

Organisational Transactional Analysis in the Workplace

Anita Mountain

Most organisations have difficulties at some time or other with communication within, and between, different departments and teams. Often consultants are called in to enable the organisation to establish clear communication, sometimes being asked to set up a process or system to enable effective communication. However, in my own experience I have found that communication is usually only effective when people feel comfortable, safe and relaxed with their colleagues.

I will outline two models I have used with departments and teams to enable them to get to grips with the issues they need to address and to go on to resolve these. I link the second model to Wickens' work in The Ascendant Organisation.

The first model, Concepts for Thriving, (Mountain, 2004: pp 59-61) is based on Denton Roberts' Hierarchy of Functioning, and fits with the philosophy and the belief that safety and security are of paramount importance. It also takes into account both the individual and the organisation and can be used as a diagnostic tool and a structure for action. It is based on the assumption that there are seven basic components to effective functioning, i.e. emotional safety, positive reinforcement, belonging, clear communication, productive activity, integration and celebration. Celebration needs to implicitly, if not explicitly, run throughout the concepts..

These seven components are built upon each other; that is, one must be in place before you can go on to the next. When they are established, nourished and applied in an organisation

that is the degree to which the organisation, and the relationships within it, are functional. The extent to which these basic components are established, nourished or applied, is the extent to which the organisation is dysfunctional or functional.

Outlined below are the definitions of the concepts:

Concepts for Thriving (© Mountain)

Concept	Definition	Required
Safety	When I have this my primary needs are taken care of, I am comfortable with myself, and boundaries are maintained.	Acceptance & protection
Positive Reinforcement	I am given positive recognition and there is mutual exchange.	Appreciation & respect
Belonging	I feel accepted and respected within this environment / team / organisation	To feel safe with others and self and to receive recognition
Clear Communication	I know I am being heard and I am therefore more willing to hear others.	A developed sense of belonging. Colleagues use active listening, feedback and response in a way that is accepting but challenging
Productive Activity	My actions are based on here and now reality and I collaboratively problem solve. I recognize, and am recognized, for my competency, and I have a sense of who I am. I am able to balance giving and receiving.	Realistic expectations



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Integration	I can celebrate what I do well, take a positive view of my “growing edge” and learn from my mistakes. I make positive things happen and can recognize my achievements. I enjoy who I am and what I do.	Facilitation
Celebration	I am celebrated. I celebrate me and who I am, what I do and who I am in relation to others and the world.	This runs through every level.

These components are implicit in Transactional Analysis theory and express an interest in thriving rather than stagnation.

In order to thrive we need to be nourished by:

- *Acceptance & protection* – when new employees arrive into a team or department the culture needs to be one of acceptance. As they have not yet established their credibility in the new place of work, new people tend to return to their previous place of work to obtain the recognition they require. The new work organisation needs to find ways to offer acceptance to new arrivals so that they can settle in and get on with the job.
- *Appreciation & respect* – we all need to feel valued and appreciated. This is something that needs to happen even before we may have had the opportunity to develop any credibility for the work we are doing. Everyone, at all levels, needs to look for contributions that can be appreciated, whether that be for the way we have dealt with a situation, delivered something on time, or showed some initiative. Naturally, this appreciation needs to be

well founded and not false in its nature, or it will be devalued.

- *Belonging* – this occurs when we feel accepted, appreciated and respected.
- *Realistic expectations* – Realistic expectations relates both to the position of the person being asked to do a task, the task itself and the deadline set for it. We can decide if expectations are realistic by assessing if it is measurable, manageable, and motivational. Whilst not all work we do is motivational, when this element is in place, a better job is likely to be done. (Many people believe they have failed even when the job is impossible, so that “failure” is not the relevant term).
- *Facilitation* – learning is effective when adequate time given to reflection and supervision. Good management enables the workforce to learn from tasks done, however successful they were. Integration and assimilation is more effective when we receive feedback when strengths are also part of the feedback process. This links back to the development of safety.

The negative environment flourishes through:

- Blame.
- Ridicule.
- Humiliation.
- Unrealistic expectations.
- Alienation.

