MODELING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR – MINIMIZING CLIENT DRAMA

John McCall and Angela Watts

Introduction

In today's fast-paced business environment, managers and employees are often stretched thin and are stressed. During our experiences as practitioners we have observed that for some clients the manner in which they consciously or unconsciously chose to address a situation resulted in what we call "client drama". We developed an experiential session for the Organization Development Conference in October 2007, using potentially drama-laden scenarios to help colleagues expand their behavior repertoire. In this session, we define client drama, explore effective use of self for modeling appropriate behavior, and offer tips for helping to minimize client drama. This paper represents our thoughts and theoretical underpinnings that will guide the conference session.

What is Client Drama?

Characteristics of client drama include: intense negativity; exaggeration about a situation; victim behavior; explosive reactions; and sabotaging behavior. Client drama often manifests as intensely negative, counterproductive, or sometimes volatile interactions among members of the organization or between members of the organization and the OD practitioner.

Examples of client drama we have observed, experienced, or helped to minimize include:

- A senior manager and mid-level managers about to come to physical blows with each other during a management team meeting.
- At the end of a management retreat that met its objectives, two managers held a conversation in the parking lot that undermined the work of the retreat.
- A client did not keep their time commitments in accordance with the contract but expected us to keep our time commitments.
- The client or potential client wants bid or contract modifications right away – at a lower price with the same objectives.
- We are called to a last-minute design team meeting. When inquiring about the meeting topic, we are told, "we'll tell you at the meeting."

Modeling Appropriate Behavior

We believe that we are most helpful with our clients when we recognize drama or potential drama circumstances, and then behave in ways that help lift our clients from the drama and redirect their interaction to efforts that are more constructive and productive for them. Our experience has shown us that by modeling "non-dramatic" behavior we can help our clients expand their repertoire of behavior for minimizing drama in their organizations. In our work, we have found it very helpful that we present ourselves as attuned, grounded, empathetic, thoughtful, appreciative, and purposeful in the ways we choose to intervene at the anticipation of or in the midst of full blown client drama.

Funches' (1989) article, *Three Gifts of the Organization Development Practitioner,* provides an illuminating and practical set of lenses upon which we have based this session. Funches' three gifts include discernment, presence, and heart.

Discernment

"Discernment comes from the Latin word *discernere*, which means 'to separate,' 'to distinguish,' 'to determine,' 'to sort out.'" (Farnham, Gill, McLean, and Ward, 1991, p. 23) For us, discernment means to process all kinds of information and make informed choices.

Funches defines the gift of discernment as "the ability to distinguish between work and nonwork in client system behavior" and "the ability to frame and focus the nature of clients' activities in ways that enable clients to understand their behavior better and the choices they make to achieve their goals" (p. 150). For the purpose of this session and addressing client drama, we think of "work" as the client actions that help them achieve their organizational goals, and "non-work" as actions and distractions that hinder the group from achieving its organizational goals.

As external consultants we have come to understand the vital importance of being able to actively and effectively practice discernment in two arenas. The first arena is about the work I choose <u>*and*</u> how I perceive myself doing that work. It is about myself, my reactions, my abilities, my choices, and my actions. The second arena is about the client's situation at hand.

For example, when working with the client situation where the senior level manager and mid-level manager almost came to physical blows with each other, the lead consultant on our team in that moment quickly discerned what was going on in each arena:

- <u>About the work I (the consultant) chose</u> – recalled the professional choice to help our client have a highly productive meeting; quickly sorted through visual, auditory and emotional data to discern the situation as aggressive; quickly scanned internal intellectual and technical abilities to discern the ability to effectively intervene to help de-escalate the situation; quickly scanned the environment to discern availability of support from the other consultant should it be required
- <u>About the client's situation at hand</u> – perceived the situation to be nonwork, i.e. client action as destructive and a distraction that hindered the group from performing the work to achieve their goal, and potentially dangerous to all present in the room.

