HUMANNESS IN ORGANISATIONS

A Psychodynamic Contribution

edited by

Leopold Vansina

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CHAPTER TEN

Enacting one's way to new thinking: using critical incidents to vitalise authentic collaboration and learning

Thomas N. Gilmore and Nora I. Grasselli

Introduction

The work of developing one's leadership at all levels has become a major imperative as critical shifts have taken place in the wider culture away from hierarchy towards networks, from top down to widespread engagement with greater emphasis on innovation and creativity. Yet, we also need to take much more personal responsibility for our development in the flow of our work as well as in formal leadership programmes, and in both with richer links to the real work challenges. As Vansina suggests, people "need other trusted persons to open up self-confined reflections, and to enrich their perspectives to appreciate trends and practices" (this volume, p. xxiv).

E. M. Forster famously reminds us "Only connect" in his epigraph to his novel, *Howards End*, which takes up the challenges of human relationships across different identities and life perspectives. In response to the turbulence surrounding organisations, members have become more ginger, more guarded, reducing authentic collaboration and learning. Paradoxically, when we need more honest feedback and help, it has become harder to get it both in specialised development experiences and in the flow of work. This chapter describes the power of writing and working with critical incidents (Argyris & Schon, 1974) that link interpersonal dynamics with substantive stakes as a vehicle for learning about and from other and self and about the wider context. This method—in both formal development sessions and in the flow of work—can increase the ability to make sense of ambiguous situations, have richer responses, and the ability to enact them even amid the stress in ways that deepen authentic connections among the participants.

There has been a significant increase in "action learning" elements in development programmes where teams have real projects on which to apply some of the new tools and frameworks with attention to the team dynamics. However, even with projects, leadership development experiences still face the following biases.

Leadership development and business education may be overemphasising analysis at the expense of interpretative capabilities. Lester and Piore (2004) recommend that business schools

> actively stress the differences between the two approaches (analysis and interpretation) and highlight the conflicts between them, and discuss how they can be managed. [We need] to give students the skills that come through literary criticism, historical perspective, language learning, and artistic achievement—the kinds of humanistic, holistic studies that broaden and deepen interpretative capabilities. (p. 187)

More leadership writing suggests the power of linking to performance arts, the use of language, story telling.

There is too much emphasis on diagnosis and suggesting interventions as opposed to actually producing them. An analogy would be teaching tennis by having students observe a match (analogous to the case description), critique a shot selection, and suggest a better one without actually trying the recommended shot. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) have flagged this as the "knowing–doing" gap between analytical insights about what to do and the inability to enact the recommended behaviour. A simple example is the large gap between the advice given, when doing performance appraisal discussions, to first "create a non-defensive climate" and the challenge of actually doing so. In voicing challenging interpersonal dynamics, we make aspects of our being more visible.

There is not enough attention to the development of emotional intelligence and to unconscious aspects of leadership. Empathy, listening, joining, and working with feelings (Goleman, 1997) all have become essential for both well-being and for creating sustainable value from our work. Winnicott (Phillips, 1988, pp. 12–13) writes,

> A sign of health in the mind is the ability of one individual to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings and hopes and fears of another person: also to allow the other person to do the same to us.

The predominately cognitive frames in many of our interactions do not welcome exchanges in which one participant gives feedback as to the impact of the other on him or her. Yet, we know that we all have blind spots (Luft, 1969) that are not known to self, but are known to others.

There is too much external coaching of individuals as against engaging with both the key participants in challenging situations and the substantive issues. The growth in external coaching has reduced the responsibility we have to one another to "work through" difficulties, to stay in contact, to make sense of frustrating experiences, and learn.

Our unawareness of the discrepancy between "espoused theories"—what we say is our influence style or leadership practices—and what we actually do ("theory in use") (Argyris & Schon, 1974) prevents experimentation and learning to improve our effectiveness. In this chapter, we note the power of peers in a development experience or informally using critical incidents to see and experience viscerally the discrepancies and to modify their approaches accordingly.

Traditional case teaching cycles between diagnosis and proposed actions. Enactments (Grasselli & Gilmore, 2013), both in traditional case teaching and even more powerfully with participant critical incidents, can help close the "knowing–doing gap" (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000) through playing out scenes and getting feedback on impact and effectiveness (Figure 10.1).

In this chapter, we explore how participant-written critical incidents can serve to help one "act one's way to new thinking", as well as gain insights as to their blind spots—all in the context of real stakes in the effectiveness of some aspect of their work. Enactments are

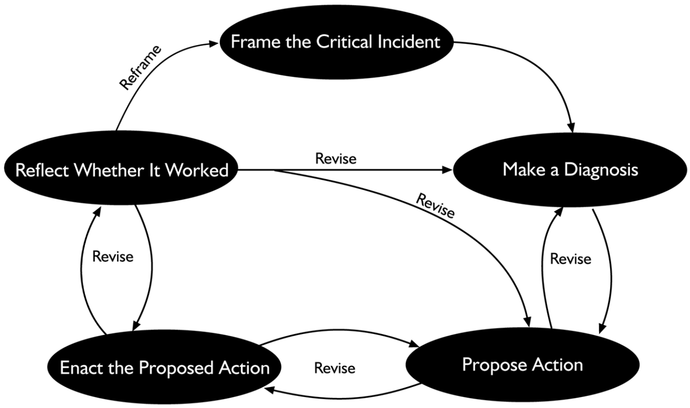

Figure 10.1. Action–learning cycle.

powerful. Minuchin and Fishman (1981, p. 78) write, “Inner self is entwined inextricably with social context. They form a single unit. To separate one from the other is . . . to stop the music in order to hear it more clearly”.

