Constructive Games People Play

A combined Transactional Analysis, Applied Improvisation and Solutions Focused approach to transformational conversations

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This article describes a fresh approach to Organisational Development (OD) that combines three strands: Transactional Analysis, Applied Improvisation and Solutions Focus. We discuss this approach with particular reference to helping organisations both survive and thrive in response to adversity by improving relationships, enhancing creativity and developing solution-building capability. We describe the core concepts of Constructive Games People Play and provide several examples of how it has been successfully applied.

Seeking Constructive Interactions

Organisations that thrive in challenging times are those that are realistic, consolidate around core values and improvise.

A study in Harvard Business Review (Coutu 2002) shows that these organisations are capable of facing a downturn in the market because they quickly recognise and respond to what's happening. By drawing strength from their practices – independent of market conditions – they improvise, which is to say they find ways to make things happen even without their usual level of resources.

So how is that done? And how can OD practitioners serve their clients to enable them to flourish by accessing these capacities? This article shows how we create more useful interactions within organisations, to encourage people to respond and adapt with increasing skill to whatever they encounter – to play more constructive games.

The Three Strands – TA, AI and SF

We combine Transactional Analysis (TA), Applied Improvisation (AI) and Solutions Focus (SF), into an approach which we call "Constructive Games People Play". These three component strands offer valuable ways to improve relationships, enhance creativity and build effective solutions respectively. Combining these strands amplifies the power of each; helping organisations create strong working relationships capable of responding to unforeseen challenges with resilience and creativity.

Let's start with the notion that conversation can be a fundamental generator of change. By encouraging more productive conversations between people in an organisation, we can create profound organisational change. In work ranging from individual coaching to consulting and implementing projects at a strategic level we always aim to encourage more constructive and generative interactions.

The benefits of taking the kind of systemic, interactional approach that these three disciplines encourage include:

- Better relationships leading to more productive projects.

- More authentic conversations – more useful and pertinent communications, so people are clearer about what to do, what they have done, and what they will do next.

• The development of "Improvisational Management" skills and attitudes at all hierarchical levels.

Transactional Analysis (TA)

There are many versions of TA concepts and many different ways to use them. We utilise a Co-creative TA approach (Summers and Tudor 2000) which emphasises developing awareness of how we relate to others and encourages:

• Choiceful Adult behaviour.

• Adult to Adult dialogue.

• Playing constructive creative games with colleagues.

• Finding new ways forward in adversity.

Some TA approaches leave an impression of psychological games as negative and manipulative. Co-creative TA revives Eric Berne's (Berne 1964) original notion that Games can be positive as well as negative. Games are repetitive patterns of interaction that lead

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to negative or positive outcomes depending on the implicit and explicit exchanges between people.

An understanding of negative games may still, of course, be valuable. It can, for example, help us to spot and interrupt blocks to improvisation; e.g. "Why don't you - Yes but" is a negative game where an individual presents a problem and proceeds to reject (usually unsolicited) offers of advice leading to a demoralising sense of hopelessness for the 'helpers' and secret triumph for the person with the 'unsolvable' problem.

"I Want your Intelligence"

An effective coaching conversation is an example of a constructive game. The client and the coach take turns to speak, following a structure or format ('rules of the game') facilitated by the coach. The format is designed to enable the client to 'do something

"An effective coaching conversation is an example of a constructive game"

different' that may not have been top of the list before the coaching began.

For example, a senior manager described one of her direct reports as overly appeasing. After being introduced to our approach, she told her report, "I want your intelligence and initiative – not your deference." The result was a shift in behaviour from the member of staff, who began solving problems more assertively, both independently and in dialogue with the manager and other team colleagues. This was exactly what was needed to deal with the new and complex issues they were facing.

The change in the game for the manager (within the rules of her organisation's cultural climate) was to stop complaining or dictating to the direct report, which in turn changed the colleague's involvement from one of over-conformity to one of creative engagement.

Changing the Game within a Coaching Relationship helps Karen

Here Graeme describes his experience from a coaching session:

Karen shared her pre-occupation with an image of herself as the "work wife" to her boss and wanted to explore this further with me. She expressed frustration that she did most of the "housework" while her boss claimed the glory. Karen and I had played a mild version of "Why don't you - Yes but" in a previous coaching session. My plan was to therefore avoid making helpful suggestions

and instead invite Karen to explore her ambivalence about her situation. I did this by asking her about the pros and cons of this arrangement with her boss. She expressed the cons as her frustration and lack of visibility and therefore recognition. When discussing the pros she realised that being a selfless supporter of others felt congruent with her Christian values. At this point I empathised with her internal struggle and asked what, if any, support she needed. Having taken more ownership of her struggle, she was then open to discussing her options with me as a partner in a positive cooperative game rather than an adversarial "Yes-But" game player. This positive, constructive game between us provided a secure base within our coaching relationship for Karen to make effective changes in her identity and behaviour at work.

