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by Nik Paddison

The Art
of Co-Working

I have spent a lot of time working with trainers and youth workers in the last years, conducting observations of their work, group mentoring sessions, supervision and support work. Something I have noticed is the difficulty many people have in working with other people. There seems to be an inbuilt assumption that by sticking youth workers or trainers in the same room as each other they will do what they do, and do it well. In reality the opposite is often true.

Co-working is something that as youth workers and or trainers in the youth field we often take for granted. We rarely work alone, and over the course of time we work with quite a large number of different people. Yet each one of these people has a different character and temperament, attitude and belief, a different understanding of professionalism and different ways of working. Working with another human being is actually quite a complex thing.

As a youth worker and trainer I like to develop a group contract / working agreement with groups. Rarely in my past did I give the same consideration to the people with whom I was co-working. 'We are professionals', 'we don't need to think about this kind of thing', 'surely good co-working is automatic', 'we will just work and it will be great'.

As a participant and as a trainer I have experienced the trainer team on a seminar or training working long into the night, every night. Huddled in a backroom somewhere away from the participants, fighting and arguing, talking in circles, and trying to find solutions to this or that problem! Sometimes it's a tough seminar or a tough group but often it is because the team has not actually considered who they are co-working with, regardless of whether they are friends or not, in reality they are professional strangers.

As much as it is important to get a group to work together it is equally important, perhaps even more so, for the people delivering the training to be able to work together. We are coming from different organisations, countries, cultures, gender, ability, experience, and so on... We need to build our relationships, to get to know the other worker(s) professionally.

We need to challenge our assumptions and discover who we are working with and try to understand how we actually operate ourselves.

Below is a selection of questions from a questionnaire I developed at Triagolnik – Centre for Non-Formal Education, Macedonia. I took and adapted the questions from different sources, and this list is being used at the beginning of every new co-working relationship in Triagolnik, both for youth workers and trainers.

• How do you deal with excessive talkers?
• How do you feel about long periods of silence in a group?
• What do you do when strong emotions are expressed?
• What do you do when someone comes in late?
• I would like to learn more about... ...during this training
• Are you more nurturing or confronting in style?
• What is not negotiable for you as a co-worker?
• My signal to ask for my co-worker's help is...

This is just a short selection, there are many others and in reality the type of questions need to reflect your own organisation or type of work. The process of asking ourselves these kinds of questions about our individual working methods raises our consciousness about what we do and how we do it. The next step would be to share your answers with your co-worker(s) and explore how you work. Let's not kid ourselves, we will still get into conflict and have problems from time to time with our co-workers but at least we stand a better chance of being able to deal constructively with the difficulties that arise during our work together.

• **Wide Angle**

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The following Model does not give answers to all the above issues about co-working, it is a model that highlights some of the most common mistakes that are made among co-workers. It is designed to help us be self-critical of how we are working with our colleagues and it provides an opportunity to explore how they are working with us. It is a tool for reflecting on the quality of our working relationships and can be used to discover what we sometimes do wrong. Although originally designed for teaching and training staff who work in pairs it was later also used by youth workers. It is also applicable for groups of co-workers and can be adapted to probably any work environment.

▶ Co-Working Models©

Created and Developed by Nik Paddison 2009

The Model below is written in the context of a pair of co-workers in the context of conducting training:

Working in Parallel

This is where the co-workers are aiming in the same direction doing all the right things but there is a lack of open and honest communication between them. They have a surface level working relationship. The level and quality of their training is based on what we might call «head knowledge» but there is little or no emotional connection in this relationship. It can also be a sign of poor preparation, neither is completely sure of where the other is going because the training programme has not been developed enough between them or talked through in enough detail.

Typically what I have witnessed here is the trainers each carefully preparing their part of the programme independently of the other. When they come to the actual training, the first introduces an activity or theory, it is effective and achieves what it needs to. The second trainer facilitates the next hour of the session, again it is effective and achieves what it needs to. But there is no link between the first part and the second part, except that it is to the same group, on the same day and fits within the overall training subject. The specific topic has just jumped from one aspect to another. There is no flow or rhythm for the group to follow, they receive information on each part but it is not linked and so it is for them to make the connection – which in reality rarely happens!

