

Tips for Serious Play: leadership as a relational process

By Esther Walker

Introduction

The series of exercises described below will help you to explore leadership *as a relational process* with a group. In other words it will enable individuals to experience:

- being one of many (a member of a group)
- being 'the leader'
- being 'the lead'
- how responsibility can be exchanged (giving and taking)
- how a leader emerges from the group and then returns once again.

These exercises are also examples of the *complicity* work that we use with groups (see *The Innerwick Experience: transformational leadership in action*).

Complicity describes a state of sophisticated interaction in a group. That state is developed through a series of exercises that gradually build a level of trust and synergy between individuals. It enables individuals to assume the taking and giving of responsibility as an unplanned, spontaneous, supportive and creative process.

The Exercises

These exercises are given in an order of increasing difficulty. For each one I outline some of the themes it helps to raise.

Circle Ball Games

Everyone stands in a circle facing inwards. One person 'A' has a ball. She makes eye contact with another member of the group 'B', says their name and then throws them the ball. 'B' then has the ball. He makes eye contact with another member of the group 'C', says their name and then throws them the ball. And so on...

A way of making this easy to start with is to use a big ball. To increase the difficulty you can then:

- reduce the size of the ball
- remove the requirement for the person throwing to call out the name of the recipient
- introduce a second ball and then a third ball (and then a fourth...)

This exercise reveals:

- how comfortable people are with focusing their concentration
- how comfortable they are with taking responsibility for action

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- how they direct their energy
- how aware they are of (and sensitive to) what is going on in the group.

Staring at my Back

The group remains in a circle but people turn to face outwards. One person comes to stand in the middle. This person chooses someone to look at and stares at their back. The group is silent. If a person feels that they are the one being stared at, then they turn round. Was that person right or not? Someone else then takes a turn in the middle and the exercise is repeated.

This exercise reveals:

- how energy is directed and experienced within the group (often with this exercise the two people standing on either side of the person being stared at turn round – the energy in the group is a felt experience)
- how aware people are of (and sensitive they are to) what is going on 'at their back'.

Eye to Eye

One person in the group is chosen as the leader and everyone else is a follower. The followers have to maintain eye contact with the leader while also being aware of what else is happening in the group. Followers cannot shove one another out of the way in order to maintain eye contact with the leader. Instead, they move like a flock in response to the changing direction of the leader.

This exercise reveals:

- the experience of power for the leader who has 'all eyes on them' (and how comfortable individuals are with this)
- the experience of responsibility for the leader who has 'all eyes on them' (and how comfortable individuals are with this)
- the experience for followers of subordinating their own interests in the service of their leader and the flock.

Sitting Circle

Everyone stands in a circle facing right or left. They close up all the gaps, standing close together. Each person puts their hands on the shoulders of the person in front. Everyone then *at the same time* sits on the legs of the person behind. You will find that the circle is self-supporting and can even move.

People who have never done this exercise usually do not believe that it can work. Although the relative size of individuals is immaterial, the circle does need to balance so do not have all big people on one side and all small people on the other. If people do not commit to sitting on the legs of the person behind them, then the circle will collapse.

This exercise reveals:

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- how comfortable individuals are with depending on others (and here of course it is a *physical* dependence)
- the strength there is in support (each person in the group is supported by the one behind them and, at the same time, is supporting the one in front)
- how a collection of individuals can transform into a unit which can then move around.

Count to 20

Everyone lies on the floor and closes their eyes. The task for the group is to count to 5 with only one person saying a number at a time. If more than one person says a number, then the group has to go back to the beginning.

When the group has succeeded in counting to 5, increase the challenge to 10 and then 15 and finally to 20.

Issues raised:

- how willing or reluctant individuals are to make mistakes (some people keep silent)
- how willing or reluctant individuals are to share control
- how the group (and difficult people within it) manages frustration (the group will only succeed if individuals can remain focussed and alert).

Debriefing

These are experiential exercises of course, so that although there is a clear goal, what is really interesting is the experience that people have in trying to achieve that goal. Be clear at the outset that *all* and *any* feelings that people have are equally valid and contribute valuable learning for the group (as well as for the individuals themselves).

These exercises are excellent resources to help people directly experience and then discuss feelings and themes that are relevant to leadership: e.g. competitiveness, anxiety, paranoia, control, power, anger, fear, support, being part of a group, being out of the group, taking and giving up responsibility.

When a group successfully achieves the goal people usually experience a great deal of satisfaction and celebration. (This is also an experience that it is important to pay attention to.)

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