When we experience safety as being weak or absent we might feel threatened. This affects our relationships and we are more likely to be negative and critical as a defence, or perhaps withdraw and do the minimum required of us. This in turn is likely to lead to poor communication which leads to



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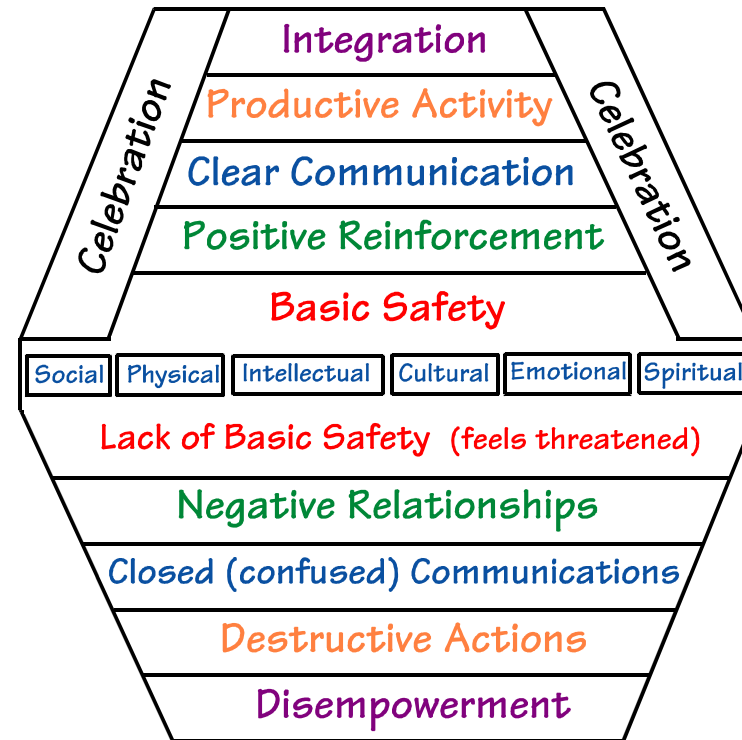
(Adapted from additional workshop notes by Denton Roberts - October 1997)

destructive actions with resultant conflicts. This can then lead back to the start of the cycle when we feel threatened instead of safe.

All organisations need to develop a healthy environment for their employees. Understanding the Concepts for Thriving promotes this process. Establishing Emotional Safety will lead to attachment; Positive Reinforcement provides attachment and leads to engagement; whilst clear communication strengthens the bonding through engagement with others and the environment.

If we are in leadership positions we need to provide emotional safety by ensuring that contracting and expectations are clear. When undertaking training, coaching or supervision we need to ensure that sessions are not interrupted. We need to facilitate the process between ourselves and others, and between group members, in ways that show respect and develop understanding whilst at the same time ensuring appropriate boundary setting. Through appropriate recognition we provide Positive Reinforcement. Listening to others establishes Clear Communication, and will enable everyone to keep out of self-driven behaviour. Rather than waste time on conflict this will enable the workforce to be productively active and to integrate their experiences.

Having outlined the theory I will now discuss how I have used it.



I was called in to work with a multi-disciplinary team within the service sector. They knew each other well at collegial level, and were experiencing difficulties with communication issues. Staff members sometimes felt left out of the loop and this affected relationships. I drew up the Concepts for Thriving – the top half of the above diagram. Having explained the concepts I then broke the team up into three smaller syndicate groups and asked them to assess at which level they thought they needed to pay attention. On returning to the large group to give feedback they had all assessed that they were experiencing difficulties at the level of Basic Safety.



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This self-assessment meant that they were more prepared to discuss the issues with each other in ways that kept themselves and others okay. They sought out what the issues were in positive ways that addressed what needed to change. This process itself began to establish safety within the team. A part of the later action plan included taking time in staff meetings to celebrate what had gone well at individual and team levels, as well as ask and receive support with areas that were not going so well. Management were given the constructive feedback that they did not offer sufficient support and recognition and they agreed to change this process.

So, out of a brief to enable effective communication came a process which addressed a deeper issue and gave the team ways to address the difficulties that also mirrored the Concepts for Thriving model itself.