Working in Conflict
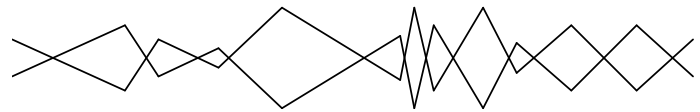
Here there is a conflict between the co-workers; there is a relationship breakdown and therefore a communication breakdown. Neither has confidence or trust in the other. Each trainer is focussing on the work of the other; what mistakes are they making? What are they doing wrong? 'I could do that better...' It is difficult to hide any conflict between co-workers from a group however subtle the conflict. It directly affects the quality of the training and if not quickly resolved will influence the nature and ability of the group to develop and learn.

I was in a trainer team some years ago where two co-workers were in conflict. Both had very different but strong personalities. In front of the group they acted professionally, but behind the scenes, they were in open war. Each one was sure that they were right and the better trainer. Every team meeting lasted for hours and hours because they would not listen to each other, they had no concept of communication in each other's company. On the surface this did not affect the participants but it did affect the quality of the training. All the trainer team had to endure this conflict and the long meetings were focussed on these two and not the participants or the programme.
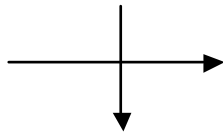
Working in Competition
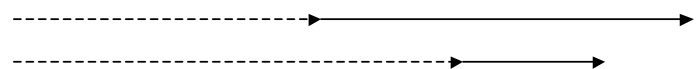
In this context one or both co-workers do not believe in or accept the abilities of the other. Each is striving to be the lead worker and to show the group, themselves or the other, who is the better trainer. As one does something «amazing», so the other responds with something more «amazing» and so on... The focus of the trainers is on the self and being better than the other, not on the development of the group. This is not necessarily on a conscious level, from my observation it is usually happening without the individuals being aware of what they are doing.

This is perhaps the model I have observed the most over the years. It is especially common with those of us with big egos. One trainer I worked with was constantly looking for bigger and better ways of presenting activities to the group. It seemed at times that the most important thing for him was to be the most popular trainer with the group, it did not seem to matter about the quality of the training. This was not done consciously, yet whatever his colleagues did he had to go one step further, do it bigger and better, and be more creative and energetic. The training became a competition of personalities, rather than a development and learning of the subject.

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Working at Cross Purposes

Working at cross purposes means "to misunderstand or to act counter to one another without intending it" (Webster's Dictionary). There is a lack of communication between the co-workers. The trainers have witnessed a situation or incident and each tries to resolve it in their own way but without understanding what the other is trying to do. Both trainers know where they want to go but assume the other will just follow or is thinking in the same way.

Another aspect of this is when the trainers are attending to a number of small groups and each trainer is giving slightly different or even contradictory information to each group. One trainer gives the instructions for an activity and splits the participants into small groups. The second trainer then floats among the small groups unconsciously giving contradictory instructions. The first trainer is also floating and continues to give his or her original instructions. Confusion is created and the trainers and the group have to sort it all out in order to complete the activity. While this does not have catastrophic effects on the participants and they are able to complete the task, the quality of what they achieve is poor and not what it could be.

Working in Shadow

This example sees one co-worker far more experienced than the other. It does not show the experienced supporting the inexperienced, instead it shows the experienced trainer dominating all aspects of the work. This includes preparation and actual training time. The experienced trainer is very visible and the inexperienced is either not visible or is overshadowed in all they do. The role of the experienced should be to support the inexperienced in trying new things and gaining valuable experience.

I was observing a colleague trainer working once in this kind of scenario. There were just two trainers. The more experienced trainer totally dominated the session, her co-worker might as well not have been there. He was virtually invisible, his parts of the session were not only minimal but also overshadowed by her greater experience and larger than life personality. He sat next to the flip chart making little or no effort to engage himself in the process or the group. She on the other hand was unstoppable, she was totally immersed with the process and

engaged with the group. It did not occur to her for a moment that she had totally excluded her co-worker or that she had a responsibility toward his development.

