
Beyond role play: Workplace theatre and employee relations

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Workplace theatre provides a useful and flexible public relations tactic in fulfillment of the goals of employee relations programs, particularly in culturally diverse workplaces. But while theatre is growing in popularity as an internal relations tool, not every type of workplace theatre provides long-term change to organisational culture or facilitates employee support for organisational goals. This paper examines the use of theatre by Harmony, a South African goldmining company, as a means to bridge workplace cultural divides and encourage two-way communication. The case study is used to highlight the potential for further development of this technique in internal relations programs. Recommendations are made about the style of workplace theatre best suited to providing bottom-up and horizontal communication channels.

There are ample examples of theatre used in the workplace. What seems lacking, however, is comprehensive theorising of why and how theatre works, and specifically how it works in employee relations. This paper meshes theatre, performance, and communication theories in a workplace setting to outline a tentative blueprint for theatre use in employee relations programs.

Placing theatre into the workplace context

In applying theatre and performance theory to organizations, we work from the assumption that organizations are by nature performative. All action is based in symbolic interaction, and reality is socially defined. We are all actors, spectators, or both simultaneously. We “play” defined roles based on how others see us, interpreting roles’ norms and expectations from others and our environment. This approach is supported by relatively recent theorists such as

Bhabha and Butler, who assert that racial and sexual identities are constructed through negotiation (Carbado & Gulati, 2000), but builds primarily on earlier work of symbolic interactionists such as Goffman (1959). Goffman argues that we create particular “definitions of a situation”, or what he calls scripts, by organising our experience into frames. Goffman’s frame analysis approach has been extensively adopted and developed in public relations communication (see for example Knight, 1999). We believe that his original theatrical metaphor, however, has unexplored potential for workplaces where, according to a recent study of workplace discrimination, scripts may be more prominent and the pressure to perform roles more critical than in everyday life (Carbado & Gulati, 2000). We argue that, if workplace identities are performed roles, performance itself should be considered a key tool to improve relationships between characters in the workplace drama.

This of itself is not a wholly new idea. Role playing has long been a key training method in human resource management. Skills such as empathy, mutual understanding, and behaviour modification have been taught in theatrical workshop situations. In Australia, for example, accountancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers has been hiring professional actors since 1996 to play “difficult customers” to its sales staff, and is now starting to on-sell the training program to its clients (Colquhoun, 2002). Our argument is for programs of this type to go further. We believe that, to reach the objectives of a full-scale employee communications program, rather than achieve isolated training outcomes, theatre should go beyond role play to the complete staging of a theatrical production.

The objectives of employee relations

To define a “full-scale employee communications program” and its goals, we have drawn on several sources, including Baskin, Aronoff & Lattimore (1997), Cutlip, Center & Broom (1985), D’Aprix (1984), Daniels, Spiker & Papa (1997), Grunig & Hunt (1984), Gudykunst, Stewart & Ting-Toomey (1985), O’Hair, Friedrich & Shaver (1995), and Robbins, Waters-Marsh, Cacioppe & Millett (1994).

Firstly, we assume that an internal relations program’s primary goal is multi-directional communication. Employees need “interactive relationships” with other employees and management (Ingala & Hill, 2001). Considerable scholarship suggests that employee satisfaction, motivation, and productivity are directly related to levels of interactive communication (Parry, 1999; Alexander, 1989; Cutlip et al., 1985). Within this overall communication aim are several more specific goals. These include to a) communicate management goals and objectives, manage change, and demonstrate strategy and tactics for reaching organisational goals (top-down communication), b) communicate what is happening in other parts of the organization, strengthen staff solidarity, and share responsibility for organisational goals (horizontal communication), and c) increase morale and productivity by giving everyone a voice for active, constructive input, and maximise knowledge resources by facilitating genuine participation in decision-making (bottom-up communication).

Theatre, we argue, has advantages over many more traditional employee relations tactics, in that it simultaneously serves both the macro goal, to train and give practice in dialogic communication, and the micro goals, to open up and maintain specific horizontal and vertical communication channels. An important point, however, is that theatre is tactical. It is not a strategy, and does not stand alone as the answer to employee communication problems. It is only effective within the context of an overall strategic communication plan with carefully managed objectives. Nevertheless, it is often

overlooked as an effective choice when selecting internal communication tactics.

