

# Teambuilding based on Action Methods

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## **Abstract**

Using action techniques during a teambuilding process is not an easy feat. In view of the secure atmosphere required and the desired efficacy it is best to embed any action in a more elaborate methodology. J. L. Moreno developed such a methodology which Norbert Apter has called "Action Methods" when applying it to workshops in a company setting. In this paper, the author presents his vision on the use of Action Methods in teambuilding workshops with a view to a team's renewed outlook and dynamics enabling it to trigger the desired future. In combining theoretical elements and practical examples he explains in a few practical settings, that beyond the necessary mastering of techniques, five centers of competences are required which need to be developed: enactment, use of diverse types of intelligence, balancing integrative lines, establishing a constructive relational climate and respecting each necessary phase of a session.

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"True exploration lies not  
in seeking new continents,  
but in seeing them with new eyes."  
Marcel Proust

In the business world, many companies offer their staff teambuilding workshops in order to give them a new impetus. If they increasingly opt for a psychologist specializing in team work to run the seminar, the reason is very simple: a request for teambuilding often implicitly implies issues relating to the team's identity, its mission, its dynamics, the members' capacity to cooperate, their way of using emotional intelligence, their stress management skills or their intercultural understanding. Very often, teambuilding also implies an element of "conflict management", be it latent or not, major or minor.

Experience has shown that one or even several teambuilding sessions based solely on verbal exchanges are of little interest. Therefore an increasing number of professionals are offering action based teambuilding workshops such as sailing, hiking, team games etc. These actions sometimes reach the desired effect of group cohesion, however they are insufficient to efficiently solve issues that would enable genuine consolidation of group relations and operating methods. Some professionals might develop seminars based on exchanging, reflecting and developing various arguments for which they will resort to action techniques. However, introducing action and interaction is never a benign measure. When J. L. Moreno, the famous psychiatrist, introduced psychodrama in the 1920ies, he not only introduced action at the service of intra- and inter-personal relations, but he developed a comprehensive method offering sufficient flexibility whilst being thoroughly structured in order to securely surround the developmental process.

When operating teambuilding workshops for companies, I don't deal with the psychotherapeutic aspect of the seminar, and since I have been including a large number of elements developed by J. L. Moreno in his theories (sociodrama, sociometry, etc.), I have chosen to loosely call this method "Action Methods"<sup>1</sup>.

I have identified 5 centers of competence, each one of them needs to be developed in order to use Action Methods efficiently in a company setting: to facilitate enactment, use of diversified types of intelligence, balance integrative lines, establish a facilitating relational climate and obviously, respect all sine qua non phases.

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<sup>1</sup> term used from time to time by Moreno in a generic way.

Let me introduce these 5 centers of competence.

### **Enactment**

Moreno's well developed theory and his practical applications and experiences drawn from action research clearly highlight a fundamental distinction that the facilitator must understand: action is never equivalent to enactment.

Most trainers know from experience that words are not always sufficient; ex cathedra presentations not only have a clear limitation but they can sometimes be inappropriate. Therefore trainers increasingly rely on active or even interactive training sequences. The selected actions are usually a way of loosely developing the topic at hand. More often than not, the trainer only uses these sequential functions. The potential behind the use of such actions is significant and can generate a major amplification of existing possibilities. Selected actions or interactions can be linked to the team's professional reality which may have arisen in the participants' past, present or even in the anticipated future, thus evolving towards enactment, i.e. externalization of interior processes or very close representations of "reality". (Apter, 2003a) In this case, it becomes essential to use another "stage", distinctly different from the verbal level, in order to create a "what if" reality in the here-and-now which every participant can enter without possibly confusing it with the "present reality".

