference director. It was part of my charge from her and the

sponsoring organizations to guide her to become a full-fledged director. At that conference, which she conducted in a vastly different style than mine, I learned a great deal about the elasticity of the role and its variable impact on member learning. I also learned that had I tried to “stage direct” her work to be like mine I might have taken away from her and the conference a precious and unique experience of leadership and authority. Each of us, when acting as the conference director, learns how working in the role suits us, but when we generalize that as advice to other directors, particularly those who are early in their experience of the role, we risk stifling the other person’s interpretation. I agree with Ed Klein’s admonition in *“Systematic and Personal Issues in Directing a Group Relations Conference”*, “. . . there is no right way to direct.” There are, however, key areas of the role functions every conference director needs to consider how to approach. Those I will treat here are Team Leader of Staff and Intellectual Leader.

Team Leader of Staff

To a significant degree, the success of any director’s work is dependent on the role effectiveness of each member of the conference staff. This is exactly the same as in a context that is more formally defined as a play. How the actors fill their roles – the passion and the discipline they bring to taking up their roles, the appropriateness of their expressions in their roles, the degree to which they are willing to take risks to push the limits of understanding available in the drama, their capacity to work in an *ensemble* with each other – all are elements affecting how effective the director and the membership will experience the director to be, and how well their learning can be extended. So how does one build an effective team of “actors”?

Staff Selection

Obviously how the director selects staff has a profound effect on the conference. In some conference contexts, the sponsoring organization(s) put requirements on the director to pick from particular groups of consultants or from particular lists. If the conference is sponsored under the *aegis* of the A.K. Rice Institute in the United States, certain experience or competency levels are required of candidates to be eligible for staff roles. Other times the director is free to select from the broadest range of consultants available. Whatever the case, in addition to verifying that potential staff are trained and competent to do conference work, I believe there are some questions the director might want to consider with regard to each selection. These are:

- ◆ thoughtful consideration of the demands of each conference role that needs to be filled;
 - ◆ a sense of bringing diverse perspectives/ways of knowing in those selected for staff roles;
 - ◆ whether and how the director knows each person being considered for staff;
 - ◆ whether and how each potential staff member knows each other potential staff member;
- and finally, but not least,
- ◆ how the director imagines the consulting and administrative staff members will work with each other.

The last element seems crucial to me. It is the responsibility of the director to construct and inspire the staff team. It would be foolish, therefore, not to carefully consider whether the people one is selecting can work together with

vigor and commitment. To draw on another analogy to other dramatic contexts, since there is no overt script in a group relations conference but that which comes from the participants' past and present experiences, selecting people who have the potential to have "something to say" to each other (and the members), and the skill and courage to say it, is a strategy worth considering.

The question of whether a director ought to select people s/he knows or not has been addressed by others before this. A widely held value seems to be that whether or not the conference staff are known to each other and/or to the director, there is considerable benefit to inviting someone from outside the particular sponsoring center, or organizational context, from which the majority of the staff come. This is so the particular unconscious, or even conscious, assumptions and social arrangements made by the group can be more easily brought into focus for study by an outsider to the local system.

When I directed three AKRI national conferences I invited few consulting staff I had worked with before. In one case I invited an individual I had not met before but who had been nominated for the staff by that person's AKRI Center. In general, the staff I invited during those years did not have lengthy experience with each other, except in one case which I later had reason to regret.

Although this approach to staff selection requires more effort to validate the experience and competencies of potential staff, and probably a more protracted negotiation prior to the actual invitation to consult, this strategy, in my view, provided a clearer focus on task among the staff, and less sentient history to carry and potentially work through in the milieu of the conference.

One more point needs to be made regarding staff selection. Probably the most crucial role for the director to effectively select is administrator. The administrator is equivalent to the role of stage manager in a “real” play. The administrator holds the organizing element on behalf of the leadership pair of the conference – at least that is how I have experienced the role relationship when it functioned at its best. A sense of organization must reside in the director, of course, in terms of design, planning, and self and staff management. However, the administrator is the active embodiment of order, in the boundary region between the conference and members, staff and members, the conference and its host site, and sometimes even in the boundary region between the staff and the director. The administrator’s selection needs to be made with the consciousness of the crucial capacities s/he needs to have, those of organization, empathy, and a willingness to serve in “holding” the pragmatic elements of the conference while not having final accountability for them. Many a director’s ire has been wrongfully directed at his/her administrator when, in fact, the director’s own lack of consciousness in selecting and partnering with the administrator are much more to the point.

The Joining Process

So the staff is assembled in plenty of time to begin forming a working *ensemble* before the members arrive. What are some of the key actions the director can initiate to foster team work?

Pre-conference staff work is crucial to the evolution of integrated work during the conference. Although in some ways the conference never feels completely grounded in reality until the members arrive (which is as it should be), how the

staff encounter each other, and the director, before the Conference Opening will reverberate throughout the life of the conference. Pre-conference staff work is not unlike a dress rehearsal.