Yet, we need to acknowledge the felt risks in moving from proposing actions to their enactment. Stanley Milgram, famous for his experiments on authority, was curious about a cocktail party hunch that New Yorkers were rude. He assigned his Columbia students to ask strangers for their seats on crowded subway trains without giving a reason. A high number in the first group felt too fearful to even make the request. To explore that finding, he tried it himself.

> Dismissing his students’ fears, Dr. Milgram set out to try it himself. But when he approached his first seated passenger, he found himself frozen. “The words seemed lodged in my trachea and would simply not emerge,” he said in the interview. Retreating, he berated himself: “What kind of craven coward are you?” A few unsuccessful tries later, he managed to choke out a request. “Taking the man’s seat, I was overwhelmed by the need to behave in a way that would justify my request,” he said. “My head sank between my knees, and I could feel my face blanching. I was not role-playing. I actually felt as if I were going to perish.” (Luo, 2004)

In this chapter, we overview a component of a consulting and coaching programme that worked with real critical incidents that link interpersonal dynamics with substantive stakes. This challenged both faculty members and participants to take the risk of showing, not telling, in ways that make learning more visceral and deepen relationships.

The executive participants were asked to develop, in advance, a short write-up of a *critical incident*: "an actual encounter or challenging episode, one where you doubted your effectiveness or where you felt frustrated and less successful than you felt was possible". (See Appendix A for a write-up of the request.)

As Schon (1983) has noted in the context of professionals learning on the job, we learn most from situations in which we are both surprised and do not get what we want (Table 10.1).

This framework shows how often that it is only in hindsight, after people have not got what they wanted, that they understand insights about their tacit—and often unrealistic—expectations. Too often, when disappointed, we externalise the reason for the failure to get what we want as about the other ("fundamental attribution error"). Only when we let the disappointment in do we then develop richer strategies resulting from disappointment and surprise. In the state of being puzzled, frustrated, one is ready to explore alternative

Table 10.1. The role of surprise and learning.

	Not surprised	Surprised
Get what I want	*Low learning*, one's core skill.	*Low learning*, because one gets what one wants whether one attributes it to luck (hence no learning) or to one's skill, but rarely do we reflect when we have achieved our desired results.
Don't get what I want	*Low learning*, high externalisation of the reasons why we were unsuccessful. The constraint was immovable, the politics were all against it, etc.	*High learning*, yet an uncomfortable place to be. What went wrong? Why did it not turn out the way I expected? What might I have done differently and with what possible result?

approaches and to reflect on one's default patterns under stress—for example, to talk too much, to withdraw, etc. Zaleznik (1967, pp. 59, 61), in a classic article on leadership, notes,

> men who want power and responsibility are especially vulnerable to episodes in which reality does not conform to their wishes or intentions . . . these episodes [of disappointment] may be occasions for accelerated personal growth . . . If disappointment and the pains attendant on it are denied or otherwise hidden from view, the chances are great that the individual will founder on the unresolved conflicts at the center of his experience with disappointment.

The requested critical incidents are not at the level of major life setbacks that Zaleznik is exploring, but do involve real intentions with outcomes that disappointed them and they are still puzzled as to why. This keeps the link between an interpersonal frame and real stakes.

Following the instructions received in advance (see Appendix A), each participant has to make decisions about what episode to explore, reflecting over their frustrating experiences, having to revisit whether they really could have been more effective, or was the outcome overdetermined. Thus, even the request for a critical incident where one was disappointed in a supportive climate creates a beginning for working through.

Once they have set on an episode, they have to bracket the incident: when did it begin and end? Who are the actors? What information about the context is relevant for understanding the complexity of the case? This is active practice in pulling for help from others, a concrete instance of E. M. Forster's advice to "only connect" when we too often withdraw or commiserate with colleagues rather than learn. It also builds a key skill for getting useful help: being able to frame a situation quickly with the right amount of detail. This framing of the critical incidents adds an important element to the participants' learning.

When given a request to write cases that contain experiences that were frustrating or unsuccessful, feelings of shame might be evoked. The learner's anxiety is increased: how will my incident compare with others? How will I appear in front of my fellow learners in this slice-of-life situation? If used in company development programmes, there can be political complexities of revealing issues about leaders that are known to one's classmates as well as the challenges of confidentiality. We discuss strategies to deal with this later in the chapter.

In our experience, faculty members need to anticipate two responses—a minority of participants not doing a case, or submitting a thinly masked case in which the case writer was actually effective. Yet, as we will discuss, both of these can be occasions of learning about self and others as the engagement with the critical incidents deepens.

In addition to student anxieties, faculty members also have to deal with not knowing the case as well as the case writers sitting in the room; not having a fully applicable theory, not having "the answers" to critical incidents as they most probably would for a published case study. The deeper anxiety is not knowing whether the cases will "work" as learning vehicles. Can the faculty members create a climate that is "good enough" to contain the emotions that might be stirred up? These all add an edge and a level of realism to the engagement with the mix of peer anxieties and dynamics with the faculty.

Using participant-based cases for learning

The critical incident work with enactments is composed of the following steps.

Pre-session

1. Setting the ground rules and eliciting the critical incidents (see Appendix A for the request).
2. Faculty analysis of all the critical incidents and selecting one or two for full group exploration and getting the case writers' permission to use their cases (we have never had them not agree).
3. Assigning participants the common case for the full group and 3–4 additional cases of peers to review, along with tips for reading cases—see Appendix B. We recommend participants to "pencil-read" the cases—that is, to underline words, imagery, analogies, and sentences that they found intriguing or important and write comments in the margins with their questions, hypotheses, or emotions/experiences while reading the case. Nabokov (1980, p. 3) has advised readers of novels in ways that are relevant to approaching others' cases:

> [O]ne should notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes after the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected. If one begins with a ready made generalization, one begins at the wrong end . . . we should . . . study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know.