Working as a Rescuer

This scenario is very similar to 'Working in Shadow'. The difference here is that one of the trainers is constantly stepping in to rescue the other trainer, whether they need it or not. Each time one of the co-workers starts to explain an exercise or deliver a theory the other co-worker steps in. They do this either during the explanation or they repeat in their own words afterwards what was said by the first trainer. There is no cooperation here but it is not competition, it is a lack of trust or the ego of one trainer preventing the other from being able to do anything effectively.

I experienced this with a colleague some years ago. Her approach to the work was much more process oriented while at the time I was more task based. We had divided the week of training between us, each had his or her own part. Each time it was my session I would introduce the activity, we would go through it and then arrive at a discussion or debrief. And without fail, each time as I was facilitating she would add something and then suddenly she was facilitating the discussion and I was excluded to the sidelines. Each time she thought I was struggling with the discussion and knew that she could handle it better so she stepped in and rescued. Through some good discussion between us after a couple of sessions we were able to resolve the situation.

However it should be noted that a Rescuer can be a positive model as well. If one of the trainers is having problems facilitating a discussion or delivering a theory or an exercise, they need someone to step in and take over for a moment. The positive model will take over, but when they see their co-worker is OK or get a signal that the co-worker wants to continue, they give back the lead as appropriate.

Working with a Wanderer

In this scenario the trainer is alone and unsupported by their co-worker. One of the trainers is delivering a theory or instructions for an exercise and their co-worker has disappeared. Sometimes this means the co-worker's concentration is

• Wide Angle

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somewhere else, staring out of the window or thinking about dinner. Sometimes this means the co-worker physically removes themselves and is off somewhere, for example; preparing materials for another exercise but still within the training space. In either case the majority of the group becomes attracted to the distraction created by the co-worker rather than what the primary trainer is doing at that moment.

I think this is one of the most frustrating of the Models for me. I was supporting a dialogue day and had completed my part of the session, I was now sitting as a member of the group. One facilitator was introducing some important aspects concerning the development of national youth policy. Her colleague – who was also sat in the circle with the group – suddenly got up walked across the circle to go behind where the participants were sat. She then proceeded to arrange chairs, tables and materials in the background, walking here and there across the room.

Working Together

Working together is a constructive and positive working relationship that will include small conflicts and it will include a little co-worker competition – but on healthy levels and even – sometimes – the rescuer. This relationship is about working together with strong communication, verbal and non-verbal, and a willingness to understand the other. It is about respect for the work of the other, a desire to see the other develop, an openness to ask for help and offer support, analysing the session together, problem-solving together, willingness to give and receive open and honest feedback, developing the programme and activities in close cooperation and so on...

Since I first used this Model in a training in February I have heard several colleagues referring to it. One colleague remarked that she used it to analyse what was wrong with her co-working relationship on a course she was conducting; she worked out that she was 'working in parallel'. Through reflecting on the Model she and her co-worker were able to make the necessary changes and developed their co-working relationship constructively and thereby the quality of their work. Another colleague explained to me how she used the Model in the preparation phase when working with someone she had never worked with before. They used it to raise their awareness of the potential problems they might face as new co-workers during the training. As they started to work together by referring to the Model they were able to identify the ne-

gative approaches they were using and quickly through discussion adjust their approach to each other. They had a very successful training.

There are many ways in which we work together, in pairs or in teams, this Model does not explore every difficulty that could be experienced but covers some of the most common issues faced. Most of the time we do not think about how we are going to work with other people, we just assume that we can and that there will not be problems. In reality we have to work at our working relationships as much as personal relationships and be constantly aware of the issues as they arise. This Model can be used as a reminder of the things we tend to do that are wrong, that work against good co-working relationships. The Model can help better the work we do with our co-workers and therefore the quality of the work we deliver to our participants.

▶ A Closing Request

I am looking to continue developing this concept. I would therefore like to hear from you if you have some examples of any of the Models or if you can think of any alternative Models.

I can be contacted on the email address linked with this article. ■

References: ✖

- Questions and statements are adapted from:
  Younger, R. Wade. *The Art of Training: Co-Facilitation*. Copyrights 2005. www.fruitionpm.com

Contact: ✖

nikinsim@yahoo.co.uk

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