Funches offers the following in her discussion. Discernment:

- Requires us to rely on our perceptions and to exercise judgment, in addition to using our knowledge and technical skills.
- Sometimes requires substantial courage from a consultant.
- Requires us to trust our internal experience as a potential source of useful information for the client.
- Requires framing and focus activities to enable clients to understand their behavior and choices they make to achieve their goals.
- Requires selectively sharing observations and judgments so as to focus clients' attention.
- Requires seeing the system (and oneself) as an indivisible whole (pp. 151,2).

Presence

Funches states that the gift of presence is two-fold. The first is simply being in the here-and-now with the client. The second is using oneself with the client system to intervene and assist the client in effecting change.

Our presence in the here-and-now can help minimize drama by paying attention to our body and our reactions. When with the client, we work to be personally centered so that we can focus on the client more and ourselves less. When we see potential drama, sometimes we simply breathe with people and let things calm naturally. Or, we shift body and language patterns to slow things down to enable people time to think and make choices. In our multi-media society, we need to be mindful of presence in all kinds of circumstances – in-person, telephone, e-mail, video conference, chat room, or any emerging medium – and use our presence to assist the client in non-dramatic ways. For example, we have all heard horror stories of wrong people copied on e-mails with the resulting consequences of major drama. Positive here-and-now presence requires a honing of our reactions and constant learning about ourselves.

Our here-and-now presence also involves being aware of the diversity of our identities as we interact with clients. We work to be conscious of how our individual identities (John is white, male, gay, coupled, and able-bodied and Angela is African-American, female, heterosexual, married, and able bodied) show up in a client system – regardless of how we behave. We do make choices of how we interact with clients based on our diverse identities as we strive for a world that values diversity more and more. We make choices to disclose and talk about diversity identities to support clients in our work with them. We believe that open conversations about differences can help minimize drama situations.

The intervening presence of the organization development practitioner is more technical. When we employ the models and learning of the field to our work, we use our intervening presence. We are both involved in educating future organization development practitioners, and we enjoy expanding our repertoire of techniques as we assist practitioners coming into the field. We believe that we need to be in the process of continual learning to practice organization development well.

Our role as consultants is not to give the answers but assist the client in discovering the answers. When we jump into problem-solving mode with clients, we can add to drama. Rather, we can assist the client through reflection and assistance with the discovery process for the answers to their issues.

Finally, a simple way to minimize drama with regard to presence is to meet clients' expectations for our presence and our deliverables. Much drama occurs when people speculate circumstances when expectations are not meant. Also, when we think about the scope of our work with a client, we ought to be aware of the full range of objectives of our work and build into the contract tasks that the client might not have expertise or priority to do.

Heart

Into the gift of heart, Funches assembles "those qualities of compassion, humanitarianism, grace for others, passion for one's craft, and the will to extend oneself in the service of the work in learning and growth" (p. 159). We would add our personal value to share an appreciative, abundant spirit with the world and our clients to the gift of heart. We work with clients for whom we can establish a positive regard and can see a success path in our work.

Conversely, in the rare instances we cannot see a success path, we politely (we hope) decline the work because it is not a good fit for us or the organization seeking our service.

As we experience the gift of heart, we feel the full range of emotions with our clients – from joy to anger to sadness. While we are part of the client system "whole," we are separate from the client, and that separation enables us to behave in ways that help minimize drama. To protect ourselves and to support the client, we work to establish appropriate boundaries between ourselves and our clients. We can deeply empathize with our clients, and yet our clients' drama does not need to be our drama. We acknowledge what the client is experiencing and ask what they would like for the future.

A very important function of organization development consultants is reflecting back our observations about clients – to help them see their behaviors and their choices. When we reflect back, and we use our heart from a sense of wonderment and appreciation of what we see, our observations are more likely to been seen and heard from the client system. Communication will flow, and defensiveness will be diminished. Better communication flow helps to maintain a human connection and minimize emerging drama.

