

“Seeing With Fresh Eyes: How ROG Expanded My Awareness, Presence, Contact and Self-Acceptance”

I was struck by a question posed by my ROG supervisor when I was candidly venting my frustration about what felt for me like the intransigent and destructive behaviours of parties in a case I was mediating.

“What could you do with your frustration?” she inquired.

Core ethical principles in mediation include impartiality and neutrality of the mediator – so rigorously staying in the objective non-partisan zone and avoiding any kind of interventions that could be construed as directing or ‘telling’ seemed to be out of bounds. Instead, the only obvious response from the mediator stance seemed to be to swallow my thoughts and feelings and be extra vigilant in case my behaviours might leak any judgement or bias.

Even though I had spent twenty years providing both mediation services and training people as accredited mediators, the ROG approach provided a very different frame for the context of my work: how I see my clients and in particular, the impact and meaning of their behaviour. Rather than seeing them as resistant, difficult and not willing to ‘change’, I have shifted into a much more curious and accepting mindset.

Applying prescribed skills to ‘help the parties move forward’ has given way to tuning into, and getting curious about, my here-and-now experience and what might emerge from doing that. Instead of relying merely on one faculty (my cognition – my thoughts, my knowledge, my reservoir of learned ‘skills’), there were other ‘core organisers of my experience’ that were untapped and could provide an impetus for intervening. For example, realising that far from having to ignore my emotions, raising awareness, and sharing this could be impactful and useful. This seemed anathema at first. My reflex response to my supervisor’s question above yielded words like ‘frustrated’, ‘exasperated’. How could this provide any useful input to an intervention with people already overwhelmed? Or what about another aspect of my experience, my body sensations and level of energy – again more ‘negative’ descriptors such as ‘tense’, ‘want to run away’ appeared more like self-indulgent wallowing rather than a useful practitioner resource.

A key feature of a relational gestalt approach is ‘use of self as an instrument of change’ and contains an invitation to attend to all our senses and use this information to inform how we intervene. So rather than having to ignore or suppress many aspects of my experience which risked my interventions feeling performative and inauthentic, I could actively lean into my experience and incorporate it in working with clients.

This felt very freeing – as a practitioner, it was less about having to have and judiciously deploy a ‘toolbox’ of skills and evaluating afterwards how ‘well’ or not I performed. The ROG invitation was to become, paraphrasing Beisser’s quote, ‘Change occurs when one becomes what he is, not when he tries to become what he is not’ (Beisser, 1970 cited in Chidiac, 2018, p. 145) ‘more of who I am’ and deepen my capacity for contactful, relational presence in the here-and-now of working with clients.

Of course, this does not imply reckless or careless reactivity on the practitioner’s part. As well as tuning into and noticing my own experience, the Self-Other-Situation (SOS) Model (Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac, 2013) emphasises a need to balance three interrelated elements of one-Self, the Other (be it individual/team etc.) and the Situation.

In the Other lens, I am also paying attention to, and noticing the phenomenology (vocal changes, posture, body language, subtle energetic shifts). Through the skills of tracking (bringing into my own awareness) and describing (sharing without interpretation what I notice is immediately happening in my client), I can share what I notice in service of supporting them to have greater awareness of their present moment experience.

The Situational lens draws on another key gestalt concept ‘the Field’. This posits that people, and their behaviour never exist in isolation; rather as a function of ‘the whole ‘life-space’ within which people act, including psychological, sociological, historical and physical aspects’. This wider organisational breadth and depth of interrelated influencing forces are elegantly depicted in the ROG Wave metaphor (Chidiac, 2018).

Entering any system to work with two individuals or a team caught in conflict, it’s tempting/easy to fall into view their dysfunctional ways of interacting as personal, individuated reactions to one another. The Wave analogy invites me to locate and get curious about the wider systemic and field influences that are configuring people’s overt behaviours – which are the visible above the surface Waves and ripples. I can invite them (and myself) to sense and attend to how the deeper Sea waters – unacknowledged organisational dynamics such as unwritten rules, covert power struggles and the sedimented Seabed – culture, legacy history, might be contributing to this relationship and situation. Intervening can then encompass raising the clients’ awareness of the deeper complexities and influences external to them and be a doorway to a conversation that can support some sort of change or shift in perspective.

Returning to my supervisor’s question, responding then from the ROG stance of ‘ethical presence’ (Denham-Vaughan & Chidiac, 2020) which lies at the heart of the SOS model and bringing greater authenticity and in the example above a ROG informed response might be:

“I am noticing some tension and a sense of frustration coming up for me in this conversation and I’m curious to what might be happening for each of you right now as you are discussing xxx?”

ROG has led to a significant shift in my own experience of my role as a Practitioner be it coaching individuals or teams, mediating, facilitating. There is a greater sense of freedom in the gestalt approach which is concerned with what is, in the here and now – not what may be, should be, might be or has been. This reflects a central idea that awareness followed by acceptance of ‘what is’, is the portal to change.

While I’m still very much in the learning zone with ROG, my experience to date is that gestalt-informed questions and explorations seem to shift the conversation to a deeper level more quickly. Tuning into and sharing the resonance a team or group conversation is having on me, seems to model and give permission for them to similarly reflect and give voice to their experience of that interaction. Inviting clients to look at and name the ‘what is’ seems to lead more quickly to greater self-acceptance and self-compassion (on their part). My sense also is that by bringing curiosity rather than judgment to a client’s ‘resistance’ seems to (paradoxically!) support them to at least become more aware of and less bound by it, even if they aren’t able to immediately ‘change’ some aspect of how they are engaging in a challenging situation.

Rather than using interventions that were solely drawn from pre-learned and encoded skills and abilities that I strategically implemented (or failed to at times), I now see the power and impact of interventions based on my present-moment experience and awareness, and how this can be used to raise awareness and ultimately effect change for the client.

I have also experienced a newfound sense of ease and self-acceptance in myself as a professional – less focused on proving my worth through skilful deployment of competencies and more with just connecting and working with my own and others’ humanity.

References

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Mary Rafferty



Mary has worked in private practice as a coach, mediator and trainer since 2004 in a wide range of organisations both private and public sector. An Advanced Member of the Mediator's Institute of Ireland, her mediation practice spanned both organisational and family contexts as well as training people to accredited mediator level.

A core theme of Mary's work has always been around supporting people to have high quality conversation, build robust relationships in their teams and foster culture of open and transparent communication. An accredited ICF (PCC) coach, her work focus has moved exclusively into leadership and team coaching and how to enhance capacity for relational presence and honest dialogue.