

Planting seeds or throwing bombs

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Abstract

This article is based on a chapter from “Thin Book on Organisational theatre” and discusses a variety of challenges and opportunities for bringing change to organisations through theatre, action research and consultancy. The suggestions span from the extremes of provoking radical change (throwing bombs) to sowing small seeds of change - with a variety of combinations and approaches in between. The article deliberately raises more questions for reflection than providing recommendations for action.

INTRODUCTION

The article takes its point of departure in Denmark at the second day of the Organizational Theatre Summit³ in March 2005, where the most important essences from our discussions were presented. The results from this group were presented as a performance in order to demonstrate different approaches for working with change. The following play is based on an actual incident that had happened a few years earlier to one of the participants.

The Performance

Paul is writing on the flip chart, lecturing about change. He carries on and on with a lot of platitudes. After a couple of minutes Kari, a participant, jumps up and cries: “NO!!!” She rushes to the flipchart and tears to pieces the paper Paul has been writing on and throws the pieces all over the floor in front of her. There is stunned and awkward silence in the room. She sits down again. Paul is confused and shocked; he leaves the room. More silence. The tension among the participants is considerable until Sam begins to talk with purpose in an incoherent fashion about how we might continue. He is trying to save us from the

painful situation.

After a while Sam gets got hold of the situation. He says: “Let's try this. Stand up and form two lines facing each other.”

We all do as told and Sam guides us through an exercise where each person has to change 10 things in his or her appearance while standing with their back to a partner. On instruction the partners turn round and face each other. They have to identify the changes made. The good feeling in the room returns, people are laughing and enjoying themselves. Paul comes back and sneaks into the line. Nobody seems to notice. Sam is energetic; the exercise is going well. He proposes doing it again only this time with 20 changes. “I don't want to do this any more, I think it's rubbish,” someone says loudly enough for everybody to hear it. “All right,” Sam says and everybody continues like nothing happened.

A few minutes later the exercise is over and Sam talks a little about change and how we do or do not notice when people are changing. He also points out how a moment ago everybody looked different, some without shoes, shirt outside the trousers, hair rumpled - but now everyone is busy getting themselves organised; colluding back to their appearance before they started changing. He makes the point we have a tendency to return to our default

³ Lotte Darsø, Stefan Meisiek and David Boje (Eds.) (2006). “Thin Book on Organisational Theatre”, published by Learning Lab Denmark, DPU

setting.

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In the following we will try to unfold the discussions that led to the above performance. We talked about change as a spectrum running from “planting seeds” to “dropping bombs”. These approaches can be applied in the short-term or as part of a long-term process. We were fascinated by the opportunity that sometimes will appear during such a process, “the moment”.

Our performance created a forum for discussion about how we make sense of what we, as practitioners are doing when we go into organisations. The dramatic experience of Paul lecturing and being stopped was a “bomb”, a disruption, which offered the possibility of change. Sam's exercise was a simple demonstration of some of the elements of change processes and of its inherent challenges. The exercise in itself could produce insights (seeds) about change, but at this particular time it was used for “smoothing out” the dangerous “moment”. The group, led by Sam, chose not to deal with the awkward predicament they found themselves in. A critical factor when discussing the whole notion of “planting seeds or throwing bombs.”

Important questions arise out of these two approaches debated: What is our responsibility to organisations and groups of individuals when working with them? Should our function merely be to disrupt? Or should we be embedding a process within organisations supporting and monitoring the change through various support mechanisms and processes that are initiated by the work? How willingly do organisations embrace these approaches?

Are we revolutionaries who should free the workers' souls by initiating (leading them into) some sort of Armageddon? Should we burn the fields down in order to plant new

seeds? Should we tell organisations what we think? To what degree are we responsible for what happens afterwards? Who do we serve?

We opened with a “bomb” leading to a moment of disruption. This created the possibility for change. But, in fact, most of us are not in favour of throwing “bombs”, still, we do agree that for real transformation to happen small “bombs” could be necessary.

Paul explained that he often performed provocative scripts bought by clients, and once performed left with no explicit explanation. What the clients did afterwards with the reflections on this piece was up to them to discuss. This statement Paul made was viewed as quite contentious to those of us sitting around the table as it brought up a serious question of ethics. At this point Paul started to reflect on the collusion of mediocrity, which refers to an “unspoken agreement to avoid discomfort through avoidance of real honesty and challenge”.⁴

This whole debate evoked a fairly strong response from us all.