Many times, heart connections are established by the use of stories. If we want to ensure that we are minimizing drama, we need to be careful about the stories we tell. As we minimize drama, a typical story we tell ourselves as a two-person consulting team is:

> We have terrific clients that need assistance making improvements or dealing with complex issues. Our experiences and abilities are different, and we provide value to our clients. We are great partners in this change effort.

Do we have client circumstances that cause us to grit our teeth? Yes. Sometimes we vent to each other or our colleagues for the sake of our sanity. However, we try to look at the situation from a whole systems perspective and figure out how to support our clients with full, compassionate hearts.

Tips for Modeling Appropriate Behavior to Minimize Client Drama

We propose the following tips for organization development practitioners to model appropriate behavior to minimize client drama:

- Know thyself; demonstrate to yourself a personal commitment to self-introspection and reflection to continuously heighten your awareness of "self".
- Practice discernment in non-client settings (e.g. at home, personal relationships, community situations) to develop this as a new gift or further hone your skill with this gift.
- Be focused and present to the what's going on "in the moment" with yourself internally, with the client externally, and with the intersection of you and your client's interaction
- Develop skills to be centered, no matter what the client circumstance.
- Complete prep work for client engagements to ensure that your attention is focused.
- Talk about your personal diversity identity as it relates to your work with the client.
- Keep your commitments to the client. Keep renegotiations to a minimum. When an unforeseen circumstances arises that requires renegotiation, think through your possibilities for the new commitment that fulfills the client's needs to a great extent.
- Take responsibility for tasks associated with which you are assisting the client. For example, if you are assisting the client with strategic planning, have meeting reports and planning documents as part of your contract. The client likely will not have the internal capacity or priority to perform these tasks that are often outside of their normal business.

- Strive for positive regard and to envision a success path with your client (whether you are an external or an internal consultant).
- Use language to describe emotions to show that you empathize with the client.
- Be with the client in the full range of emotions, but keep boundaries for yourself to minimize your drama behaviors.
- Be choiceful about the stories you tell. Minimize drama stories.

Concluding Remarks

Although many of our clients are stretched too thin and stressed by the demands of their fast paced business environment, as OD practitioners we can effectively use ourselves to help minimize the drama that sometimes emerges from overwhelmed client systems. Through the lenses of Funches' three gifts – discernment, presence and heart – we are able to help lift our clients from the drama and help them develop the awareness and skills to produce less dramatic responses that are more constructive and productive for them.

References

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Biographical Paragraphs:

John McCall

John McCall is an organization development consultant with over 19 years internal and external experience. Concentrations include strategic planning, team building, diversity management, and process analysis. As an independent practitioner, John provides consulting services to a variety of government, private industry, and human service non-profit organizations. Prior to independent practice, John worked for Baltimore Gas and Electric – focusing on plant improvement and strategic planning at Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant.

John has a M.S. in Organization Development from American University and an M.S. degree in Technology and Management from the University of Maryland. John has served on the Board of Trustees of Organization Development Network from 2000-2006 and is a past-president of Chesapeake Bay Organization Development Network. He is also a member of NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science.

Angela Watts

Angela Watts, President and owner of Annapolis Professional Resources, Inc, is an external organization development professional with 20+ years of experience consulting to executives and managers in public and non-profit organizations. Angela is often called upon to help clients deal with complex, conflict-laden situations that to them seem insurmountable. She uses a whole system perspective and methods to promote participation to allow differing points of view to be hard and used advantageously by the organization.

Angela’s consulting experience is complemented by her role as Adjunct Faculty at Johns Hopkins University where for the past 14 years she has provided instruction in the M.S. in Organization Development and Strategic Human Resources program and The Skilled Facilitator certificate program. She has an M.S. in Applied Behavioral Science/Organization Development from Johns Hopkins University and a B.S. in Social Work from Bowie State College in Maryland.