At the very beginning of a two-day teambuilding workshop organized for a bank, on a Monday morning, I had intentionally arranged the team in a circle. I began the seminar by ostensibly moving an empty chair next to me, saying. "It is Monday morning; this empty chair here is in a different time frame: for this chair it is now Tuesday afternoon." I invited each team member to come and sit on the chair in turn, to "remind" us of his/her name and title within the bank's team and to tell us first what he/she "expected from the seminar on Monday morning" and then, "what had turned out to be the most significant moment of the seminar" seen from the Tuesday afternoon time-frame. The participants were free to explain some of the highlights and/or deficiencies "experienced during the 2-day workshop", as well as any perspective stemming from it. In spite of my rather unconventional proposal, their fear of ridicule and their lack of exposure to Action Methods, each participant came to sit on the future chair. Stimulated by this introduction, some announced "how satisfied they were after these two days", or "how relieved they were to have experienced" some of the issues being dealt with"; others spoke about their doubts and said that it "had brought nothing". The short dialogues I carried on with each one as they were sitting on the future chair allowed for instant understanding of the dynamics at hand. It is interesting to note that during the wrap-up session which took place on Tuesday afternoon, several participants mentioned that they had really been surprised by the technique used

at the start of the workshop, as well as by their own statement during this very first enactment. Some added that this procedure had convinced them to become “players” in the teambuilding process, as opposed to mere spectators: “It was an excellent way to involve us from the start”.

In this example the stage is rather special: the facilitator’s chair is placed on the interface of the “verbal frame” and the empty space which is to become the stage later on. Moving an empty chair into the interface allows for the latter to become the stage where everything becomes possible; exploring this empty space then becomes manageable. As seen in the example of the future chair, enactment can consist of minimal action or it can be much more elaborate as we will see later in a few other examples. A more elaborate action technique will trigger a combination of the cognitive level with the emotional and behavioral ones, will correlate with each participant’s reality, his life experience, his story, his person, the here-and-now, the minor or major tensions experienced in the group. This is where specific skills, including psychological ones, are required of the trainer who needs to fully master the Moreno method. For “not only is it an elaborate and secure way to use interaction during a seminar, but also - and above all - it provides ways to transform learning into competencies which are directly applicable in the workplace.” (Apter, 2011)

### **Use of Diverse types of Intelligence**

In order to keep everyone’s spontaneity and creativity stimulated throughout the process, a key source for actualization and growth according to Moreno (Apter, 2003b; Moreno, 1972 (original in 1946)), facilitators need to draw upon what Howard Gardner was later to call “multiple intelligence” (Gardner, 1999). Each member of the team displays his own configuration of intelligence. He/she can avail himself of several modes of « understanding » which can be combined in different ways. During a teambuilding process, the added value of Action Methods lies in the manifold forms of intelligence available. In such a setting, any action technique calls upon several types of intelligence concurrently.

On stage, asking several small groups to create a simple human sculpture to represent the group’s style of cooperation for example, requires first the development of a common reflection, respecting the common decision of what it is that will be represented, and how to go about it, then adjusting to all the other group members (ecological intelligence). Enactment itself relies upon physical contact (kinesthetic intelligence), imagery and observation (visio-spatial intelligence), as well as evidencing of relational perception (interpersonal intelligence). Inviting each member of the human sculpture to express his feelings at that point in time will facilitate his self-awareness (intrapersonal intelligence), enabling him/her to hear

others using their own language, their own words and meaning (linguistic intelligence) as well as their intonations (musical intelligence), whilst consciously or unconsciously elaborating a string of categorization and reasoning (logical & mathematical intelligence).

The action technique chosen by the facilitator is of lesser importance than the method used. However any type of intelligence used will enable each team member to be involved, to develop his own synthesis for understanding and to contribute it to the pool of “collective intelligence”.

Balancing integrative lines<sup>2</sup>

In seeking to reach enactment’s fullest potential to call upon all relevant types of intelligence, I noticed that Action Methods are best supported by six integrative lines which become most efficient when used together: expressing – exploring – exercising – elaborating – evaluating – evolving.