Note that the frame here is to enter one another's cases with a minimum of judgement (aided by knowing that others are reading one's own case) and in a more associative and interpretative frame, jotting down "hunches" or "hypotheses". Trist (2001, p. xxiii) describes a process of *tuning in* that applies both to reading others' cases and being open to others' reading of one's own case. It

> involves the ability to get in touch with new situations . . . to get a feel for their texture. . . . One has . . . to make sense of it . . . in emotional as well as cognitive terms. . . . and allow it to come in contact with what is already in oneself. . . . If one's defenses are too rigid one is not going to allow this to happen so that the novel is likely to be screened out.

In the session

1. Introduction to the overall process and full group enactment to illustrate the method with the assigned common case. We have been tempted to use a case from a previous session with a different group that has been particularly powerful, but know it makes a difference for the faculty to be at risk and for the group to feel and know this is a peer's case even if the identity of the case writer is not revealed. It begins the norm of the risk taking needed to deepen learning.
2. Mini-teams are assigned to work up a set of cases in smaller groups, so that after the full group session every case writer gets a chance to engage with their narrative, each rotating through roles of coaching the overall process, engaging with one's own case, and peer coaching and engagement with other's cases.
3. An optional component is to learn from patterns in the critical incidents, especially when they are clustered within some critical

relationship—for example, marketing and production, headquarters and divisions, or within key change challenges.

4. A summary session in how to build this mode of quick enactments into the flow of everyday work as a form of rapid prototyping to link head and heart in understanding a complex situation and acting into it, or in a reflective, after-action review to learn.

We discuss these steps and the methods for maximising learning by illustrating the process with the following critical incident that was produced in the context of senior executives in change and coaching roles participating in a university-sponsored development programme.

An illustrative case

Situation

As a family business consultant, I am working with a business founder who is preparing for retirement as leader of his highly successful manufacturing company. At present, he leads the company, together with his son, who is second in command. His son wants to take over, but is frustrated because the company's organisation is so lean that there is almost no staff between the top management (father and son) and the workforce. The son feels the need to build a team with key skills for long-term success.

My strategy

My diagnosis is that the son has a chance to succeed as the new leader if he is supported by a team in which important roles are played by a human resources director and a financial director, thus freeing the son to be more of an operational managing director. I raised the issue during a meeting with father and son.

The results

At the next meeting, the father comes up with a solution. He has contacted two "senior consultants". These are people in their sixties who have become consultants after retirement. The father argues that these people are very experienced and very cheap. In his opinion, these two "senior consultants" can substitute for the team his son wants to build. Moreover, he thinks they can act as mentors for his son.

I am totally surprised by this initiative, and do not react.

Why it was frustrating

I still feel very frustrated by this turn of events, because I know this is neither a good solution for the family business nor for the succession process. The founder actually takes advantage of my suggestion to strengthen the management team by appointing people who are close to him and probably will not help to smooth the process of succession. Taken by surprise, I did not react adequately.

Introduction to the session

The session begins with a very brief framing and moves rapidly to engaging and enacting with the chosen case to model a key practice of "rapid prototyping" as a mode of learning and getting feedback. This draws on the traditions of "socio drama"—show *vs*. tell—and improvisation, and Weick's advice:

> In inexplicable times, people have to keep moving. Recovery lies not in thinking and then doing, but in thinking while doing and in thinking by doing. No one has the answers. Instead, all we have going for us is the tactic of stumbling into explanations that work and talking with others to see whether what we have stumbled into is in fact part of an answer. (Weick, 1995)

Enactments of critical incidents

The voluntary case writer is brought up to the front and everyone is invited to briefly reread this critical incident and their written notes on the case. Depending on the amount of time, each participant can be invited to think about the following questions while rereading the critical incident.

- What appear to be the dilemmas or issues that are the focus of this critical incident?
- Timelining: what are the key moments (either in the encounter, leading up to it, or in the follow-up) in which you think the case writer could have acted in such a way as to take the case in a very different direction? With what possible consequences to his goals? To the relationships? Why do you think those moments are the most fateful?
- What is the influence of other stakeholders who are mentioned or implied?
- What title (perhaps playful) would you give this critical incident?

We strongly recommend against a full group discussion at this time about the critical incident and/or patterns in the critical incidents. Both the faculty members and the participants can easily collude in a mutual intellectual defence, because, as Milgram noted, enactments are anxiety provoking for all. For the faculty members, unlike situations where they are using a published case, they are in new territory themselves, confronting a slice of life someone has shared and knows more about than they do.

Before enacting one or two key moments in the case, an option is to ask small huddles of the participants to select one question to ask the case writer. We suggest limiting the number of questions, as we find getting more facts is often a defence against the anxiety of taking action. Developing better questions in a coaching frame is another area of learning, as the questions inevitably imply hypotheses about the case that reveal the enquirer's frameworks. Here, we find it useful to challenge the group: "Is this a real question, or are you making a recommendation for the case writer?" Furthermore, the questions inevitably have some aspects of projection where we put some of our own edge of awareness traits into the other's case. Faculty members, taking up the role of the director, instruct the case writer not to answer action-implying recommendations, as those are better explored via the enactments than in an analytical discussion.

Faculty members can list participants' suggestions about potential fateful moments where the case writer might have acted (not yet described) in ways that could have made a significant difference to the outcome before the key episode, during the episode, or after, as follow-up. These can be placed on a timeline to engage the case writer in choosing where in the flow he or she would like to explore different approaches.

For example in the case above, it might look like the following sketch.