Within the discussions about change I also introduced other concepts including Okayness. This is a Transactional Analysis concept that says that we all have a right to be in the world and to be accepted and recognised. When we believe this to be true our beliefs and actions will be congruent. We will listen to others and be interested in their perspective before trying to convince them that we are right even before we have heard and thought about their views, we will get on with others, even though we may not like them as an individual. We will also set and maintain boundaries when we need to, in ways that keep the other person okay, even if we don't like their behaviour. I colour these positions in red and green to reflect traffic lights – red for ineffective communication, likely to put a stop to things, and green for go, when I believe this my communication will be effective.

The alternatives to *I am OK and You are OK* are unhelpful in terms of communication and developing and maintaining relationships. These alternatives are:

I am OK and You are not OK – This is the one-up position and if I am here I am likely to be angry. I will believe I am better than others, that my ideas are the right ones, and that you and your frame of reference, beliefs, behaviours are not as important, relevant etc. as mine.

I am not OK and You are OK – If I am in this position I will put myself down and want to get away from others. I cannot be assertive here and I make others more important than me. I will feel helpless when I am in this place and invite others to take advantage of me and my desire to please others.

I am not OK and You are not OK – When I go into this place I will feel hopeless and believe that nothing can be done to change my lot, the situation or life. Here I will experience passivity and will not be willing to hear solutions to situations. At my worst I will use drugs and drink to obliterate things for a while.

The majority of people do not stay in any one of these zones all of the time. Behaviourally we move around them dependent upon the situation. However, there is likely to be one we go to more readily when we are under stress, and we call this the existential life position.

When we interact with those whose style of communication is in one of the red zones we can use this experience to reinforce our own negative beliefs about ourselves and others, thus going into a red zone ourselves. Of course, our own negative perspective can invite people into their own red zone.



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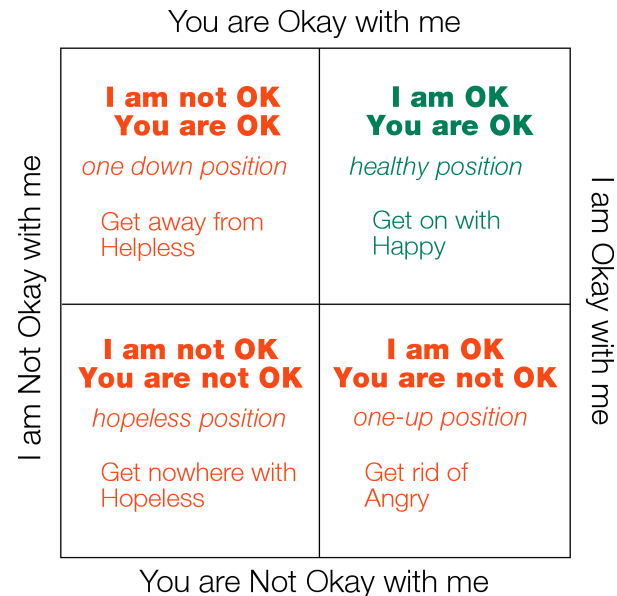
For example, those of us who go into the *I am OK and You are not OK* position are likely to find those who believe they are not OK, and then they have someone to persecute. This belief is unlikely to be overt but will come across when we talk about someone else as “stupid”, “ignorant”, or talk generally in derogatory tones about or to others.

Whilst these positions are generally considered in two dimensions, in organisations this can be developed into a three dimensional process. For example, a finance department and an administration department may talk about the training department in derogatory terms as they perceive them as always “swanning off” round the country having a good time while they are there working away to support them. This would be *You and I are OK and They are not OK*. Under the surface this negative process may cover the fact that the finance and admin. departments do not actually feel good about themselves and can only feel good when they put another department down, so the underlying position may be *I am not OK, You are not OK and They are not OK*. However, we would only really know this if we consulted with each department and assessed the organisational culture, in the meantime we go by the behaviour.