It is important for the director to remember that the staff is itself a small group. Its task is first to serve members by offering them opportunities to learn, but in the process of doing that, especially in the context of the Institutional Event, the staff will also study their own collective behavior. The director's conscious awareness of how the staff is working together is an important element of the team leader aspect of the role and requires active pursuit of teamwork if it is to flourish. For some time the culture of our conferences has been to emphasize individual performance in some degree of isolation from how that performance impacts the rest of the team. A director who is willing to "see" the dynamics of the team, and to intervene to improve the work of the staff as a whole, is likely to provide members with a more effective learning opportunity, and the staff a more satisfying work experience.

I have found one useful pre-conference activity is for the director to tell each staff member, in the presence of all the staff, why s/he has been selected. This provides the beginning link of director with staff in the "here and now" of the conference. It also serves to challenge or confirm other staff members' imaginings about why each person is present. Of course, during the conference more is likely to be learned about motives for selection, but beginning with the baseline of what the director is aware of makes a good start.

Also in preconference work it is effective to invite each staff member to talk about what s/he is bringing into the conference psychologically, e.g., a recent illness, a child leaving home, a job change, etc., in addition to what each person is feeling about the conference. This discussion often shows itself later to have been the precursor of conference themes which touch both the staff and members. I have also found that in the joining process, when the director invites staff to talk about how they are coming into the conference, the director must “come clean” him/herself. Decades ago I worked on staff at an AKRI national conference where the director did not tell staff about a significant personal agony that was affecting him. This led to staff’s unwillingness to fully engage with each other and a need to find some avenues of joining outside the conference work context. Although this created a rich learning opportunity, looking back I can’t help wondering what would have happened had the director made another choice. The elements of a director’s vulnerability are crucial to a full exploration of leadership and authority. If we attempt to construct leadership as “perfect”, i.e., impermeable to the effects of personal experience, we do members and staff a disservice. As Nancy Adams proposes in “A Letter to a Young Director”, “the primary task of a director is to tend to the complexities of self. If, I, in the director’s role, can attend and monitor my own experience then I can ‘hear’ the staff and membership.” The director can be both vulnerable and competent. This is a model for staff in which the director “takes them in and is taken in by them” in a way that fosters that likelihood between staff and members.

Another discussion much worth having in the preconference phase concerns staff members’ previous and current experiences with each other. Although it

runs the risk of actually convening the staff as a small study group, it is important for the director to invite and authorize enough work around this material that the staff can join with as much consciousness about the emotional network among them as possible.

Team Leading During the Conference

A primary element of directorship in terms of leading the staff team during the conference is staying aware of how they are working together, as I have said before. Another very important element is trusting the team.

Ethically we cannot ask members to scrutinize their individual and collective behavior unless we pursue those activities in the staff team. A key focus of the director needs to be on how the staff are relating to each other's authority and role behavior and whether those working relationships are functioning in the interest of member learning or not. An example from one of the national conferences I directed occurred when two male staff members from the same AKRI Center had been humorously taunting each other for some days into the conference. These two had had recent conflict with each other in their back home Center and it was evident in staff work that their working relationship in the conference was wary, if not strained. They were both members of the Small Group Team. During free time before an afternoon session, several staff, including these two men as well as me, were gathered in the staff work room. One of the two staff members made a joking comment and then ventured near the other who was sitting at the table. When the first one came near enough, the second grabbed him around the leg and wrestled him to the ground. Other staff, including myself, were amazed, and of course poised to intervene. The

two continued to wrestle to a stand-off, laughing and yet seriously challenging each other at the same time. The end of the tussle came when the one who had been standing at the beginning said to the one who had grabbed him, “I give up, I give up – you win!”

As the director, I had watched the engagement on alert, concerned I would need to intervene if this became violent or seemed otherwise out-of-hand. This did not develop, and afterwards I commented to them, “Good work.” Their “fight” felt entirely appropriate to the work they needed to do between them, and also advanced the level of intimate engagement among the larger staff. Moving in to stop them from working, even though they were doing it in an unusual way, would have been to arrest an important team development among staff. Sometimes it’s best for the director to stay out of the way of staff team work. Knowing when an intervention is needed is the challenge, and not always interpreting staff interactions as being “about” the director is a useful perspective to maintain in this endeavor.