1. Breaking the superficial niceness.
2. Fake revelation. The call to action. Output but no change - we provoke people but no change happens.
3. Once change has been revealed you dilute it to something safe.
4. Even though the change has taken place the failure to stay in the new place of discovery becomes quickly apparent.

What do we think we are doing when invited into an organisation? Do we provide input for people to reflect on - individually or together, or do we involve ourselves in a process of change? Paul's approach was based on the idea that performance is, in itself, all that may be required. The reaction

⁴ www.cats3000.uk/OTsummit

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is, essentially, a matter for the audience.

However, what about the potential damage that might be done by an outside “intervention”? Whether such an intervention is one where the outside party gets involved interactively, or whether it is simply a “bomb”, a straight performance, there may be damage resulting from the “explosion”.

In general terms, where the damage done by breaking a collusion in the short term is greater than the benefit gained in the short or longer run, then it may be better to leave a collusion in place.

There will be the “fallout” of the explosion; there may be a need to facilitate recovery, a pathway through the “aftermath”, helping to “manage” the reaction. It may be that those who help break collusions are not necessarily the best people to help deal with the aftermath, with the rebuilding process.

In our group some saw themselves very much involved in the dialogue that arises when the “mirror of the drama” creates reactions. Indeed, the processes of role play and forum theatre allow individuals and groups to engage in a creative dialogue leading to greater self-understanding, and possibly change and innovation. They did not see it as their business to “bring” change, but to facilitate it in a more emergent way. Others saw their role as artists who observe the “pain of the times”, as it reveals itself in organisational life, feeling restless to help reduce that pain, to overcome it through “intervention”. Unlike traditional intervention where the engendered change may arise from direct change, from expertise and advice, the theatre-based “change agents” use performance, “drama itself”, to stimulate reactions that unsettle the status quo, and “stir the pot”. The organisation “reacts” to the theatre, is changed by it, and is never the same again.

The common ground that arose from the discussion upon the importance of the intervention being a creative process, was

that it was carried out over more than one stage, based on ongoing collaboration with the client and involvement of the audience in the creation of the work, be this directly or indirectly. This approach, over time, is based on adaptation of the work, experimentation and reflection, very much akin to Action Research.

OT and Action Research

The aim for both action research and organisational theatre is to achieve collective learning and change through involvement and reflection. Moreover the members of the organisations are themselves responsible to make change happen - through collaboration with theatre and/or action researchers.

The core elements of action research are :

- o Action research is context-bound and addresses real-life problems.
- o Action research is inquiries where participants and researchers co-generate knowledge through collaborative communicative processes in which all participants' contributions are taken seriously.
- o Action research treats the diversity of experience and capacities within the local group as an opportunity for the enrichment of the research/action process.
- o The meanings constructed in the inquiry process lead to social action or these reflections on action lead to the construction of new meanings.
- o The credibility/validity of action research knowledge is measured according to whether actions that arise from it solve problems and increase participants' control over their own situation.

Artists and researchers have different roles when using organisational theatre as a method for changing and improving organisations. Artists playing theatre are experts in communication, where the play starts a collective thinking process at the

work place. The most important difference between OT and action research, is that action research implies a long term relationship between researchers and managers/workers, where OT is often used for dealing with challenges in order to find solutions. As researchers our task is also to document what kind of learning has taken place as a result of OT.

The Moment

The purpose of this next section is to hear from the individuals around the table discussing this topic. Let's return to the moment of "the bomb".

Kari and Hanne:

When Kari tore down Paul's flip chart, the rest of the audience chose to pretend as nothing had happened. Although everybody felt the uncomfortable tension in the room, nobody dared to stand up and ask Kari the important question: "Why did you do that?" At the same time, Kari was obviously tired of Paul's long-lasting and, to a certain degree, boring way of lecturing. She (and probably the rest of the audience) wanted to end the lecture, and change the group activity. But only Kari dared to do something about the situation - in a somewhat unorthodox way. In both situations the main section of the audience chose the safe but unproductive way: not to be involved. This action (or lack of action) didn't lead to much change. For Paul, this bomb-like experience probably made him wonder what Kari wanted to tell him, but the audience kept going as if nothing had happened, or were frustrated, angered or threatened by the intervention. What had happened if Sam, who tried to save the situation, had asked the audience what they felt about the situation, and invited Paul and Kari to join the discussion? Would the audience choose to speak freely about it, or would they still be silent?