- Before the meeting, ensuring that the son is attending and that there is a shared agenda.
- Coaching the son to be more effective as his own advocate for this strategy rather than the consultant doing the pitch.
- Early on in the meeting, blocking too much discussion of it if the son is absent, and not mentioning the case writer's surprise.
- Following the meeting, a session with the son or with the father to reflect on why the consultant was silent and how that might link to issues of the effectiveness of the father's approach.

We recommend giving the case writer considerable authority, commensurate with the risks, and then picking the moment he or she wants to explore.

The enactment

The case writer briefly sets the scene and identifies the participants. In this instance, the meeting was in a conference room in the consultant/case writer's office. Right away, surprises emerged. It turns out that the case writer chose not to mention that the founder's wife was present, as was a female junior colleague of his. Participants can learn from reflecting on what they consciously and unconsciously left out of their own write-ups as these are explored with the full group case, as Sherlock Holmes does with the clue of the dog that did not bark.

We recommend that the case writer initially should take the role of the key "other" whom the writer was trying to influence—in this case, the founding entrepreneur. Invite the case writer to inhabit fully the other person's role, not to stereotype it or make it deliberately difficult for the person who is playing his role as the intervener. Useful advice comes from David Mamet (1991, p. 11), the playwright and film director. He advises against trying to show "character" but, rather, to employ the strategy of "What does the protagonist want? What does he or she do to get it?" Thus, the focus is on wants that participants can identify with and can be thinking of actions to bring it about, as opposed to trying to enact the other's style or personality. This keeps the focus on purposes and the range of ways we can achieve them in interpersonal encounters.

One of the values of this work is deepening one's feelings (empathy) and insights (perspective taking) for what might be going on with the person one is trying to influence (Shell & Moussa, 2007), in essence practising Winnicott's "ability . . . to enter imaginatively and accurately into the thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears of another person" (Phillips, 1988 pp. 114–115). Because the case writer has greater knowledge of the context, he or she can lead the improvisational dynamics of the others in the scene, including the one playing the case writer's role, which is a powerful way to imagine what purposes and motivations are in the other.

We suggest that the authority to cast fellow participants in the other roles in the enactment also be given to the case writer, rather than through asking for volunteers. When the group has been together for even a short time, these choices are unconsciously influenced by transference dynamics, whereby colleagues are seen as themselves but they are also suffused with the case writer's associations to other people: parents, colleagues, subordinates, friends, clients. Thus, the selections can amplify some of the case writer's out-of-awareness aspects of the dynamics. In this instance, the case writer selected classmates to play his role, his junior associate (a woman), and the entrepreneur's wife. One should present the participants as closely as possible to the real settings: across a table, making a phone call, behind a desk, etc. When the case writer revealed that the son was not actually present, we invited him to select a fellow participant to be the son and listen to the exchange as if a fly on the wall, but not be in the enactment. One can use this strategy for other absent stakeholders to stimulate imaginative thinking about other stakeholders' possible reactions. In many cases, we have been impressed with the way the people chosen fit with the roles they are cast in.

The faculty members then iterate that they are taking up an authoritative, theatre director role, being clear about beginnings and endings and able to interrupt at any one moment to explore what the different participants might be "thinking and feeling, but not saying"—much like the Argyris and Schon (1974) method of two-column case write-ups. At this point, the enactment begins. It can be helpful to have one of the parties actually walk into the scene to begin the meeting.

Increasing risks to increase learning

When the faculty stops the enactment at an interesting moment, several approaches can be used.

- Everyone can be invited to work quietly to think about what they are observing.
- All can be asked, if they were one of the roles in the exchange, what might they be thinking and feeling, but not saying.

This takes everyone out of the spectator role and often reveals how much more transparent we are (Luft, 1969), as people can accurately read when one of the enactors is angry, frustrated, disappointed, or pleased, even when the individual might not be aware of that feeling.

The most powerful approach is to invite each participant in the class to identify a different action that might be more effective in the exchange. But, when a participant began to share these "observer insights" with the entire group, we cut him off quickly and invited him to switch with the person playing the case writer/consultant and replay the engagement from the moment that is appropriate to the suggested approach.

For example, in the family business case, when a classmate said to the person playing the consultant/case writer, "You should involve the wife," we cut him off and had him switch chairs with the consultant to enact his strategy, not tell it. He was then required to enact behaviourally his advice to involve the founding entrepreneur's wife, and they continued the enactment. Sometimes, the new tactic enacted changes the trajectory; at other times it reverts quickly to the previous stuck dynamic. Note that, as per Schon's critical incident cycle diagram, we encourage the advice-giver to jump to *producing* the intervention, rather than just sharing his or her diagnosis or strategy. As Weick (1995) notes, we often learn more by acting into the ambiguity of the situation.

Everyone can then experience how this did or did not shift the dynamics, how it affected the founding entrepreneur, and what the wife had to say. This work resembles both improvisational theatre and socio-drama (Browne, 2007). In real life, we have to build our capacity to embrace uncertainty and co-create effective exchanges that advance our purposes, as opposed to being like lawyers in litigation, only asking questions to which we already know the answers.

While still in the large group, one can invite smaller groups (perhaps the assigned case teams) to take up a key moment in the full group case and experiment with different tactics. This gets everyone out of the spectator role, but produces a safer feeling in the smaller setting with everyone working in parallel. The class can look at the patterns of the results. For example, how many achieved the result they wanted (if it was some kind of negotiation)? The key is getting people to think beyond a single response and to develop the talents that chess players exhibit, namely to think of series of moves and countermoves, anticipating three or four moves ahead in a complex and changing game (Gilmore & Schall, 1996). Participants also deepen their appreciation for the dynamic of the exchange—one asking, the other responding—and whether and how to shift the dance or invite co-orientation to some larger shared interest.