The Harmony case study

Harmony Gold Mining Company is the world’s fifth largest gold miner, a position it has reached very rapidly through new acquisitions (T. Jonkheid, interview February 20, 2002). It operates primarily in South Africa, but also has significant operations in Canada and, more recently, Australia, including 31% of Bendigo Mining (Hoover’s, 2002). According to Hoover’s investment information service, Harmony “specializes in turning old digs into new digs”. It buys “mature gold mines with lagging production and turns them into low-cost, high-productivity mines” (Hoover’s, 2002). Change is rapid, radical and, according to our source, often traumatic and alienating for employees (Jonkheid interview, 2002). In South Africa in particular it presents challenges, as it involves moving from a traditional model of mining companies owning and managing an entire “company town”, providing housing, roads, food, health, and other services to employees, to a “business model”, in which the mine’s survival is linked to expenditure cuts. In practical terms, Harmony no longer maintains roads, landscapes gardens, or repairs employees’ houses. Instead, employees receive incentive-based pay increases, but move from dependence upon their employer to self-responsibility. Employees found the changes difficult and often lost sight of the ultimate goal to keep their mine running, even though most Harmony acquisitions had been slated for closure by previous owners (Jonkheid interview, 2002). Harmony employed Jonkheid to “market” the changes to employees. Jonkheid heads what she calls an “internal marketing” company called Red Arrow. She saw her role as “selling” the dramatic shift in business approach (coined “the Harmony Way” by the company) to internal publics. There were two key goals: first, improve shareholder confidence in Harmony’s internal culture by making it a unified and collaborative environment and, second, increase employee discretionary effort levels by addressing motivation and morale. Harmony’s

explicit objective was an improved share price; and this too became directly important for Red Arrow as, at Harmony's suggestion, Jonkheid agreed to the unusual step, for her, of taking 40% of her fee in shares.

Jonkheid began by segmenting the employee public into senior executives, middle management, supervisors, and miners, and auditing all communication within and between the groups. Next she conducted one-on-one interviews and focus groups with the different segments, asking them what the Harmony Way meant to them, what they thought of Harmony's leadership, whether they felt valued and recognised, and whether they had issues or problems to raise. She collated each group's key issues, identifying areas needing improvement. The main issue was that, in every group from senior executives down, there was some confusion about what the Harmony Way actually meant. All groups were also concerned about workplace safety. Employees experienced significant intrarole conflict when production schedules set by one segment appeared to require safety sacrifices by another (Daniels et al., 1997). Labour costs are 54% of mining production costs, therefore the resentment, high absenteeism, and lost productivity resulting from the safety conflict had major impact on Harmony's bottom line.

Jonkheid then produced internal communication pieces to convey her findings to employees, choosing a medium best suited to each segment. She first worked with CEO Bernard Swanepoel to identify what, exactly, the Harmony Way was. From a series of interviews, she identified four "pillars"; attitude, teamwork, the "business" approach, and stakeholder involvement. A written summary was presented to executives. For middle management, a comic-strip booklet overviewed the Harmony Way in a more readable format, plus drew on staff interview and focus group findings to dramatise the struggles and issues of Harmony Way implementation. The largest internal public, however, presented Jonkheid with a challenge. The miners were relatively uneducated, often illiterate. They identified as black (their preferred terminology), in contrast to the predominately Afrikaans middle and upper

