

Chapter 14

Applied Theatre: A Novel Technique for Helping Organizations to Manage Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes applied theatre as an innovative and novel intervention for helping individuals and organizations to manage change. Applied theatre engages participants to understand their emotional responses to change and how they might respond more effectively to it. These processes are discussed through the legacy of Aristotle's ideas on emotional participation and Boal's Forum Theatre on engagement with groups and their empowerment. After a brief introduction to applied theatre methodology, the chapter presents key insights from interviews with five directors of applied theatre that highlight how they use their skills and competence in emotional awareness and emotional management in order to shape the emotional states of participants and achieve learning to cope with change. Finally, the authors highlight recent studies suggesting applied theatre can have positive impacts within a broad array of settings.

INTRODUCTION

Organisational change has often been described drawing upon theatre or dramaturgical metaphors, such as change being about a series of acts, individuals acting out particular roles, and the change context described as a scene (McFarland, 2004; Tichy & Sherman, 1993). This in part reflects a greater appreciation for the non-linearity and unpredictability of change processes and the human drama that often unfolds when organisations undertake large scale transformation. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's seminal work on managing change detailed in her 1990 book, *When Giants Learn to Dance*, is similarly a recognition of how organisational change might be usefully perceived through more aesthetic perspectives. Ford (2008) suggests successful continuous change is more akin to a process of improvisation. Work of this

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6155-2.ch014

sort has tended to perceive theatre as a metaphor for the change process. Carlson (1996) for example, emphasised strong connections between the *aesthetic drama* of theatre and the *social drama* of life. Whilst Goffman (1959) in, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, described social behaviour as a stream of performances by actors who both rehearse and enact their roles.

More recently however, drama and theatre have moved more centre stage in change management as organisations look for more innovative ways to help managers and employees navigate the challenges of change (Coopey, 2007; Mirvis, 2005). This mirrors the increasing use of organisation theatre in executive education and development more broadly (Badham et al., 2016; Fraser & Bryans, 2018). Berggren & Soderlund (2011) for example, in their recent review of management education, cited organizational knowledge theatres as one of six key learning practices used in executive education alongside reflection reports, personal learning contracts, roundtable discussions, live cases, and action-oriented thesis work. Coopey (2007) similarly offers two examples where theatre techniques are applied in business settings. The first describes the use of a drama workshop on an executive education programme designed to develop the relational skills of managers. The second was where a theatre workshop was used as part of an organisation-wide change programme.

This chapter explores the role of applied theatre as a powerful tool for bringing about change in individuals and organisations. It introduces ideas from writers such as Aristotle and Boal, who sought to explain how theatre is able to achieve change through engaging the emotions and experiences of participants. Applied theatre is a form of artistic expression where participants take an active part in developing and performing drama. We start by introducing readers to some key ideas about how theatre can be used to achieve change and social organisation. We present insights from interviews with five theatre directors that explore these ideas in working with individuals and groups, particularly the importance of emotional engagement.

WHAT IS APPLIED THEATRE IN ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXTS?

There are a number of texts on organisational change that suggest incorporating performance art in implementing change can offer many advantages (Jabri, 2012; Watkins & Marsick, 1993; Zander & Zander, 2000). The use of acting as a means to enact organisational change is based on the notion that like role plays and self-reflection exercises, acting is another form of experiential learning. However, it is particularly powerful as it is a very effective means by which individuals are able to tap into the tacit knowledge they hold about themselves and the world they occupy. Organization theatre refers to applied theatre in organisational contexts. It is a collection of techniques that are used to assist in managing change in organisations. These techniques are designed to create an awareness of the problems facing the organisation and stimulate or motivate action for change (Clark & Managham, 2004).

Some authors describe how staging a dramatic performance that enacts particular organisational problems can provide a stimulus for audience reflection (organisational members) that subsequently guides collective problem solving and corrective action (Coopey, 2007). However, more participatory techniques have more recently received greater attention which require organisational members involved in both *creating* and *enacting* the drama or piece of theatre. Mirvis (2005) points out that there are a number of parallels between the design of change processes and theatrical performances. Whilst managing change often has a plan, theatrical performances require a script, staff in the organisation are the cast, whilst steps in the change process can be thought of as proceeding through a series of scenes.

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