In a recent use of this process, in the full group enactment of leaders of editorial and business, there were two major paths that were explored, one confrontational and one collaborative. When the group broke into six parallel groups to explore the same case, they came up with seven different, thoughtful strategies to explore, including several that co-orientated the pair to real strategic issues that they both faced (Mant, 1983).

Below, we touch on three specific dynamics—vicious circles, gingerness, and reparation—which can be explored via enactments.

1. *Breaking vicious circles.* What creates stalemates or "escalatory dynamics" (Hirschhorn, 2002), in which both parties feel trapped, and what might be some strategies for breaking that circle? In the enactment of this critical incident, it quickly became a dynamic of the consultant asking a question and eliciting a defensive response from the family business patriarch. What might be ways to break this circle? Even developing "recipes" for doing so (Senge, 1990) can be helpful, such as "say more" and tolerating a long silence (just as a lob in tennis gives one a chance to collect one's own thoughts and yields more information). Another tactic

invites the other to jointly explore the felt stuckness. "I feel we are stuck and wonder what is your view?" This invites both to a "balcony" perspective, where they might explore the secondary gain they or others get from the stalemate. Another tactic might be to adopt the other's point of view to see how that changes the exchange. Then the enactors and observers can step back into reflective mode to explore if and how it changed the dynamic.

2. *Care-taking or gingerness.* A major inhibitor in these exchanges is unilaterally protecting the other; what Harvey (1974) has named "the Abilene Paradox", where people do not tell each other what they really want. In enactments, people can try much more direct approaches to test what might be hearable or not and often discover that greater directness brings clarity to complex situations and deepens connections.
3. *Reparation*. Rifts in families and in organisations are costly, yet most organisations are filled with ruptured relationships that have significant organisational consequences. When one builds a connection with others that guarantees staying related despite difficult encounters—that you will be there to reflect, learn, and, if possible, repair a working alliance—greatly improves speed, connection, and creativity. In the above case, there might be a difficult reflective conversation with the son, which would raise questions about who the client is and how the consultant would handle the triangular dynamics (Gilmore, 2000). Having the courage to move closer in times of stress and building one's reparative skills are critical to preventing rifts that can persist and greatly degrade the resilience of a working group or unit. Some questions to ask could be: how did we get off track? What can we learn about our dynamic of working together? In this case, what would the next meeting with the founding entrepreneur be like if the consultant wanted to reflect on the meeting where he had felt "surprised and did not react?" This tactic is powerful in breaking vicious circles of misunderstandings. We often have insights after the encounter is over (what the French call "staircase wit"—what you think of walking down the stairs after an anxiety laden meeting), but we often do not take the next step to see how we might productively engage others with these afterthoughts. It is more likely that one will gossip and complain about the absent other to one's allies, which only widens the splits.

Parallel work in small groups to work all the assigned cases

After a full group enactment to illustrate the method, the participants meet in their assigned case groups so that each can receive help with their critical incident. It becomes more efficient as people move more quickly to a critical moment in the case and can mix discussion with brief enactments to help one another. In Appendix C, we provide an alternative method for giving every case writer some feedback and building the coaching skills of their colleagues. We recommend that each take up the coaching/facilitating/directing role in the small groups to support the group in learning how to deal with the critical incident and enactment methods. This way, the participants take away the method as a "tool", which enables them to use it in their daily work, that is, in peer coaching or supervising, in asking for help, in preparing for important encounters (future-orientated critical incidents), or reviewing self-experiences.

The faculty challenges in facilitating learning from enactments

1. *Dealing with participants who do not submit cases*. We respect the risks each participant takes to develop a case and do not think that those who do not contribute their own cases should be in groups with other case writers. We have had positive experiences with all non case writers being in a separate group and exploring their own difficulties in writing a case. Alternatively, sometimes this brings cases to the surface and enables them to receive and give feedback. Several powerful insights have come from these conversations that go deeper than "too busy", as people bring up some of their issues about being vulnerable, or explore their resistance to the faculty's request for a critical incident, which might mask their fear of being judged by their colleagues if they submit a case.
2. *Dealing with cases that are thinly veiled successes*. Usually, peers will challenge one another as to what grandiose outcome they had imagined when what they achieved is personally experienced as a failure, or invite the case writer to reflect on their difficulty in being vulnerable in the service of learning.
3. *Timing of interventions in the enactments*. As noted above, enactments of situations that come from participants put both the

faculty members and the participants into new territory that is created by the enactors. The challenge for the faculty is to balance intervening too soon, too slowly, or at the wrong time. In one situation, we intervened very early after a consultant had asked his second question of the "client" (case writer), and only three to four seconds had elapsed before the consultant then continued talking. When we froze the scene and enquired about what was happening, the client felt he was not given time to think about what he felt was a good question. The consultant reported feeling anxious because of the silence, imaging it was a stupid question, and flagged that as a significant issue for him. The whole class saw the power of tolerating silence as a "pull" strategy to elicit thoughts from the other and an important tool to signal that one had finished talking and expected the other to reply. Calm silence is powerful and difficult. It is hard to know in advance what dynamics will unfold. This puts the faculty members in a co-learning mode with the participants. It does not have to be perfect, and, taking the director's prerogative, the enactors can be asked to go back to an earlier moment that, as faculty, we might have missed and now see as more interesting to explore, or, if it is flagging, suggest fast forwarding to the summation at the end of the meeting to see what are the possible next steps. In our reflective note, which we discuss later in this chapter, we mention letting an unproductive dynamic go on too long.