management. Understandably, they did not readily relate to "white" messages in "white" packages. Jonkheid's research into the miners' culture suggested that their preferred communication methods with each other were oral storytelling, song, dance, chanting, music, and metaphor. She decided these were the best methods to also present the Harmony Way and dramatise workers' own views of its implementation, so she employed Blue Moon, a theatre troupe well known throughout South Africa for its industrial theatre productions, to "translate" the comic book into eight seven-minute plays. Jonkheid describes the plays as "not character pieces" aiming for naturalism or realism, but rather creative patchworks of drumming, chanting, and mime, each crafted around a central "message plan" that addressed a specific issue such as safety. Scripts were drawn not only from the Harmony Way but also from workers' experiences of and responses to the Harmony Way. "It had to answer their queries," Jonkheid explains. "It could not be seen as just a management mouthpiece." The plays were performed at employee inductions and inside mining shafts. Each play was rotated every month until each shaft had seen all eight plays. Each performance was followed by a "facilitation group", usually moderated by a union leader or shift boss, to discuss miners' reactions to and thoughts about the theatre piece and issues it addressed. Jonkheid notes that each play was only as successful "as people want to make it". Much of the communication benefit hinged on miners' motivation to raise issues at the subsequent facilitation groups; however, she described participation levels as "fantastic".

Eighteen months after Jonkheid first began working with Harmony, progress appears rapid. She is still conducting evaluative interviews and focus groups to assess employee attitude shifts, and we hope to update this study with that data in future, but we have two preliminary indicators. Workplace accidents have reduced by 30% (Calderira, email communication, February 26, 2002), and the share price has shown a massive 381% increase, from 32.50 Rand in July, 2000, to 124 Rand in February, 2002 (Jonkheid interview, 2002).

Phase one's success has enabled Red Arrow to argue for a second, more participatory, theatre phase, in which miners will be trained to co-produce and act their own scripts, putting on performances for their fellow workers.

Disadvantages of the approach

While Jonkheid is understandably happy with her campaign's outcome, she is not one-eyed about theatre. It is, she points out, expensive and "difficult to manage". The logistics can be complex: workplaces are not acoustically or otherwise designed as performance spaces. Furthermore, each expensive-to-stage performance is essentially a one-off. Jonkheid describes the theatre she has used so far with Harmony as a "non-sustainable" communication medium. It is costly to hire theatre professionals to make a customised piece, yet the message is only presented for the play's actual duration; seven minutes.

The Harmony project's next phase, which Jonkheid has just begun, aims to make theatre a more "sustainable" employee relations tool. She wants theatre to become a permanent channel for employees to articulate their views and problems, and is forming groups of twelve Harmony employees to work with one professional theatre director and four apprentice actors to learn acting and staging skills. In doing so, she takes a step closer to the style of theatre that, from our analysis of theatre theory and the history of workplace theatre, we recommend as likely to be most effective for long-term benefit.

Other examples of theatre use

Theatre presented particular cultural benefits in the Harmony case, but this may not be the only reason why it was successful. Its success in other cultural and workplace contexts suggests that, while selecting a communication medium familiar to the audience is paramount, theatre has other, more intrinsic, benefits. Harmony is not an isolated theatre use example. Internationally, theatre is currently being used to address issues ranging from living with HIV (Rohd, 1998), to reducing university academics'

"moral distress" (Brown, 1999), to addressing workplace violence (Workplace Action Team, n.d.). Unions have long been using theatre to educate, organise, and activate workers (Filewod & Watt, 2001; Conrow & Delp, 1999). Georgetown and Cornell Universities in the United States of America, sponsor theatre education programs in maximum security prisons in New York State and Virginia to help inmates develop "empathy skills" (Mitchell, 2001, p. 59). The New York Police Department has recently introduced theatre to teach new recruits cultural sensitivity (Telesco & Solomon, 2001); and a Danish theatre company called Dacapo Teatret has performed a play called "Change; the Spice of Life" more than 400 times for European corporate clients, to expose workplace conflict and bring workers to dialogue (European Communities [EC], 2002).

Several common characteristics can be extracted from these different uses of theatre for a tentative "blueprint" of successful workplace theatre. In particular, tracing the history of workplace theatre use by unions identifies some common threads.

Historical Context

In a recent book on theatre and the labour movement in Canada, Australia, and Britain, theatre historians Filewod and Watt (2001) show how unions using theatre to motivate workers have developed their techniques in the last century. Union theatre began as "simple agitprop" (p. 10) in the late 19th century, but has now developed into a complex and effective model of collaborative internal communication. Three aspects in particular have changed; participation has broadened, there has been a shift in the aesthetic understanding of workplace theatre, and theatre has been reconceived as a communication "loop", rather than a message conduit, or one-way medium (Filewod & Watt, 2001).