Preben:

When Kari got up and tore the paper off the flipchart there was a moment of surprise,

anxiety and unpredictability: "What will happen next?" It was a bifurcation point where the situation could develop in very different directions. And if we take this seriously, it is obvious that we were in a situation of possible change. In that moment, the trouble is, of course, that we cannot know what the change will be, how the situation will develop, and not knowing and being out of control is anxiety provoking.

I think the way Sam handled the situation by taking leadership and so re-establishing control is how we often handle such unpleasant situations. But in fact anyone could have stopped Sam from returning to the planned program by saying: "Stop, can we stay with this for a moment?" And then we might have gone into a conversation trying to make sense together of what happened and how we might go on from here - in a different way than planned. It takes courage to stay present in such an undefined situation leaving it open for a mutual exploration of possible new ways to make sense of the situation. It takes courage because in those situations even though we may have a lot of experience and intentions about how we would like to go on, we know we are not in control, we don't know what will happen and we have to react spontaneously to whatever happens. However if we want to be creative these are the moments we should welcome.

I don't want to use theatre as a means to change the concepts or the beliefs of the audience. I don't want to use theatre as a tool. Art is always about questioning the present seeking for a possible new future. The artist is usually doing this on his own or with colleagues, but when intervening in an organisation he's in a joint action with his audience. In order to stay an artist he has to enter this process with curiosity, seeking the moments where there's a possibility of changing patterns. He has to go into this dangerous and creative field of unpredictability. And in this work I find presentations - even theatre performances - less useful. Handling unpredictable

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situations you can only do by being present and acting in the moment - and acting in the moment means improvising.

Lotte:

I call it a moment of truth. It is an opening, a crack, a pocket, a space of possibility that appears during a process. I have experienced it with many art forms. It can emerge through a question or a statement that stands out, because it captures an essential truth or a sudden profound insight. The air vibrates and if people are sensitive enough the realisation will be followed by reflective silence. The moment is risky, as what happened was unexpected, it took a new direction. The question will usually be whether the group should follow the new thread or stick to the program. This depends on the situation, the context, the people, the framing, the setting, the time frame, the leadership, and what is at stake. Most often people will collude and continue the program as if nothing happened, as we (Sam) purposely did in our performance with Paul and Kari. It takes an experienced and sensitive facilitator to handle moments of this calibre and there will be no guaranteed successful outcome.

Sam:

It is interesting to observe how the external mass control mechanism, (manifested by the group psyche), and the internal rationalising voice is disrupted by such a moment.

Moments like these that we are discussing in this article make us confront many truths about ourselves that we are often uncomfortable with. In that dark depth lies a lot of unanswered questions quite often effected and influenced by a need to relate/belong to a "whole". The issue is how and whether we choose to face those truths as individuals and as a collective. The truths in themselves evidence a certain change in behaviours that are necessary to really, honestly move forward.

Contingencies of the moment

Each change situation is unique. Even where the use of drama is based on archetypal material, or generic themes, the reaction of the client organisation, the "audience", will be different on each occasion. These contingencies require a skilled facilitation, and sensitive performance and staging, whether there is use of direct performance, role play or forum theatre. The setting of the work will involve considerations of venue, demographics, type of organisation, and its' management style.

In our discussion, we shared experiences of how we stage and facilitate different types of work, in different cultures, working environments and so on. These were some of our collated thoughts. The biography of the organisation will also influence the way the work is framed. The phase of its development is crucial, its receptiveness and also readiness to work in a more arts-based way. It may be that we have to say "the time is not right for this" yet.

Also the framing of the material itself. The extent to which the material needs to be slanted positively to lift and inspire, or whether it is to be used more as a kind of "exorcism". Or, it may be that the work is framed simply as a means to encourage dialogue and conversation.

We agreed there are no formulas here. Each organisation is a unique species! We need to do our research and ensure that setting and framing are adaptive and flexible. In Dacapo, theatre practitioners work alongside a skilled consultant who acts as the facilitator of a dialogue between organisational members. The purpose isn't to frame "this" or "that" but to encourage mutual understanding through dialogue "about the drama". The participants can think more deeply about their organisation and the changes that are potential. The drama and its resulting dialogue can help to reveal this potential.

The different setting and framing will also influence the form and style of

communication: the type of interaction, the genre of theatre, the choice of approach. In some organisations, forum theatre is most suited where a process of questioning will help to reveal a change agenda. In another setting, stepping into role and experimenting with different types of resulting behaviour may be more appropriate. In another setting it may be that a direct performance of a play, containing themes about the human condition - trust, belief, fear, courage, for example - may have a significant impact and be seen long after as a critical incident, strong enough to encourage reflection, dialogue and change in the days, weeks, months and even years to follow.