Each line is important, neither one prevails. It is the combination and fine dosage of all of them that will allow active progression in “cooperating, working together” and integration of this dimension during the teambuilding session in accordance with the circumstances and requirements of a given team.

Let’s consider the example of a team of social workers who were wondering about their identity, their very *raison d’être*; they obviously needed to talk about it, to express their questioning as to who they were. What was the impact of their history? What was their desired future like? In order to facilitate expression and allowing them to go beyond that very stage I opted for the enactment of a time-line in action. I suggested rolling out an imaginary time-line on stage representing the team’s past chronology. I then suggested bringing to life the key moments in the team’s history by representing them on stage. Thus we discovered (on stage) the previous composition of the team, as it existed four years ago when only two of the current members were present, the atmosphere existing back then, departures and arrivals of various team leaders or fellow team members, changes in structure, organization, operations, even orientation – and under what circumstances they had occurred. The team was thus able to rediscover the rationale behind its past development, and therefore to better understand its present development. Little by little the past began to make sense, and so did the present. Rolling out the team’s past along an imaginary line not only enabled the team members to express and re-experience their previous understanding of the team, but also to attempt to solve

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<sup>2</sup> Line : one of the translations of the french word « voie », other translations could have been « ways », « lanes »... For a long time, I was calling them « axes » (Apter, 2011). I changed due to the connotation of « axes » (World War II). The term « line » does justice to the complexity of the movement and to the unexpected elements that one can encounter.

some unfinished business. A poor welcome of a new colleague could finally be remedied; farewell was given to some former co-workers (a previous boss amongst them) who kept haunting their present history by being around and interfering in the present team's dynamics. Such welcoming and separation steps (they were exercising to complete interactions) opened up possibilities to solve further tensions. Active "working through" (elaboration) of the past enabled genuine development to take place. At the end of the process, back in the verbal frame, the social workers were able to look at the present from a different angle (evaluation + evolution), without a burdening past weighing it down; the desired future could be envisaged under improved auspices.

This example shows that whatever technique is chosen, facilitators of a teambuilding workshop based on Action Methods need to make sure they are creating sufficient space for each one of these lines through their coaching and guidance, as the targeted integrative synergy is fundamentally linked to a balanced use of the six lines for integration.

### **Creating a constructive relational climate**

It goes without saying that resorting to multiple types of intelligence, or collective intelligence, must occur in an atmosphere based on trust and confidence. The same goes for the balancing of integrative lines used by the coach. Otherwise any action technique will appear threatening, intelligence will freeze and integration will be blocked from the start: the result can only be deficient. The relational climate during a workshop is therefore of foremost importance, especially when minor or major tensions exist.

Moreno and a number of other psychodramatists throughout the world may have written a few pages regarding the importance of generating a setting of openness, an environment of acceptance and trust where change can occur, but it was really Carl R. Rogers who researched, published extensively on the subject and founded the Person-Centered Approach.

In teambuilding – as is the case with most other activities – the trainer or facilitator must trust the "innate tendency towards self-actualization"<sup>3</sup>: each and every one will do "his best"<sup>4</sup> depending on internal and external data available at this very moment. Moreno fully agrees with this principle in his concept of "resource orientation". To accompany such a life process and trigger a climate conducive to personal development, Carl Rogers identifies three conditions which are "together necessary and sufficient" (Rogers, 1968): unconditional positive regard (Bozarth & Wilkins, 2001; Haugh &

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<sup>3</sup> Term used by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, initiators of the humanistic school.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes it is simply the « least worst».

Merry, 2001), empathy ((Haugh & Merry, 2001) and congruence (Wyatt, 2001). For each team member needs to know that he/she is being accepted the way he is, for whatever he stands for, and that he is met with a benevolent attitude by the facilitator. Even if some of his behavior should become unacceptable. He also needs to be met with empathy, to be listened to and heard within his own frame of reference, and to know what the other person has understood from his expression. In developing empathy, the facilitator needs to remain sufficiently in the background in order to avoid feeling neither sympathy nor antipathy, as both would be detrimental to the process. His own congruence, expression of the feelings he experiences, and lack of any judgment or power game is essential to the participants' verbal liberation. This particular way of the facilitator to express himself (owning his feelings and thoughts) and the topic covered by his expression (his own reality) is non-threatening and is conducive to the team members reaching the same level of expression.

