

## **The Social Key: From Conflict to Community - A Deep Democracy and Process Work Approach**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter introduces a Process Work approach to transforming conflict through embracing the skills of deep democracy. Process Work is a process orientated, cross-disciplinary approach to individual and collective change. I will illustrate its application through examples of our work in a grassroots project in Bolivia. What particularly stands out for me having worked on these projects, and other very different settings in Europe, is that the skills outlined below can be applied in any context, and while the language and metaphor used may need to be adapted to a specific situation, the underlying whole systems approach and compassionate attitude needed towards human experience is the same, whether it be within grassroots organisations in the global south<sup>1</sup>, the global eco-village network or in corporate Europe.

Through these experiences it has been humbling to realise how similar we all are. The myriad of common threads that can be found in all of these settings has deepened my understanding of the systemic and interconnected nature of the world we live in, giving me hope that increasing our skills and awareness in this area can make a difference and lead to major and lasting change.

### **Process Work**

Process Work has been pioneered and developed over the last 25 years by Drs Arnold and Amy Mindell and their colleagues. Process Work started as therapeutic work and then developed into group work and as a method for working with organisational development and leadership. Arnold Mindell, initially a physicist, subsequently studied psychology at the Jungian Institute in Zurich. The theory and practice draw on Jungian psychology, physics, quantum theory, shamanic traditions and Taoism.

Process Work seeks to **increase awareness** and in so doing supports the individual, group or organisation concerned to access a broader base of insight from which to make choices. Obstacles, disturbances and even conflicts are seen as an attempt to bring new information to a person, group or organisation and help them realise their full potential. Process Work assumes that each soul, individual or collective has a drive towards wholeness, which creates an underlying motivation to seek meaning in life.

### **Deep Democracy**

Mindell describes deep democracy in the following terms. "For organisations,

communities and nations to succeed today and survive tomorrow, they must be deeply democratic - that is, everyone and every feeling must be represented. Deep democracy is awareness of the diversity of people, roles, and feelings about issues. When we are asked to become aware of and value our deepest inner experiences, almost any group or world situation becomes immediately different and manageable". (*Mindell, 2002*)

Deep Democracy is one of the pillars of Process Work. It links one's attitudes and belief systems with one's external experience, offering an approach that supports a deeper understanding of the interconnected relationship between our 'inner' and 'outer' realities. Cultivating this approach on an organisational or group level leads to a more deeply felt sense of resolution and congruence in all aspects of organisational or group life, leading to a shift in atmosphere in the workplace which allows more individual and collective creative expression. This leads to enhanced performance and focus.

### **Three Levels of Awareness**

In Process Work there are three levels that the facilitator will be aware of in the process of facilitating conflict. These levels can appear simultaneously or at different times and skill and fluidity is required by the facilitator to stay very present, to be alert to the signals which appear and which indicate the level at which the conflict needs to be facilitated.

#### **1. Consensus Reality**

Here we deal with 'real' events, problems, and issues connected with the development of individuals, couples or groups. Facts and feelings are used to describe conflicts, issues or problems. The dynamics of rank, power and privilege are apparent here.

#### **2. The Dreaming Level**

Here what emerges are dreams, deep feelings, the unspoken truths, 'double' or unintentional signals and ghost roles (un-represented figures) as well as the zeitgeists (spirits of our times) that often unconsciously influence the 'field' of our groups or communities.

#### **3. The Nondualistic or 'Essence Level'**

At the deepest nondualistic or "essence" level, Process Work deals with the sensing of tendencies which move us but which are not easily expressed as yet in words. This area of human life is sometimes like a subtle atmosphere around people and events.

Deep Democracy recognises the simultaneous importance of the three levels of experience. Everyday reality and its problems are as important as those that figure in the dream level and also as important as a spiritual experience at the essence level of reality where rank no longer exists.

## **Rank, Power and Privilege**

Mindell defines rank as “the sum of a person’s privileges. A conscious or unconscious social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and / or spiritual power. Whether you earned or inherited your rank, it organizes much of your communication behavior, especially at edges and hot spots.” (Mindell, 1995)

When facilitating individuals or groups it is helpful to support the areas of strength in each person and how they can use this for the benefit of the whole. Many of us have difficulty doing this, but the effects of rank are felt anyway. Owning and acknowledging one’s rank helps to create a more congruent and authentic atmosphere. When rank is not acknowledged, it will communicate itself through unintentional or double signals, where the body language, content and tone of what is being said do not match. We often tend to react to these signals and because the other person or group does not identify with them, conflict often ensues.

