



Understanding ‘Roles’ and The impact on a culture of Safety

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Role theory is something we have all experienced to some degree and observed playing out in front of us in our organizations, families, and in society. The higher the water line (described in the previous piece) the more roles are played out. This dynamic occurs largely at the unconscious level and is rarely understood, results in labelling of individuals and group, and at the extreme end can have a detrimental impact on individuals and a culture of safety. Role theory is a concept within the process oriented psychology work developed by Arnold Mindell (1992). In this theory the term “role” has a somewhat different meaning than our typical use of the word. In Mindell’s work, a role falls within one of four main clusters:

- An idea, view/perspective, concept, or opinion
- A feeling or affect
- A symptom (headache, fatigue, stomach ache)
- An archetype. An archetype is a collection of behaviours that are commonly associated with a position or role in society. Common archetypes are husband, wife, mother, father, boss, subordinate, patient, health care provider, physician, nurse, etc.

One concept within role theory relevant to developing a culture of safety is that of a ‘role’ being greater than the individual who surfaced or held it (The role can remain out of the consciousness of the group and in its unconscious). If one person surfaces a perspective or opinion that is different, it is very likely that others hold the same view. Others may not totally agree with 100% of it or with the degree of passion with which it was expressed but others agree at least in part with the view. The following common experience demonstrates this point. In a meeting someone surfaces a controversial perspective and no one else speaks up. After the meeting or at break time, others approach the person and say something along the lines of “I am so glad you spoke up. I agree with

you...” The same dynamic is true for the other clusters of roles. Remember, others do not need to experience the role in exactly the same degree, and some may not even be aware of it until someone else in the group surfaces it. In groups and organizations we tend to label people who hold these roles with negative terms like “negative, troublemaker, or difficult”. It is generally uncomfortable to find oneself in one of these roles.

When someone expresses a different or alternative role, it is useful to ask the question—“who else feels/thinks this way—even a little?”. This then often makes it safer for others to share their perspective and makes it more comfortable for the initial person expressing the alternative view. This is referred to as ‘spreading the role’. The more roles move around the group the better the group dynamics are likely to be and the better the outcome of the group’s work.

The concept of the ‘role being greater than the individual’ also implies that if the current role holder were to leave or be removed from group, someone else would step into the role. For example, a team has a member that is an outspoken ‘problematic’ person. If this person were to leave, another person would step into the outspoken role. This person may well have been there all along but not have been in this role because the role was already taken.

Taking the time to surface all of the views and roles including those that are difficult to hear is an important part of creating a culture of safety. Taking notice of those views that are different is worth pausing and exploring further rather than the typical reaction of shutting this view down. The alternative view is often a doorway to achieving a greater understanding of an issue, reaching a better decision, and enhancing the culture of safety.

Questions for reflection:

1. Recall the last time you either observed this in someone else or found yourself holding a role?
2. Recall how you felt?
3. How could you have spread the role either for yourself or for the other?
4. Next time you see this happening, try spreading the role and observe what happens.

References

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