The second point about supporting staff in their team work is harder to pursue. Trusting team members to carry out their roles competently and not to interpret all of the role struggles as personal attacks on oneself as the director is critical. If a director manages the conference as if everything that happens in it is always (and mostly) about her/him in the role of director, s/he will shortchange the membership and confine the staff to the safest and most conservative pursuit of this work. For staff to feel empowered to take the personal and collective risks to push group relations work to the fullest level they can, they must feel trusted by the director. This definition of trust is similar to the concept

of delegation. When the director delegates a particular piece of work in the conference, i.e., a role, to a staff member, s/he must authorize clearly, both on an emotional plane as well as an intellectual one. This means accepting (and enjoying if possible) that various staff members will pursue their work differently than the director would were s/he in that role. It also means accepting the task as master rather than the director. This has been written about by many other group relations authors: the task is the arbiter of our effectiveness, not the style of its pursuit. I suppose that in the world of legitimate drama this is somewhat less true, although I would guess most playwrights might be in our camp on this point. Trusting the staff, not in a way that glosses over their struggles or their challenges to the authority of the director and each other, but in a heartfelt way that supports their efforts, heightens both the quality of their individual work and their team work. Taking responsibility for when, as a director, one cannot make such a delegation is another point. The discussion of role reassignment, or even termination of staff within a conference context deserves treatment as well.

Intellectual Leader

Fearlessness might be the best way to describe what I understand the foundation of being the intellectual leader of the conference to be. It is not that the director needs to be the most intelligent person in the conference. In fact, often, both members and staff put a lot of energy into demonstrating the ways they are intelligent than the director. This is par for the course in a context where intellect is a primary wavelength for interpersonal and intergroup competition, and often a primary element of a collective defense mechanism in the conference.

What I mean by fearlessness here is holding onto the role and being open to all levels of experience available within it. Like any element of structure, the role can be used defensively. Certainly being effective at managing the overall conference and leading the team is plenty to ask of any director. However, if the director cannot stay open to the experiences s/he is having in the conference, whether those come from his/her relationships with the members, the staff, the sponsoring organization, or any other source, the conference is likely to be impaired. The term “fearless leader” has been popular in this country over the last couple of decades. It may have originated as an expression of respect, but of late has often been used as a term of derision. It frequently denotes a person who is in fact the opposite of fearless – someone who plays the role of leader safely, with ultimate attention to what is socially appropriate in a given context. In a group relations conference, staying in a “safe” zone as a leader represents a limitation on the potential of members and staff to find out more about unconscious elements of organizational life. At a group relations conference a few years ago, my friend and colleague, Ron Sharrin, called the unconscious level of group life a mystery. He explained to members in an application session that unconscious is simply our word for a particular kind of mystery, the mystery residing in the question of why people often behave differently when they are members of a group than they do when they are acting as individuals. If the conference director is to lead in the exploration of a mystery, that has implications for the nature of the science (or art?) we practice empirically in a conference. The director needs to go down deep, and, while holding the staff and membership in mind, lead into the mystery.

We have popular myths that describe this phenomenon. Two of the most noteworthy of these are Luke Skywalker in an early “Star Wars” movie, and Captain Kirk in the “Star Trek” television series. More recently, Neo, in “The Matrix” and “The Matrix Revisited” has become mythic in exploring the mystery of the reality underneath what is apparent. All three of these leaders (interesting that these myths are set in the future and take place in space beyond current planetary life) are required to challenge their fear of being incompetent in the face of the unknown, and to find the “force” inside to “bravely go where no man has gone before”. The obligation to do the same rests on the conference director’s shoulders in her/his laboratory for learning. What this means in more specific terms is to lead from what is known and understood into the unknown, which undoubtedly varies in relation to the particular conference context. It would be foolish to try to define the activities constructing the kind of courage we’re describing except for the points below.

The formulation that the conference director must be a hero is a dangerous one because it may lead us toward the assumption that the director must be a traditionally charismatic figure. Perhaps we could consider a different definition of charisma in our conference context – that it is not the “special quality that gives an individual influence or authority over large numbers of people” (Random House), but rather the ability to demonstrate mastery of one’s own fears in the pursuit of learning. Why the mystery of our species’ collective behavior terrifies us so is an interesting question in itself. What we do not want to see, but what we could so profoundly benefit from understanding, is at the heart of conference work. The director needs to work into that heart, where

there may be darkness or light, despair or hope. A very painful learning for me at one of the national conferences I directed was that generational estrangements within the A.K. Rice Institute took more prominence than long-established, effective work relationships between individuals representing different “generations”. Discovering this element of the unconscious fabric led to a great deal of self-scrutiny and my working attempt to continue, holding the pain and continuing to try to deepen understanding in the boundary region between the generations.

Hamlet’s fatal flaw, as we know, was his inability to face his own fear. He tells us about his consequent reluctance to act: “And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of. Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.” (Act III, Sc. I) From my perspective, the kind of courage that propels us to move toward the painful unknown parts of ourselves and of the species is something a group relations director needs to grow to be fully effective.

Conclusion

This paper was written to be spoken originally. And it represents merely fragments of what could be said about the director’s role. I hope that the reader has found it evocative of imaginings about conference directing as a dramatic undertaking, as well as provocative in that it moves to reader to further explore his/her own opinions about how to carry out the role most effectively.

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