Broadening Participation

Broader participation seems a simple concept. For unions, it meant shifting from hiring actors who delivered a pre-crafted script

to workers, to hiring actors who facilitated workers to craft and deliver their own message (Filewod & Watt, 2001). Behind the scenes, however, is a more complicated attitude shift. For management-sponsored, rather than union-sponsored theatre, this entails a sometimes radical reconfiguration of the ways in which workplace culture is understood and communicated. Filewod and Watt identify this attitude shift as one from “democratisation of culture” to “cultural democracy”. Democratisation is essentially a one-way communication process. A management seeking to democratise workplace culture considers that it “owns” the “correct” version of workplace culture, but will “democratise” that version by “sharing” it with all employees (in a mission statement, for example) and rewarding support for its ideals. By contrast, cultural democracy assists all parties to “enjoy, or better still make, their own culture” (p. 46), and doesn’t privilege one understanding, or frame, over others. Workplace cultural democracy projects might include teaching employees basic documentary filmmaking skills, giving them a video camera, and encouraging them to tell their versions of corporate culture (positive and negative) in a supportive environment. Or, as we argue here, giving them basic theatre skills and asking them to dramatise their workplace stories.

Socio-cultural animation

Cultural democracy’s primary aim is “socio-cultural animation”, defined by Filewod and Watt (2001) as measurable and self-perpetuating increases in participants’ motivation and morale. Striving for socio-cultural animation changes theatre from representational to transformational. The process of making a play (scriptwriting, move blocking, character development, even final performance in many instances) shifts from a one-way model to a “self-consciously dialogic process of making theatre *with* the chosen” audience (Filewod & Watt, p. 47). Theatrical troupes involved in “socio-cultural animation” don’t simply “present” finished works to audiences, but rather are specifically employed as facilitators who “impart... skills to specific communities to

‘voice’ themselves” (Simpson, quoted in Filewod & Watt, p. 47). This is the phase Harmony is implementing now as workers are trained to compile, produce, and perform the next series of theatrical messages.

Cultural democracy shares a “motivate and lift morale” goal with employee relations. In taking the idea of ‘broader participation’ to the workplace, however, it is important to widen theatre involvement not only from trained actors to some employees, as union theatre has done, but to all employees from all organizational levels. Not only production workers, but middle and upper management should, we argue, be encouraged to become involved in order to reap theatre’s full transformational potential. This will ensure that the communication channels opened are not only horizontal but bottom-up, and top-down. It will assist all employees to better understand the roles that others play, by engaging in multi-directional communication.

Multidirectional communication

Paulo Freire argues that multidirectional communication helps employees understand their surroundings and their role within them (Freire, cited in Filewod & Watt). There are arguments against this; for example Stephenson (1967), who developed the “play theory” of the mass media, argues that “alienated” workers are happy workers; that it is better not to know the whole picture, provided one has a localised outlet for pleasurable two-way communication. Most contemporary literature on employee relations, however, suggests that workers who support organisational goals must first fully understand them and comprehend their position in the organization as a whole. To facilitate this, two-way communication must extend beyond worker with worker to include worker with supervisor, manager, or executive. Either way, theatre can facilitate the desired outcome. It can provide interaction at a purely pleasurable level, what Stephenson would define as “play” (1967, p. 2), or it can disseminate useful knowledge about others, their roles, and company networks. It can also do both, depending how it is structured.

The Harmony case study tends to support Freire. A fundamental issue identified in interviews was that workers did not know their role within the bigger Harmony picture; in extreme cases they didn't even know they worked for Harmony. Workers did not understand how their job contributed to company goals, and felt that their efforts were unrecognised. The result was low morale and flagging motivation. Phase one addressed this by using information from the staff interviews in scripts, thus giving workers a voice, albeit a ventriloquised one. Phase two may enable workers to not only speak their own concerns but to develop empathy with other employees by speaking others' concerns and playing others' roles. Simultaneously, if all internal public segments are encouraged to participate, employees will interact with persons whom they would otherwise not contact. A study by a workplace theatre group in the US suggests that the contacts made and communication channels opened up through such projects endure long after the play itself is over (Houden, cited in Theatre at Work, 2001).