4. *Pulled into the expert role*. A common dynamic when doing a variety of enactments in a learning group is that participants request the faculty members to enact what they would do. This is often the result of participants' frustration, and has the unstated subtext, "if you are so smart, why don't you show us the answer?" Note that this is very much in the traditional case-teaching paradigm, where the teacher knows the ins and outs of the case deeply and has a variety of teaching points to elicit from the case. In using critical incidents, the faculty needs to stay in the role of co-learner, drawing a variety of experiences out of the group. Faculty members can suggest approaches to explore from their own experience, but they should keep the focus on what each can learn, especially because in this work nothing is more important than the fit of any approach with the personality of the enactor. People have great skills in detecting insincerity in others and it is

often forgotten how easily one can be seen as insincere when trying a "technique."

5. *Keeping tuned into the substantive stakes in the critical incidents and the related psychodynamics*. Often, the process can become too engaging at the cost of noticing key substantive issues that the case is dealing with. For example, in the above case, there are critical stakes for the business in the succession as well as for the family dynamics. Are there parallel process issues in play? Might the consultant be leading the founder towards his proposed solution (as the son's advocate), thus paralleling the founder's selling his proposed approach? Might the father be acting out rather than connecting with feelings that his son (and/or coach) does not think he has the time or capacity to develop? Faculty members have to keep in mind the level of depth that is appropriate for the setting, but always should be looking for the real substantive stakes and possible connections to the interpersonal dynamics.
6. *Faculty modelling reflects insights from their experience.* Faculty members (and working in pairs is highly recommended) often see issues, dynamics, and options after the stress of the here and now dynamics are over (staircase wit). In the above case describing the meeting between the entrepreneur and the consultant over the son's role, the faculty (the authors) had better ideas after the class had ended and they were able to share those thoughts with the class in a reflective note. This powerfully illustrates the challenges and risks for the faculty. With published cases that one teaches again and again, the lessons drawn from one presentation can be applied the next time one uses the case (Grasselli & Gilmore, 2013). With critical incidents, there will always be new facts and new dynamics that lead to new insights about oneself and the other from the dynamic. Working with participant cases puts the faculty into Bion's (1967, pp. 279–281) stated stance of "without memory or desire", connected to the uniqueness of the particular dynamics. Furthermore, given the similar stance to Heifetz and Linsky's (2002) case-in-point teaching, where everything in the class dynamics is used as material for learning, the dynamics among faculty members and with the class are fair game. Below is a portion of our reflective note back to the participants that displays our insights about our working dynamics, including possible parallel dynamics to the case itself. In writing

up the case, we noted that our reflective note in the last two imagined questions violated our espoused advice not to respond to pull from participants to enact what we might have said as the case writer/consultant.

Reflective note

"In the family business case, we were too slow and timid in breaking the early dynamic of questions from the consultant and defensive responses from the entrepreneur to pose the challenge of how one could break those cycles in real situations. Our own dynamics—as a faculty pair comprising an older white male and a junior female—might have paralleled the dynamics between the pair of consultants in the case. The female might have seen the dynamic earlier, but could have been inhibited by her junior status in ways that resembled the junior consultant's role in the enactment. Also, gender dynamics might have been reflected: women's voices were not heard; the wife was marginalised by not being included in the case write-up and by not having her engage in the enactment. In the debriefing, it became clear that the wife had been the link that brought the consultants into the engagement. The senior faculty member focused more on the dyadic encounter of consultant and entrepreneur (both men)."

Given our task of teaching the technique, we might have stopped the case after the second question and response and invited both observers and those in the enactment to jot down what they were thinking and feeling, but not saying. That can be a powerful way of at least connecting with ideas and energy that are not appearing in the exchange. We might have introduced strategies/tactics to alter the dynamic—they are always easier to invent cognitively than they are to produce under stressful conditions.

A few responses we thought of for the consultant are as follows.

Consultant: "In this exchange I find myself closely identifying with your son. It might be way off-base, but I wondered if it would be useful for me to share some of these hunches?" Let a silence emerge, and if the father says "All right", then some of one's hidden thoughts and feelings can be shared.

Or: "In our conversation, it has not been easy for me to present a counter-argument. You are very persuasive, yet I have an uneasy feeling that I will be compliant (both in my consultancy role and in imagining your son's point of view) rather than really committed to this strategy. It is as if there has been no space for exploring a variety of paths that will respond to each of your interests. Does that resonate with you?"

Again, there might be a long silence that could break the quick question and answer exchanges. If there is some positive response, one then could say something like "I have a hunch that if you and your wife communicate your thoughts about what you want for the company, for yourselves, and for your son, say, ten years in the future, we can then more productively discuss what might be the most effective ways to get to that place."

Points to keep in mind

While critical incidents can provide a great venue for analysis and development of projected strategies, it is useful to illuminate some difficulties that are associated with the process.

- *Enactments cannot be standardised.* However, the process can be accelerated with practice. "The lesson from critical incidents is to be discovered each time rather than suggested in a teaching note or outlined in the case writer's head" (Gilmore & Schall, 1996).
- *High preparation costs.* The lack of standardisation results in a relatively time-consuming preparation and involvement from the participants as well as the faculty. Faculty members have to learn to be comfortable in situations where they do not have all the answers and do not know the case better than the participants.
- *The challenge of linking the micro-learnings to broader issues and competency developments.* Participants can become overwhelmed with the stream of opportunities in these cases and the many ways in which people can misunderstand one another. Given the increased pace in organisations, how does one select which opportunities to focus on? People can be overwhelmed if they are not helped to see the broader development of resilience and ability to be present and how valuable it can be to develop tactics that can interrupt unproductive exchanges.