There are four aspects of rank:

- **Social rank:** derives from the privilege and power that comes from money, class, gender, race, education, age, health, physical appearance and other values held in high esteem by the mainstream
- **Psychological rank:** comes from feeling secure and cared for or from surviving suffering and becoming stronger and more compassionate
- **Spiritual rank:** comes from a connection with something sacred that keeps one centred during difficult times
- **Contextual rank:** comes from the power and privilege that is derived from a position or role in a particular context

## **Working with Rank Awareness in Bolivia**

Ana Rhodes (a friend and colleague from Findhorn) and I were invited to work with a group of largely indigenous farmers in Caranavi, a small frontier town on the edge of the rainforest in the Las Yungas in Bolivia. The farmers were representatives of an agricultural producers network aiming to produce organic, fairtrade products. We had been told that the group suffered from apathy and a lack of engagement and that our brief was to teach conflict facilitation and motivational skills

## **The Cultural Context**

Bolivia is an extremely beautiful country. Nestling amidst the Andes in South America, its capital city, La Paz, sits at 3,800 meters above sea level. Stretching from the majestic icebound peaks of the Cordillera Real and bleak, high altitude

deserts of the Andes to the lush rainforests and vast savannahs of the Amazon Basin, Bolivia is a rich resource of biodiversity. The beauty and variety of this landscape is matched by the ethnic and cultural diversity of the country's population, the majority of whom are of indigenous descent. The languages of Imara and Quechua, amongst others, are still spoken as the first language of many. One of the 'poorest' countries in the world, the country's underdevelopment has been, perhaps, a blessing in disguise for the environment, allowing vast wilderness areas to survive in near-pristine condition.

Unfortunately, although the country is incredibly rich in natural resources, growing pressure from the North and global 'free trade agreements' mean that national markets find it increasingly difficult to protect local interests. In the last 30 - 40 years over 40% of the country's population of 5 million has followed the global trend of moving to rapidly increasing, urban slum areas, which in this case are of La Paz.

### **The Training**

On the second day of the training we worked with the concept that conflict is not just something that happens outside of ourselves; we are part of the system within which the conflict is happening and consequently affect and are affected by the conflict. We then introduced the dynamics of rank, power and privilege and encouraged the group to find areas of rank that they could celebrate.

At the end of this exercise one of the participants, Victor, stood up suddenly and began addressing the room in his native language of Imara. His presence and posture had changed dramatically. From being relatively quiet and somewhat deferential in nature, his posture, tone of voice and presence changed completely, unexpectedly commanding the attention of everyone present. It seemed as if it was no longer just Victor speaking and that something greater was pouring through him. There was a tangible sense that he was speaking not only on behalf of himself, his family and community but also for all proud indigenous people of Incan descent and perhaps for the spirit of all peoples who have been marginalized over the centuries, finding his and their voice. The power of their presence was palpable.

When Victor stood up we were very touched, and especially when he proceeded to share how he had lost confidence in himself after years of being humiliated for being indigenous. We saw how the 'symptom' of apathy that we had been asked to address in the training was directly related to a lack of confidence because of the voices of humiliation and criticism that he and his people had internalised over the centuries.

As Victor picked up his rank, finding the inspiration and courage to speak out, the atmosphere in the room changed completely. A sense of passion and commitment to taking a stance filled the room. This was exactly the kind of

energy that the group needed to confront the conflict that they were facing in their local area in which a very large company was pressuring the local communities to sell their land, lose their autonomy and become employees. The community leaders' response up to that point had been mostly to shout at the company representatives and walk out of negotiations, leaving the more vulnerable members of the community to be won over by false promises. As Victor accessed the sense of inherent wisdom, dignity and entitlement within himself and in the group, their right, and ability to stand for autonomy and sustainable livelihood became stronger.

This example demonstrates how important the understanding of the dynamics of rank and power are for any group or organisation. When rank is used without awareness it can lead to abuse, which can happen both when the hierarchical structure of a group or organisation is clear and in groups that identify with equality, where often there are hidden power structures that lead to conflict.

### **Working with Open Forums**

An Open Forum is the application of Process Work principles to large-scale interactions. It is a method of working with groups that facilitates conflict or difficulty as it arises in the atmosphere or 'field'.

This approach involves:

- identifying the issues or themes that are currently 'up' in the group.
- reaching agreement or consensus on which theme to work with.
- identifying the roles, voices or differing points of view that are represented, or that may not be represented but are nonetheless felt by all concerned.
- facilitating an interactive discussion or unfolding of the theme, including the less tangible or obvious aspects of the dynamic.
- noticing temporary resolutions or shifts in atmosphere, as well as points of tension and group 'edges'.

