

**Image Theatre:
Rehearsing Alternative Ways To Act In A Conflict Situation**

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ABSTRACT

Students will learn the basics of drama-based processes and Image Theatre techniques to connect with self and others creatively and spontaneously. Through the fictional conflict situation based on real examples, students will 'sculpt' three images to not only identify emotions and clarify thinking, but to also rehearse interventions to manage conflicts. This exercise recognises the dynamic nature of emotions in any social situation, and therefore shifts the literature around conflict management and the role of emotions in organisations from a theoretical perspective to an embodied, experiential one. Supplementary notes on a specific case study and the interventions used are provided.

Keywords: conflict management, image theatre, spontaneity

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational conflict, according to Michael E. Roloff, occurs “when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization” (Roloff, 1987, p. 496). M. Afzalur Rahim (2002) extended this definition by conceptualizing conflict as “an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities” (Rahim, 2002, p. 207). Whether these conflicts occur at the individual, group, organizational level, local or national level, some researchers in conflict studies tend to see conflict as productive and generative (Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold, 2006; Schulz-Hardt, Mojzisch, & Vogelgesang, 2008), yet the majority perceive conflict as a dysfunction and address the need for analysis, mediation, or management (Ostell, 1988, 1991, 1996; Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; De Dreu, & Gelfand, 2008). In addition, the role of emotions within the literature has also primarily focused on learning and organizational change (Fineman, 1993; Antonacopoulou & Gabriel, 2001; Kupers & Weibler, 2008); emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Huy, 1999; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Jordan, Ashkanasy, & Härtel, 2003); and motivation in leadership (George, 2000).

In an attempt to add a more practical component to teaching and understanding human emotions in a conflict situation, this activity draws on theories and practices within

process drama, psychodrama, and applied theatre, where the human experience forms the foundation of all three methodologies. The basis of this dramatic process is to allow participants to be in-the-moment and become more spontaneous in problem-solving. According to Moreno and Moreno, spontaneity is defined as a “new response to an old situation” (Moreno & Moreno, 1944, p. 92). Through a fictional case study elicited by real life examples from the participants, the conflict will be concretised into a series of sculptures called Image Theatre. These images not only enable participants to kinesiologically connect to their own bodies and feelings, but also facilitate a deep reflection on ways to re-enact alternative narratives that offer possibilities for insight and change.

OVERVIEW OF EXERCISE

Image Theatre was originally developed by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director and activist, as one of the many methods to overcome systemic oppressions (Boal, 1979/1985). Even though “oppression” is not appropriate to our learning context, the methods created by Boal have applications across disciplines and contexts. Simplistically, the aesthetic practice involves human bodies coming together to form still images or statues (sometimes also called *tableaux*) to depict ideas, experiences, relationships, memories, and desires. Two or three images eventually form a larger narrative, which is now known as “image theatre”: the first is the ‘actual image’; the second, the ‘ideal image’; and the third, the ‘transitional image’.

More specifically, a volunteer participant will tell the group a lived experience of a conflict that may be commonly recognised by other group participants. This could be a

conflict with a colleague at the workplace (see Appendix 1 for case study). For example, if the current reality for the volunteer ('protagonist') is characterised by unequal power dynamics with colleagues in the organisation ('antagonists'), the protagonist will be invited to shape and mould the bodies of others in the group into statues, and then place themselves in relation to each other. This is the 'actual image' representing the volunteer's perception of the conflict situation. Another image – the 'ideal image' – will also be shaped to show a contrast; this is the positive outcome or reconciliation that may be needed from the 'actual image'. To probe deeper, the protagonist has to spontaneously create a third image by 'dynamising' an action or behaviour to move from the 'actual image' to the 'ideal image' with a 'transitional image'. Aesthetically, one tableau comes to life, organically resolves its conflict, and ends up with the ideal tableau.