The aesthetic question

Cultural democracy values cultural products for their ability to consolidate and celebrate particular communities, rather than the finesse with which they tell given stories (Filewod & Watt, 2001). Some workplace plays might not fulfil conventional criteria for entertainment, information, or even watchability but, Filewod and Watt argue, are still successful. Not everyone, however, agrees with the speed with which Filewod and Watt discount the "cringe factor". Theatre theorist Jackson argues that some consideration of "artistic merit" is crucial to obtaining transformational outcomes (Jackson, 1997). Ideally, Jackson suggests, transformational theatre should be "both educative and aesthetic, a participatory event which is simultaneously an artwork and capable of powerfully stretching minds, challenging assumptions and developing understanding" (Jackson, 1997, p. 54). Certainly, in cases where organizations seek to export workplace theatre to a wider audience, for example as a

community relations tool, aesthetic criteria are important (c.f. McQueenie's comments about the Tasmanian industrial opera *Pulp*, which included worker participants but was also a polished community relations tool for its corporate sponsor, Australian Paper; McQueenie, 1997).

Jonkheid sees theatre's communicative power as dwelling in its "dramatisation of reality", its feeling of a "real, live experience". To achieve this level of authenticity, she argues that it must be "well done". She specifically hired a troupe of consummate theatre professionals to ensure that the plays would have high production values.

The communication loop

The third characteristic Filewod and Watt (2001) see as important for transformative theatre is a looped, rather than one-way, communication process. In Harmony's case, phase one did not use full-loop communication. Employees contributed to scripts via interviews and focus groups, but didn't then voice their own opinions. An important step towards a communication loop was taken in the "post-performance" discussions, but unless the plays had then been restaged with material from these discussions taken into account, the loop is not complete. The initial stages of the project thus failed to fully realise theatre's inherent potential as a dialogic communication process, a potential supplied chiefly by theatre's immediacy. A live performance can be cut and shaped to audience responses even as it is performed. Phase two will better facilitate this. As workers take responsibility for their own performances, they can incorporate audience responses into the current or next performance, in a continuous communication loop. Our own work on this topic also has a phase two: unfortunately due to space constraints we were unable to discuss here an explicitly dialogic theatre model, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979). In a follow-up paper we will assess and critique this Brazilian theatre pioneer's work in detail, assessing its usefulness in employee relations.

Flexibility

Our blueprint for workplace theatre includes broadening participation, shelving (at least partially) aesthetic criteria to focus on communication, and facilitating ongoing dialogue. We make, however, a final qualification to the “blueprint” approach. Workplace theatre, Filewod and Watt point out, works best when it “invents its own forms for its individual circumstances” (p. 20). Like any public relations project, good research is paramount. Discover what employees *want* from workplace theatre. The advantage of inclusive, workshop-style theatre production is that it is of itself a research tool. Scripts are produced in consultation with or directly by employees, or at the very least mapped out by professional scriptwriters from data gathered in extensive interviews and surveys, as occurred in the Harmony case.

Conclusion

Theatre practiced in a participatory, functional, and dialogic way is transformational at many levels: first, it gives instruction in communication and teamwork skills; second, it provides immediate opportunity to put those skills into action (learning by doing); third, it opens up unconventional communication opportunities (by levelling participants—all are novice actors, from CEO to janitor); fourth, it unites employees by superimposing a shared goal onto groups who may previously have viewed themselves as working in unconnected, competing, or conflicting roles; fifth, it provides opportunities to thematically articulate communication problems; sixth, it encourages the suggestion of solutions in order to give the play shape and conclusion; seventh, it provides opportunity to test those solutions by acting them through; eighth, changes can be incorporated immediately into a new “script” during both rehearsals and performance.

Participative workplace theatre doesn't just meta-communicate about problems, but actually enacts new communication channels; it is simultaneously training in, and means of, self-expression. It is live, immediate, active,

engaging, and confronting. And, as the Harmony case illustrates, results can be dramatic.

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