Enactments in development sessions as a transitional vehicle to their use in organisational life

In the flow of one's work, one can ask a colleague to be "the other" in a forthcoming challenging encounter and, after a brief description of the context, jump into the enactment—perhaps each taking both roles to intensify the key goals of the parties. In organisations, this is most likely to happen with sales pitches, hearings, or press conferences, but can be powerfully extended to a much wider variety of challenging encounters, even internal ones, such as an appraisal, that so often create tensions rather than developmental insights.

It can be helpful to encourage colleagues to use you as an imagined other when they come to you with a difficult issue, as against just commiserating. For example, when someone complains about someone's absence, you might interrupt quickly to ask, "What did so-and-so say when you gave them that feedback?" The usual response is, "I haven't told them", or "I can't tell them." Then you might invite him to enact some options for making it possible for the other to hear and safer for your colleague to risk saying it.

Writing up a critical incident in one's journal can be a way of getting some distance and pushing oneself beyond cognitive insights to actually imagine what one might have said, and the other's possible responses, so that one is building up a richer repertoire for situations that one finds stressful. For example, not being assertive enough across an authority boundary might be a pattern and, in the journal, one can invent possible responses for future situations. Putting in the journal imagined critical incidents that an injured or angry other might have written can be powerful. We often suggest that people write up the same critical incident that they have experienced, but from the point of view of the other in the case. What were their frustrations, tactics, projections, etc.?

Requesting critical incidents linked to key organisational issues—such as headquarters and field, shop and engineering, marketing and production—can illuminate concretely some of the difficulties and possible changes as well as build the skills to manage those boundaries more effectively. When finished with first-year paediatric interns (Center for Applied Research (CFAR), 1995), one sees patterns of their challenging collaborations: among peers over sign-out at the end of shifts, giving and getting feedback, and dealing with parents of very sick children, pushing for more feedback from attending physicians. In work with foundation programme officers, an enactment produced deep insights about the "gift giving" dynamics in the world of philanthropy (CFAR, 2003). In work with engineering and production in a microchip factory, the sets of critical incidents revealed the deep tensions in the critical work alliances between the two functions (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1989). In an annual executive development programme run by two European business schools, we also found patterns in organisational dynamics that reflected current business issues. The 2008 economic crisis brought up multiple cases in the following year in the context of financial reports, or a year later in changes in C-level management structures.

In a leadership development programme of a global pharmaceutical company, writing critical incidents was so anxiety provoking for the participants that the faculty decided to have them submit "typical incidents" as something between published cases and critical incidents. This way, middle management participating in the programme had the opportunity to try for themselves situations that were either typical for the setting (e.g., turnover was very high among the field force, thus one of the typical incidents was the management of a team gathering for a meeting after one or more people had left the team) or led to turmoil in the organisation that was never overtly discussed among managers (e.g., one manager went to a competitor and took all the "good people" with her). Here, critical incident work borders on organisational development and change workshops. Critical incidents are a window into the complex situations that people experience, and they often reveal new emerging challenges facing an institution, industry, or profession in transition.

Conclusions

The critical incident process offers both development contexts and their use in ongoing organisational work, links the head and the heart, offsets the excessively rational–analytical bias, and focuses on thinking as opposed to acting in organisational life. We see the following advantages in using critical incidents produced by participants in both development contexts and in the flow of organisational work.

- *Reality.* Critical incidents are from real experiences. They communicate a rich sense of the context of someone's work that greatly helps peer coaching and development. When used in formal development programmes, especially early on, they convey a much richer sense of the roles each one has as well as contexts for further networking and exchange of advice.
- *No one best way.* There is no one good answer, no one best way for resolving a problem presented by a critical incident. The variety of outcomes allows for alternative strategies (Gilmore, 2000). The development of alternative strategies enhances participants' range of approaches.
- *The power of "small leadership"* (Sullivan, Gilmore, & Blum (2010). In the context of excessive grandiosity in the leadership literature, critical incidents illustrate the power of "present moments" (Stern, 2004) to alter both working alliances and the unfolding of events.
- *Developing a repertoire.* Participants develop resilience as they become more comfortable with ambiguity and learn to trust their gut in risking a variety of different approaches. They develop more "in the moment" ways of enquiring from the other, asking for time to think an issue over, inviting the parties to jointly explore their context and the pressures each are under, etc.
- *Empathy.* Participants learn to empathise and take other people's points of view. Empathy has recently been identified as a strategic issue in business that is more connected to the customers' experiences and requires a higher emotional intelligence in order to align the human resources in the organisation. It is a chance to see key roles (function, level), positions (top, middle, frontline), and professions from the inside rather than as a spectator—which often leads to stereotyping or caricature. When talking about "others", we often label them as a "resistor to change"; we rarely say that directly to their face, and neither do others describe themselves in that way, usually seeing their actions as protecting some important (to them) value.
- *Enhancing peer consultation on both substantive and process issues.* Especially in residential programmes, presenting critical incidents early in a programme provides slice-of-life views of participants that enable them to connect with each other around both change strategies and substantive issues that critical incidents bring to the surface.

- *Active practice.* Enactments are valuable because they focus on the difficulties we have in producing a strategy (the knowing–doing gap referred to earlier). Many times, people have in their minds an effective strategy, such as creating a non-defensive climate or reassuring the other that "we have shared goals". Yet, when these strategies are enacted, they do not produce the desired result. Others observing one try out the framing of an important meeting can give feedback that someone comes across very differently from what he or she might have intended. Voice is linked to presence and authority, but is too little a focus of our development. Coach to actors, Patsy Rodenberg (1992, p. 4) notes,

  > As soon as we open our mouths and speak we are judged. Instant assumptions are made about us by others. . . . Do we sound enfranchised or disenfranchised? . . . Do we sound as though we should be in charge or just subordinate? Do we sound as though we should be heard and answered?