Short-term versus Long-term involvement

Paul's rather provocative notion of letting off a well-intentioned bomb and then making a quick run for it didn't accord well with most in the group! However, the spirit of engendering a critical incident which has lasting impact did resonate with most. All of us would like to feel that our work lasts beyond the end of the day! Most of us can still re-play the detail of the moment in our heads as we reflect now.

Often some of the most challenging and potentially inspiring artists and artist trainers, have a portfolio of work and processes that do not lend themselves easily to evaluation and performance measurement. Indeed, as in challenging mainstream training, feedback sheets might actually be negative, evidencing discomfort and unease in participants, and have a "watering down" effect of the experience itself. The benefits may be deeper and may reveal themselves over the long term, for example as a radical change in attitudes or behaviour. Good feedback sheets may well be the sign of a 'collusion of mediocrity, where apparently 'happy sheets', actually hide a collective 'relief' that the arts based training didn't (thank heavens) manage to 'rock the organisational boat' in any significant way. It ends up all being just word play that ticked

the necessary training box- "work covered-budget signed off".

Art has the potential to turn training and development events in organisations into "critical incidents". A critical incident in a workshop is usually something which, after the event, is looked back on as being significant. Significant enough to be remembered. Significant enough to stand out in ones heart and mind. Potentially significant enough to lead to a change in attitude or behaviour.

Major change is often described in dramatic terms, just like the describing of a play or a film. The use of theatre, specifically in training, is no frivolous or entertaining side show to the main "event", but the training itself. The use of drama can impact directly as an "intervention" in the process of change. It can encourage re-evaluation, rethinking, re-framing, emotional response and even behaviour change.

Confronting characters from a play which has important things to say about the human condition, about life, about work, about questions of change and transformation, the audience can see aspects of themselves in the "mirror of the drama". They can see characters and behaviours that inspire them, that anger them, that make them uneasy, that make them laugh or cry and, most powerfully, that really influence positive and negative aspects of their own personal and organisational selves.

Much training and development activity simply is not significant or critical enough to inspire change. It is not strong enough to act off an intervention in the change process. No matter how pragmatic the "tools and techniques", no matter how slick the PowerPoint slides or the workbooks are, change and transformation will not last beyond the journey home from the workshop or training event. Unfortunately much arts-based training also falls into this category. The theatre scripts are poorly written, the characters funny, but

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stereotyped or poorly drawn, the workshop processes resemble too much poor training with the art "plugged in" in a false or bland way. Simply put, the drama isn't powerful enough to last beyond the closing "thank you".

Action Research is an iterative process allowing experimentation over time. Where the relationship with our clients is longer term there is the potential to be more adaptive, to build upon learning and change, and to innovate. Even a minimum of two "interventions" allows five possible change points. There is the preparation and diagnosis before the first intervention. There is the first intervention. Then there is a gap of time between first and second interventions. A second intervention allows reflection and further embedding of learning and change. Then there is a further chance to look ahead and experiment further after the second intervention. This encourages the arts-based change to become a process of ongoing change and continuous improvement.

If a longer term relationship cannot occur, the single point of intervention would have to be a very well chosen, well planted, and hardy seed! Or perhaps a bomb. Not all agreed on this. The debate goes on!

Conclusion

Are we change agents? Are we change facilitators? Are we terrorists, preachers or missionaries? Are we teachers, trainers, or artists finding new channels for our work? Are we all of these or none of these?

Are we arrogant to think we can or should change others with our work? Are we cowards if we avoid that call to change?

Our group began a dialogue that lies at the heart of a debate that has been raging in the world of Organisation Development and Change Management for decades. What was unique about our discussion was the consideration of theatre (in all its different forms) as a tool, an approach, a method of change management. The sheer memorability of good theatre, the impact of it, the fact that it can stay with a person for years, that it can unsettle, that it can inspire, that it can engender laughter and tears in equal measure, creates a vast potential for using theatre in individual, group, organisational and social change. Whether theatre is a "bomb" that levels personal or organisational ground, a kind of constructive destruction that allows new edifices to arise, new seeds to be planted, or whether it is a more gentle, nature-respecting process, of planting seeds, of nurturing and patiently engendering developing change, still is up for discussion. We concluded that the diversity of approaches is a strength. What becomes crucial is that setting, communication and framing are contingent. It is always dependent on the utter uniqueness of the moment, and needs to always be changing, responding to shifting dynamics in the corporate climate.

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