The philosophy behind 'Image Theatre' is to (i) allow participants to *feel* those images in the body; to (ii) allow for multiple interpretations to any image; and to (iii) transform 'images of reality' to 'ideal images' as a way to transform the state of affairs for the main character. By physicalising and embodying all three images in sequence and in motion, the participants will be able to analyse the "feasibility of the proposed transitions" (Boal, 1985, p.138) – to see if change was 'magical' or if it was "brought about by the opposing forces operating within the very core of the group" (ibid.). This organic action potentially eliminates the feelings of being "stuck", both kinesthetically and cognitively. The reason is because in this process of dynamisation, 'thinking' is made concrete in the body. Boal writes: "A bodily movement 'is' a thought and a thought expresses itself in a corporeal form" (Boal, 1992/2005, p. 49). Yet this 'thinking' is simultaneously imbued with 'feeling'. In other words, the protagonist's readiness and willingness to change the

narrative of his or her reality, and the act of changing it, not only involve understanding and emotion, but leads to liberation and transformation.

This ties in with Stephen Fineman who argues against research trying to pin down emotions and to measure it as a variable. He writes that “this has begun to colonize our appreciation of emotion in ways that can impoverish rather than enrich our understandings” (Fineman, 2004, p. 720). That is why this dramatic process – such as Image Theatre – is organic and dynamic, and learning to facilitate the use of these techniques, with careful processing of questions, is what this experiential learning activity seeks to demonstrate.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FACILITATION

Facilitating this exercise would require the students to read the Case Study (see Appendix) to show the context of the conflict. They should have some basic understanding of conflict management theories so that a brief discussion can take place. The purpose of the case study highlights the role and limitations of cognition in conflict management. This prepares the participants to kinesthetically connect to their own bodies and emotions to manage conflicts in a dynamic and organic manner.

Ask:

- (i) *If you are in the protagonist's shoes, can you really change what the other person is doing to you?*
- (ii) *How do you work with those feelings of frustration? Or those feelings of 'stuckness'?*

Explain that in the case study, the protagonist felt that there was a dissonance between what she should do, and how she really felt in this conflict situation. So this was how the Image Theatre was used as a form of intervention, which leads on to the class demonstration of 'resources' given to the facilitator to work with.

But before the facilitator demonstrates that, invite the students to do physical warm-up exercises. This will be followed by students forming "statues" or "sculptures" of themselves, as well as of each other, so that they form a tableau or an image, almost like a photograph.

Fictionally, invite one volunteer to create a conflict situation by moulding and shaping one statue. Through group discussions, invite students to report their observations on what the image means to them.

Invite them to do another image, one that is an ideal situation from the conflict situation. Elicit comments on the contrasting images.

Then allow the students to move from one image to the final image in their bodies. This will open up discussions on what worked, what did not work, and if more interventions needed to be in place.

The session will end after a deep reflective process (see Discussion Questions below).

60-90 MINUTE LEARNING MODULE

10 minutes	Review the Case Study (see Appendix) and explore strategies for conflict management and conflict resolution. Explain that those strategies are primarily cognitively and logically planned. Explain that the dissonance always happens between what one knows and what one feels. Tell them that the session will take on a more experiential, kinesthetic way of acknowledging and changing the conflict situation.
5 minutes	Conduct a physical session to warm up the bodies, for example, rotating the heads, arms, and torsos. This allows participants to be kinesthetically connected to their bodies and breath.
15 minutes	Facilitate examples of Image Theatre, so that participants can understand the aesthetics of powerful “statues” or images.
15 minutes	Ask for a volunteer participant to share a particular conflict situation at work.
15 minutes	Facilitate the formation of two images: ‘image of reality’, and ‘ideal image’. Observations and reflection are important processes here.
15 minutes	Facilitate the dynamisation of images so that there is a transition from ‘image of reality’ to ‘ideal image’. Observations and reflection continue.
15 minutes	Discuss and review strategies to overcome the conflict situation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you see or observe in this image, or about your bodies in space?
2. What is the relationship between the protagonist and the antagonist?
3. How do you feel about your placement in space, or being in-role?
4. What needs to be done to move from this image to the next image?
5. What worked? What didn't work? Why?
6. How did you feel about this process?
7. What insights do you have on this conflict situation?