All these positions are purely perspectives, the only actual fact of course is that I exist and you exist – *I am* and *You are*. However, the *I am OK and You are OK* position will be helpful to communication and to life in general as this is the only place that we can really solve problems and invite relationship. It is from this place that effective management and leadership takes place. It is from this place that safety can be established and co-operative processes be encouraged.

Ernst (1971: pp 19-23) developed a behavioural approach to the life positions, which is different to Berne’s (the originator of Transactional Analysis), who considered the importance of life positions to be their existential nature.

Ernst’s concept is called the OK Corral and I have diagrammed this below.



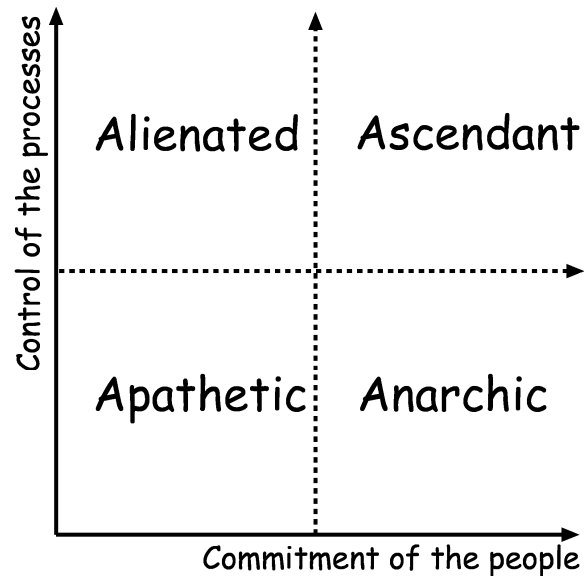
I have linked this with Wickens’ work on the Ascendant Organisation as there is a correlation between the culture of the organisation and the life positions. Wickens looks at organisation types and starts with a simple model outline below (1995:4) before moving on to a more complex perspective.



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“The ascendant organisation combines high levels of commitment of the people and control of the processes to achieve a synthesis between high effectiveness and high quality of life leading to long-term, sustainable business success”.

(Wickens P. 1995:3)



Peter Wickens: The Ascendant Organisation

Previously many leaders concentrate on one axis: control of the process, and control was externally imposed. However, as Wickens points out, commitment is an internal process, with people believing in their own values. Ideally people work for organisations that reflect these values and therefore they are highly motivated to work to achieve their own goals and those of the organisation.

Commitment, though does not come from the length or style of a contract. It comes from ensuring that irrespective of their employment status, everyone is treated with respect, no one is a second class citizen, the contribution of everyone is both valued, and seen to be valued, and the employer helps employees develop their talents and skills.

(Wickens P. 1995: 156)

Wickens model fits well with the OK Corral. The Ascendant Organisation quadrant falls within the *I am OK and You are OK* quadrant of the OK Corral. For Wickens the Ascendant organisation is the one in which there is most prosperity, power and happiness. In terms of Okayness we can only really solve problems when we are in the OK/OK top right hand quadrant. In this position we will be genuine, congruent and own our own power – both hierarchic and internal sense of power - as well as acknowledge that of others. This behaviour is more likely to lead an organisation to be an “Ascendant” organisation in Wickens’ terms. Therefore there is a direct causal link between relationships in the organisation and the success of the organisation.

Organisational leaders and managers need to treat everyone in ways that show they value and appreciate each member of the workforce and their contributions. The leader’s behaviour is key to the development of effective team working and to the promotion of good communication. This occurs through clarity in contracting and establishing clear boundaries in terms of behaviour. People need to be genuinely involved in those areas they can directly affect and kept fully informed about areas they cannot affect but that affect them. These processes will help to develop a safe environment where the workforce will flourish.



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Anita Mountain MSc, CTA (O)(P), FITOL, Teaching & Supervising Transactional Analyst (Organisational and Psychotherapy specialties). Anita is the founding partner of Mountain Associates. She is accredited to train trainers both nationally and internationally. Being certified and accredited to this level in these two specialties in Transactional Analysis is no mean feat as she is only one of a handful world-wide, and the only one in Britain, to achieve this. It takes about five years to achieve the first level in one specialty and another five to achieve the teaching and supervisory level.

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