**An atmosphere or 'field'** includes not only the individuals concerned but also the entire organisation or culture of which the group is a part. It consists of the more familiar or overt aspects of group life like agenda items, identified roles and rational discussion as well as the less obvious and more difficult aspects of any group. Examples of the latter include the minority views, shadows or 'elephants in the room', cultural influences that reflect the belief systems and 'spirits' of the time as well as 'ghosts' which are the points of view or opinions that are not identified with or easily expressed in the group and yet strongly influence the field. Often when these 'ghosts' are voiced and interacted with there is a sense of relief and resolution.

Addressing the content and structure of concerns is important in groups.

However, if the underlying issues or feelings in the background are not addressed it is unlikely that a deeply felt resolution will be reached.

### **Applying Open Forum in the training**

On the third day we began to teach an Open Forum approach to working with large group conflict. The theme that the group chose to explore was the conflict between their cooperatives and the large company on their doorstep that was pressurising them to sell all of their raw coffee beans. There was a sense of urgency in the group because they had to make this decision within two months. The alternative was to take the risk of strengthening and organising their own cooperatives, advocating for the right to trade freely and activate the local government support that they would need to do this.

Although there was a clear wish to do the latter, there was also a sense of apathy or hopelessness in the atmosphere that we had begun to address the previous day with Victor. In the group of twenty-six participants there were two people who already worked for the company and were able to represent their point of view. This was useful in terms of having all the sides of the conflict represented.

We facilitated the Open Forum by inviting people to take positions or 'roles' that represented the various points of view. After airing many opinions and feelings, the group began to express some of the despair and anger that they felt; however as we worked with these roles, encouraging people to inhabit different sides of the dialogue and to experience 'the other side', the atmosphere began to change. The sense that the large company possessed absolute entitlement and clarity became an ally, instead of being seen as oppressive. This demonstrates how cultivating an ability to pick up an aspect of the 'other side' is a key tool in 'Process Work'.

A renewed sense of resolve, solidarity and commitment to strengthen the cooperatives and to look for solutions that would enable them to become more effective in all areas of coffee production began to emerge. Rather than just focusing on fighting the company, they could then use that energy to build alliances, improve the internal practices of their own organisations and find ways to be more inclusive of other producers.

We ended the training with a decision making process that supported the group to come up with clear next steps which they could take in order to really ground their intention and to strengthen themselves as cooperatives.

The president of the coffee cooperatives arrived unexpectedly to hear the outcomes of the workshop and he was so impressed by the next steps that had emerged from the Open Forum that he offered his support in taking the dialogue to the next level needed within local government.

## **The Role of the Facilitator**

This chapter provides an outline of some ideas drawn from Process Work that we have applied in our work during the last few years. Because Process Work is not a prescriptive approach, rather one based on unfolding the signals as they appear in the moment, it is a creative, alive and intuitive process. This requires the full engagement of the facilitator and a willingness to work on increasing her own levels of awareness, particularly in the area of belief systems and bias, so as to be facilitating from as clear a space as possible. As she forms part of the field, the facilitator's inner attitudes will be communicated either directly, when they are held with awareness, or through double signals if they are not consciously identified with. This is why the ability to reflect internally, or to do 'inner work', is an important part of the facilitator's skill set. Being fully congruent is what instils confidence and generates trust. It is what will help to build the quality of the relationship between the facilitator and the group, which is necessary for working at the deep levels required for organisational transformation.

While we were in Bolivia we also had the opportunity to apply many of the principles described above in other trainings such as in Leadership and Confidence building for women and organisational development for several NGOs. This year and next we will be returning to run training for trainers programmes so that the local people themselves can incorporate these and other tools into their own training programmes. We will also be continuing our work in other parts of the world.

I would like to thank my colleagues and teachers who over the years have provided, and continue to provide, huge amounts of inspiration and support and without whom I would not be able to do this work.

## **Biography**

Gill Emslie is a long-term resident of the Findhorn Foundation Community in Scotland. Part of the management team there for several years, she currently works as a consultant and trainer in the areas of organisational development and capacity building in both Latin America and Europe – within grassroots organisations as well as in business. She is a mother, loves music and nature and has studied and worked with various approaches to transpersonal psychology over the years, in a variety of settings. Prior to living at Findhorn, Gill spent several years living in remote areas of North and South America where a deep respect and appreciation of the Earth's beauty was born, along with a profound concern for the senseless destruction of its vital living systems, even in some of the most remote areas. This realisation motivated her to come to Findhorn in search of ways to address this situation both within her and in the world. As she describes in the article, Gill recently went to Bolivia to give a series of workshops and trainings with Findhorn colleague Ana Rhodes.

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<sup>i</sup> 'Global south is an alternative term used to describe countries often identified as belonging to the 'developing world'.