The series of questions typically develop in complexity from the literal to the interpretive, which on one hand, abides by Bloom's taxonomy (1956) in educational objectives, and on the other hand, follows Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984). Here, the concrete experience of doing the tableaux allows participants to observe and reflect on their own experience, make abstract conceptualisations regarding the conflict situation, and finally to actively experiment (and use the strategies from Image Theatre) to resolve the conflict.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

As previously mentioned, this experiential activity draws on multiple research disciplines – conflict studies, educational learning theories, drama education, psychodrama, and applied theatre.

John O'Toole, one of the leading drama practitioners, says that the "affective element of tension is an essential ingredient" (O'Toole, 1992, p. 78) in any drama or process-based work. This is in contrast to roleplays and simulation used for training purposes where emotions are often unacknowledged. To access human emotions in process-based work, this experiential session uses Boal's Image Theatre as a methodology. Here, the participants are asked to take on a role which is different from actors in a theatre doing characterisation work. They do not memorise case studies or scripts. Because it is a role based on real life circumstances, they can identify with the circumstances and react and respond to stimulus that happen in-the-moment. As such, the unscripted situations become real enough for the participants. They show their authenticity in their actions as they respond to the various roles and negotiable narratives. In so doing, they identify the

humanness of their own feelings and those of others', clarify what is needed in the social context, and change the conflict situation to a possibly ideal one.

Another very important consideration why this Image Theatre, as well as process drama, works so effectively is the concept of *metaxis*. It is a Greek word to describe the condition of betweenness of the human condition. In this experiential activity, metaxis is the tension between the *fictional* context and the *real* context which allows the participant to step in and out of the role simultaneously while reflecting on the action and being in-the-action (see O'Toole, 1992; Linds, 2006). More specifically in our Image Theatre, metaxis is "the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (Boal 1995, p. 43). As a result of this clever manouvre, the participants learn to reflect on their action, in action, and through the action.

PARTICIPANTS' REACTION

Image Theatre has not been taught to MBA students, but the reactions below are gleaned from the actual interventions with participants from the banking industry (please read the Case Study in the Appendix first), which, I believe, is most applicable for classroom teaching of conflict management case studies.

IMAGE 1: In the first Image, Amy (the protagonist) shaped her antagonist, Chloe, with an open palm stretched towards her, as if she was blocking her in some way. The other palm is opened upwards, as if wanting something from Amy. Chloe's feet are angled in a way that shows she is ready to run away. After moulding the sculptures, Amy then sits

herself down at the table, with her elbows propping up to support her lowered head. This was the image she had created to tell the story of her conflict – which we call “Actual Image” or “Image of the Current Reality”.

Reflecting on the accuracy of Image of the Current Reality in terms of “feeling” and “problem”, Amy said, “The problem and the situation is like that, it’s correct – like I’ve given up.”

At one stage in the activity, Amy recognised that the conflict she was having with her colleague could be interpreted through the lens of leadership theories she had learnt at Wharton as an MBA student years ago. In other words, there was a cognitive dissonance between theory and practice, between what she knows and how she is feeling.

IMAGE 2: Her second image – the “Ideal Image” – showed Amy sitting with her antagonist at the table with a paper and a pen.

TRANSITIONAL IMAGE: Amy was told to “shape” the antagonist’s image from the first (standing up, blocking her) to the second (sitting down with a paper and pen) in slow motion. She first reacted in confusion, “Can I use force?” When told to try it in new experiential ways, she reiterated, “Other than force, what else can I do?” Finally, in that transitional image, Amy brought the chair, invited Chloe to sit down, and reshaped her forceful palm gestures into holding a pen.

REFLECTION: The co-actor playing Chloe, the antagonist, reflected to Amy that it was only when Amy stood up, on the same eye level, that there “was a natural leverage to pull me down [to the chair]”. In other words, Amy had to appear “bigger” than her antagonist. This was then followed by a lowering of herself back into that chair. The co-actor added, “What I found very interesting is, only at the very last moment you were pushing away my hands into this [new] position. In the picture, you were accepting the resistance until the very last moment.” This was a moment of insight for Amy.

Discussions followed – and the “conflict” was not solved within the Image Theatre. As such, more interventions were enacted to transform the images, this time with her taking on the role of an owl (rather than a bulldog) – which will not be covered in this Case Study. Nonetheless, the interventions are drama processes that allowed the participants to act, react, and reflect on the action, in the action, and through the action.