In 2008, I was working with a group in DR Congo, which partly turned out to be a conflict resolution process involving MONUC (UN Mission to Congo). The stage represented a Court room, the judge had just declined jurisdiction and the local sorcerer started a cursing ritual against the opponent and the governmental authorities. It seemed like there was no possible solution to the conflict. Tension was dangerously increasing. With every action technique deployed, I made sure that I remained centered and relied on what Carl Rogers had taught us one day in Dublin, in 1985, during my training period (these are the notes I took then):

When a person faces another human being

- who accepts and welcomes him,
- who listens, hears and seeks to understand him,
- who is in the here-and-now, who is open and expresses himself with congruence

then, gradually the former realizes that his defensive-aggressive behavior is no longer necessary. He can then lower the tension at his own pace and rely on his resources to reach for "his best".

The same applies to any group or team...

This was certainly the one element that enabled the group's spontaneity and creativity to remain mobilized, in spite of the huge cultural differences at play.

My way of being allowed me to welcome the situation, to seek to understand the specific frame of reference of the event, whilst genuinely expressing multiple layers of astonishment. Later on, more than half of the participants mentioned how important my trust in the process and in the collective intelligence had been for them. The assurance generated by my attitude as well as the group's

creativity and spontaneity had been “essential factors” in elaborating options which turned out to be rather unexpected.

Such a way of being, suggested by Carl Rogers<sup>5</sup> allows for true encounter beyond any difficulties, beyond similarities and differences, be they cultural ones (Apter, 1996).

For the facilitator to gracefully experience these three attitudes which are “together necessary and sufficient”, I believe that he must have developed what later became to be known as “emotional intelligence” (Goleman, 1995). The required climate based on dialogue and co-development through enactment for a teambuilding process can only be helped by it; the whole team can then progress whilst considering individual and collective reality and requirements alike. No doubt, spontaneity and creativity promoted by Action Methods meet here very favorable grounds for development.

### **Respecting each necessary phase**

Action Methods, as well as a facilitative relational climate and a secure setting for the experience to take place, require at least three mandatory phases according to J. L. Moreno. The wide array<sup>6</sup> of action techniques available which can be applied or constructively combined during each phase fosters a creative development of various options which can promote the desired evolution. It is possible to work for a few minutes or a few hours with a given technique, depending on the phase reached in the process, the needs or the objectives. Examples of action techniques which I introduced earlier can be developed to a lesser or higher degree or entirely differently. The same goes for the examples to come. None of them are specific to the phase in which I mention them.

The typical phases developed by Moreno are:

#### *Warm up*

Warm up is the time to ask the question: “What is it we want to deal with?”. It is a time to state the target and refine the topic, to elaborate its foundation; a time of preliminary contact, a first step in the direction of... Games, practical exercises, discussions in sub-groups, they all enable the gradual focusing of

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<sup>5</sup> Carl R. Rogers was a Nobel Peace Prize nominee in 1987 for his work on *encounter* and mediation between the protagonists-antagonists of South Africa, Ireland and above all Central America (workshop in Rust, Austria). He died before the Nobel Prize was awarded and we will never know whether he would have been the beneficiary.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Ancelin-Schutzenberger (Ancelin-Schutzenberger, 2003 (original en 1966)) lists over one hundred action techniques; there are many more.



the topic and progression towards its more complex structure. This is the beginning of co-construction.