Another negative Game is "Ain't it Awful?". Here two or more people engage in a negative conversation, apparently expressing distress but covertly gaining satisfaction from their shared misery. In the following example Paul describes how a negative game of "Ain't it Awful" was transformed into a constructive game.

Changing the Meeting Game

The manager in this case reported that her meetings often began (and indeed continued) on a negative note. In an atmosphere of moaning and blame, she was finding it nearly impossible to shift the conversations from such 'problem-talk' into discussion of what was wanted and what could be done.

"changing the game – from moaning to relishing "

As an experiment, she decided to start the next meeting by changing the game – from moaning to relishing – with a warm-up round of introductions, with each participant invited to state one thing that they were looking forward to during the day. She tried this and reported that the meeting was transformed. It turned out that her colleagues were delighted to engage in 'solution-talk' – they simply needed to be nudged out of their habits and into a more constructive way of working together.

Applied Improvisation (AI)

The previous example illustrates a key improvisational principle – that of making good use of available ingredients. In this case, this included an accepted structure of meetings as games in which people take turns to offer contributions to the group, and their willingness to use (when freshly invited) existing skills of reporting forthcoming positive events that were already in mind.

Improvisation is probably best known as a theatrical discipline - with improvised comedy sketches popularised by TV shows such as Whose Line Is It Anyway – or as a musical technique heard mostly in jazz. The principles, skills and tools that the likes of Josie Lawrence and Paul Merton use to generate their performances are now increasingly applied within organisations. As president of the Applied Improvisation Network (AIN 2010, accessed 30th Jan 2010), Paul has been leading new developments in team collaborations, creative thinking and bringing out the improvisational skills that are too often suppressed in organisational settings.

Solution Focus (SF)

This skill of shifting conversations from problem-talk to solution-talk (two surprisingly different games) can save you and the people around you a great deal of time, reduce stress and generate more positive collaborations. The switch from problem-talk to solution-talk is at the heart of the solutions-focused approach (Jackson and McKergow 2007; Jackson and Waldman 2010, accessed 30th Jan 2010) and is highly consistent with the Co-creative TA emphasis on describing and promoting healthy relationships.

Improvisational Management

When faced with problems arising from the current economic crisis, organisations can no longer rely upon what worked in the past. In order to respond to fresh challenges, staff must both collaborate and improvise. Our integrated approach therefore seeks to both develop effective working relationships and improvisational attitudes and skills that can be applied to find effective solutions in new situations.

We use the term "Improvisational Management" to encapsulate this approach to working within organisations. You can identify Improvisational Management when you see managers explicitly focusing on making the best of what's available, as in our example

above. It's apparent, too, when managers relish being in the moment - here and now – showing less focus on the past (worrying about their mistakes) or the future (how people might react unfavourably). Instead, they bring their attention to the current situation; responding to events as they unfold with solution-building capability.

TA, AI and SF combined in practice

So where do TA, AI (Applied Improvisation) and SF most fruitfully overlap?

They share:

- An interest in identifying structures and deliberately putting those structures to good use.

- A pragmatic, actionistic approach.

- A positive and constructive approach.

- An emphasis on spontaneity in finding good solutions.

- An emphasis on utilising and amplifying "naturally" occurring solutions.

All three approaches offer guidelines for good practice without being formulaic. In this sense they are generative (i.e. they offer ways of creating solutions) rather than prescriptive (i.e. defining the solutions). This allows scope for managers to improvise solutions that are optimally adapted to work in very specific, often unique circumstances.

Another important shared feature of these approaches is that it is relatively easy to build skills in each, and to start using the skills early. They do not demand months of training or any familiarity with complicated theory or technical language. This makes them particularly appealing in organisations facing crisis and needing to improve their results quickly.

Finding a Simple Small Step in the Midst of Chaos

John heads a department in a financial services company thrown into chaos by the financial downturn. Massive re-organisation and daily setbacks mean that time is very pressured and the department struggles to maintain its ordinary functional role in the midst of externally and internally driven transformation. This has severely disrupted John's normal communication with his boss, who often fails to respond to John's emails on non-critical but nonetheless important issues.

In a coaching session, John is invited to explore how he can improvise in this situation. He considers various options and comes up with an improvised email system, in which each email he writes to his boss is as concise as possible, contains a clear and brief proposal for action and has "Yes or No?" in the title.

In a brief discussion with his boss they agreed to try it. The increased number of - albeit brief - responses from his boss helped John feel more secure and become more effective within this demanding context.

Promoting a Culture of Improvisational Management

"A crucial role of developers is to alert clients and colleagues to the games they are playing ''

We have found many leaders and managers instinctively understand the structures of games, are willing to play them, and are especially keen to play constructive games. The skills they can develop include recognising what games they find themselves playing – and which games their colleagues tempt them into playing; adjusting their moves improvisationally; and selecting or devising games that are more likely to deliver the results they desire.

A crucial role of developers is to alert clients and colleagues to the games they are playing, their structures and possibilities, and to the skills of making them more constructive.

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About the Author

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