- *Rapid prototyping for innovation*. As new products and services are developed, enactments, even with props, can deepen the sense of context and learning about the value of some new offering, taking in potential customers' point of view on the product.

Leadership and followership are more fluid, increasingly more improvisational and depends on the ability of people to move quickly from initiating to following in order to build on the work of a colleague (Weick, 1993). In today's organisations, people have to flexibly adapt to build on colleagues' strengths to accomplish the task at hand.

As with improvisation, organisations need a creative edge in relationships, but always within a superordinate valuing of the collective and co-operative task. Increasingly, the strategies and planning scenarios of organisations do not produce a definitive script for others to execute. As with improvisation, there is more real-time weaving of the two, acting and adjusting as circumstances change. Especially in a context of high uncertainty, often one must act to learn before one has a fully developed plan. Most of the significant challenges in today's organisations require collaboration with others over time to create compelling narratives about where the individuals have come from in order to animate the next stages of their journeys.

In today's context, visceral learning about risk—the interpersonal kind that Milgram described earlier—is critical to being effective in organisations. Enactments, like improvisation, create that risk for all the stakeholders taking up roles in a chosen case, as well as for the faculty.

In noting the increased ambiguity that leaders face, Weick suggests a different conception of leadership than the heroic concept of the leader who knows the way and helps or empowers followers to get there:

> The effective leader . . . searches for the better question, accepts inexperience, stays in motion, channels decisions to those with the best knowledge of the matter at hand, crafts good stories, is obsessed with updating, encourages improvisation, and is deeply aware of personal ignorance. People who act in this way help others make sense of what they are facing . . . sense making is about how to stay in touch with context. (Weick, 2001, p. 94)

Enactments in development sessions allow leaders to practise these skills in a safe, collegial learning environment. The learning that this process can produce has real-world applications and provides an outlet for reflection and analysis that would otherwise be unavailable. Context is critical. The context of the learning situation for business executives must get closer to real situations in the lives of students and executives and engage them in ways that have edge.

As we have described above, the ability to enact—to show instead of tell—can be brought into the flow of day-in and day-out work, increasing our playfulness, our creativity, and our connectedness to others in the service of meeting the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing world.

Appendix A: instructions for writing a critical incident

Following the instructions below, write up a short critical incident and e-mail it to us. These incidents will be used in class for discussion but will be held as confidential among the group. Feel free to mask your identity as well as those of others in the case.

Think of a critical incident in your work. The incident must be an actual encounter with another individual or group. It should be a challenging episode—one where you doubted your effectiveness or where you felt frustrated and less successful than you believed was possible. In considering which incident to choose for critical analysis, the following criteria should be considered.

- The episode was not a pre-determined, no-win situation, that is, one in which nothing you might have done could have significantly altered the final outcome.
- Think of episodes in which the choice of a different strategy or manner of interacting might have resulted in more favourable and satisfying outcomes.
- Avoid incidents in which you acted as the "star" or risk-taker, or where your behaviour was generally impressive or effective, given the circumstances.
- The episode is one you still find somewhat puzzling; you have not yet completely understood why it turned out the way it did.
- Begin the description with a paragraph about the purpose of your intervention, the setting, the people involved, and any other important background information.
- Write a paragraph about your strategy. What were your objectives? How did you intend to achieve them? Why did you select those goals and strategies?
- Briefly describe the results.
- Finally, write a few sentences on what you experienced as frustrating in the encounter.

In summary, your submission will have four parts.

1. Brief description of the situation.
2. Your strategy.
3. The results.
4. Why it was frustrating.

Keep your responses to one or two pages, typewritten if possible.

Confidentiality

If you wish your case to remain confidential, please mask the setting and the identities of participants, and put your name on a separate cover sheet. Selected cases will be circulated and discussed.

Appendix B: tips on reading a critical incident

Initial situation

- What appear to be the dilemmas and issues from the incident writer's point of view?
- Who is anxious among the cast of characters in the case, if any, and how is anxiety distributed?
- If you had to give the case a playful title, what might it be?

Moments

- With the benefit of hindsight, what options were available to the writer in the flow of the case? (E.g., whether to have that particular meeting, the timing, the participants, the framing, the responses, etc.)
- In the stream of events, what are some key moments where the actor could have taken the encounter in a very different direction?
- Why do you pick that moment as the most fateful?

Participants

- How clear are the relationships and identities of the actors in the case (e.g., within an organisation, across levels, functions, with important external stakeholders)?
- What is the influence of other stakeholders who are mentioned or implied?
- What are the coalitions?

Appendix C: an alternative method

Enactments might be too anxiety provoking in many settings and too time consuming. Each person who writes a critical incident should get feedback from peers at least. A powerful method for small group work with critical incidents is the following.

The case writer frames the situation in a few minutes.

- The rest of the group has a few minutes to ask clarifying questions, with an emphasis on questions being hypothesis driven rather than just accumulating more facts about the case.
- Then the case presenter pulls his or her chair back from the circle and can only listen for 15–20 minutes while the others discuss their hunches about the case and their recommendations.
- Then the case writer rejoins the group and reflects on what he or she has heard.

This is a powerful method of peer consultation. Case presenters are surprised by how much outsiders can infer that which was not directly presented by the case writer. As with the Johari window (Luft, 1969), we are often much more transparent to others. The inability of the case presenter to participate in the discussion—in a sense a balcony perspective (Heifitz & Linsky, 2002)—deepens their listening skills and increases the diversity of views, as interaction with the presenter often steers the conversation in a more focused direction and it can often take on a more defensive tone. It is a powerful lesson in the concept of being "helpfully wrong", which can stimulate the case writer to think about how the misconception was communicated and what insights might be gained from thinking about this different (but wrong) angle of vision.

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