For a warm up during a teambuilding workshop for an international organization, I decided to draw 7 parallel lines with masking tape on the floor of the free space available. On each of the lines I put a cardboard; each of them bearing an "item" according to Huszczo (Huszczo, 1990, 1996). I introduced the items as possible goals for the team members, based on what I had heard so far: "sense of direction, sense of orientation and goals are clear; members are competent and their skills are used appropriately; each one's responsibilities are clear and in line with his job; procedures are reasonable and operational as well as efficient; interpersonal relations are constructive; active reinforcement systems are in place; external relations are constructive." I invited each member of the team to read these items and to see whether they made sense to them. I then explained that each line drawn on the floor was a continuum and invited them to indicate their priorities for the workshop by placing post-it notes numbered 1-7 on the corresponding spots. After having observed and commented together what had turned into a histogram on the floor, priority topics easily stood out. The speed and efficacy of this focusing phase had given the group a sense of clarity, perhaps even of cohesion and belonging. On a randomly chosen continuum I asked participants who had ranked it number 2 and participants who had ranked it number 7 to go stand by their post-it and explain the reasons behind their choices. A brief dialogue took place between the two sub-groups. I used the same option for dialogue in different ways for the remaining continuums and also observed some time to reflect on the situation. We were already progressing towards our goal (clarification and co-construction) through this carefully monitored interaction.

As you can see from this example, the fundamental aim of a warm up phase is to enable each member to dare participate gradually and interact with the facilitator and with the group, throughout an active process. It is the facilitator's role to bring about an "atmosphere of creative possibility" (Karp et al., 1998) p.3) .

### *Action*

This is the crux of the workshop. Little by little throughout the warm up phase, the group or the team was able to clarify the issue that seemed to deserve priority attention at that particular moment in time. The challenge for the facilitator is to combine his feelings and his thoughts in order to offer a focused action technique which will allow the group to broaden its emerging selection. It is important to enable the relational, functional and operational dynamics within the group to take shape through a variety of associated "incarnations" (Williams, 1991). To incorporate and give some impetus to the selected issue, the facilitator will most likely chose one technique and associate a number of others. More than any other phase, "action" is a time when active experiencing of the selected issue occurs in order for the team to progress towards an answer or a string of answers and acceptable or

stimulating options. Active experiencing is the best opportunity to simultaneously be immersed in the present with one's emotions, thoughts, behavior, interactions whilst developing a different sense or a refreshed sense, be it consciously or not. "Working through" as implied in this phase primarily aims at re-integrating what was or what is and make room for the desired transformation.

In a group of engineers, the selected issue was a decision needing to be made. An additional operational sector, even though restricted in scope, was possibly going to be added to their present responsibilities and they had been asked to voice their opinion. We were about 15 people standing in a circle with chairs piled up on each side of the room. After the warm up phase I suggested that each team member in turn place one of the chairs in the center of the room, thus symbolizing and expressing the argument he/she wished to put forward. Each argument could only be represented once. Proximity or closeness between the chairs symbolized proximity or closeness between the arguments. We all had to make the effort of remembering which opinion was represented by each chair. Each member in turn placed a chair, an opinion, in the open space. In the end there were 43 chair-opinions on stage, such as "we don't have the necessary skills"; "a good opportunity to develop new skills"; "the suggested activity is very time-consuming"; "we already have too much work as it is"; "it could be an exciting challenge"; "we will need specific training", etc. I asked each of them to go stand behind a chair and engage with the other participants based on the argument represented by the chair. I then asked them to choose another chair, as they pleased, and to pursue the discussion. After that I invited them to choose a chair-opinion with which they disagreed and to defend this argument in the debate. I repeated and varied the changes of perspective whilst letting the discussion unfold, sometimes in a very lively manner. Whenever I deemed it useful or necessary, I would introduce other techniques (mirroring, soliloquy, future projection, etc), all the while respecting the "central technique", the red thread running throughout the whole process which I came to call the 1000 chairs. Many things were being expressed. Gradually a common understanding was reached, an option which had so far been unthinkable, and which, once it was out in the open, transformed the entire discussion: a trial period. A major reflection based on changing chairs and changing initial arguments was triggered slowly. The consensual conclusion was: to introduce a 1-year trial period, together with a short specific training seminar and an end-of-year feedback with the secure knowledge that it would be possible to back out.