Finally, when the conflict management roleplay was completed, the facilitator observed that Amy finally smiled when she sat down. There was a huge sense of relief in Amy’s final image. “There was a change in your behaviour. You were no longer stressed; you were joyful.” One other observer mentioned that the energy changed when Amy became the owl. This effectively changed the social dynamics of the situation (in the protagonist’s behaviour) as well as in the symbolic frame (from bulldog to owl imagery).

Amy interjected, “That’s true. On a daily basis, I draw parallels to how I behave in business in the supporting function. [...]. She thinks I work for her, but it’s the other way round. I say that to myself everyday, right? [...] But you’re absolutely right. I smiled –

because I think if I were in her shoes, I know what's the best thing to do and to react.” She realised that the co-actor offered her a perspective she did not consider and now, she reconciled with her cognition and emotions.

When asked to reflect on what strategies she could use after the Image Theatre interventions, Amy remarked: “I could take her to lunch, and to take her out of the office setting.” That was akin to the image where she had to stand on eye level to leverage her antagonist to sit down, as well as the sitting down in reversed seats in another image that gave her insights. That was the position of empowerment that helped her sort out ways to overcome her conflict.

She continued, “I was very tensed before this. I had a very tensed weekend before this – because it was bugging me at the back of my mind. But all of a sudden, I feel very relaxed – even though I have not done it yet, but I see it as very empowering. Because I can, I know, I have other ways of approaching her. It is empowering. I feel relaxed now. My shoulders are relaxed.”

In summary, the reactions from participants were all favourable to seeing how effective the conflict situation was resolved, at least from the perspective of the main protagonist. Her eventual state of calm was an almost therapeutic relief.

FOR THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION EXERCISE

This 30-minute exercise can be demonstrated at the Experiential Learning Association at the Eastern Academy of Management conference in Maryland. Depending on time allocation and constraints, the case study can be given to the attendees as supplementary reading as well as the interventions and reactions written in this document, so that the activity would give them a firsthand experience with Image Theatre in managing emotions and conflicts.

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APPENDIX: CASE STUDY

Amy (not her real name) works as a Senior Vice President at a multinational bank. She acts as the chief of staff and de-facto operational leader of a business unit with international responsibility.

The bank works in a matrix structure with shared service centers: back office functions such as Finance and HR are consolidated in centralized units with internal reporting. Each shared service centers support the business units through assigned specialists who act as service providers and intermediates to the back office functions.

In addition, the service centers serve as governance and service development units; as such, they run their own projects and initiatives in which they reach out to the business units to request input.

Chloe is assigned to Amy's business unit as the key service provider. Chloe is fairly new to the organization and junior to Amy in regard to organizational position.

Chloe approached Amy some time ago with the request to provide country-specific financial administration information (cost center owners) as part of a corporate governance project the service center is tasked with. In Amy's perception, Chloe's request is phrased in a form that makes it impossible for Amy's function to respond to, as she feels that the required information resides within a different level in the organization. Amy states that her perception comes from experience, having worked in the Finance service center before.

Through email and phone calls, Amy explains to Chloe her perception of the task at hand and suggests alternative ways to obtain the information that Chloe needs. Chloe acknowledges during the conversation that she understands Amy's input. Regardless, a few days later, Amy receives another email from Chloe, demanding for the same information in a tone that Amy perceives as pushing. Subsequent attempts to explain Amy's position (again), through emails, remain unsuccessful as Chloe continues to request the same information, with the approaching of the deadline in a more and more urging language. Amy provides what she thinks is an adequate amount of information (but not what Chloe requested), stating that the remaining information must come from different sources that are not available to Amy's function.

Ultimately, at the day of the deadline, Chloe requests the written confirmation from Amy that she won't provide more information and that Chloe can fill the blanks (mostly related to contact names to be listed) with the name of Amy's boss.

Amy is at a loss – it is of no use to confirm Chloe's final suggestion and she decides not to respond to Chloe's email. Amy is annoyed and frustrated.

[Note: Chloe is not present when Amy presented her side of the story in a safe and neutral coaching space.]