An action phase can really reach its full amplification when role reversal is included<sup>7</sup>. The inherent potential for creativity and spontaneity, as well as the change in perspective and the ensuing empathy make it a major asset in Moreno's theory. Incorporating first one self, then an ally, then an antagonist, etc. allows the participant to explore his own dynamics, to experience other representations, to sometimes re-adjust his own representations, and very often, thanks to the "working through", to free up what had been locked in.

*Pooling* (in psychodrama called: sharing)

This is a key post-action moment, a time for "normalcy" and integration; a time of resonance when each member can connect to his professional environment what he/she just experienced. At this stage, participants recall other situations they have experienced, similar to the action produced. Thus the semi-reality of various scenes is connected to real-life scenes without any judgment nor interpretation: action in itself represents sufficient interpretation (Leutz, 1985). The link to everyone's reality offers recognition and mutual support. Through the participant's personal story everyone reveals himself, explaining his emotions, thoughts, behavior and thus his past reactions. The links produced – consciously or not – enable each member to look upon his past and his present with new eyes: in situ, they become a springboard for the general integration of the experience.

The constructive relational climate instituted by the facilitator takes on a specific connotation in this setting: it is a link reaching from one humanity to another, it is pooling of a professional human being to another professional human being.

It goes without saying that such moments of openness are rather unusual within a company or an international organization. And yet, implementing this phase is indispensable in the use of Action Methods: its "linking and sense making" effect supplements the preceding phases; this appears even more so in a teambuilding process.

In a teambuilding setting, I usually add two further phases before closing (which I need not develop in this paper, as they are well known amongst trainers):

*Putting in perspective*

concerned about the return on investment of this new experience, the team will require some time to identify those elements which have meaning at the present stage. The members will attempt to assess their "learning" progress and to further explore any lessons to be drawn from it, with the aim of renewing their professional reality.

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1000 chairs example, *role reversal* was introduced by changing chairs and the associated argument.

### *Synthesis and Leverage for the future*

linked to the previous phase, this moment is the final touch in the teambuilding process: pooling one more time, calling on multiple intelligence and collective intelligence to enable the team to identify any possible points of action required for a renewed professional reality.

Various action techniques can of course also be used to maximize these two phases that which complete J.L. Moreno's secure methodology.

The facilitative climate used during these five phases helps each and everyone to enact, to explore the needed lines and to benefit from his/her multiple intelligence as well as from the collective intelligence. Using such a method in a teambuilding turns out to help integrate what could have just remained an understanding of the team.

### **Conclusion**

If words alone are insufficient for a teambuilding process, « introducing action and interaction between participants of a seminar without using a well designed method is risky » (Apter, 2011). Thus the importance of J. L. Moreno's Action Methods. They enable the facilitator to actively, efficiently and safely accompany a group towards a changed situation by using a soft and yet well structured methodology.

Action techniques which are used by a number of professionals without being embedded in an elaborate methodology can open unexpected doors: the risk of slippage or losing control is considerable. In my experience, a request for teambuilding is often underpinned by a conscious or unconscious request for minor or major conflict resolution, therefore the risk is even greater. Action, interaction and especially enactment can at any time enable underlying tensions to surface, whether the facilitator likes it or not. Fortunately J. L. Moreno's humanistic methodology applied in a person- and group-centered atmosphere (Carl Rogers) can offer an extraordinary tool for active conflict resolution if necessary<sup>8</sup>. Thus, even when conflict management is disguised as teambuilding, any professional can rely on J. L. Moreno's method to promote the emergence of a renewed outlook and promising dynamics.

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<sup>8</sup> Depending on the complexity or gravity of the conflict, the facilitator of a teambuilding workshop would be well advised to have also trained as a mediator.

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