

Organizational Crisis: A Formative Perspective

Terry Cooper, UKCP and Jenner Roth, UKCP

Abstract

A brief organizational history and view of the uses of Formative Psychology in successfully dealing with an organizational crisis and stabilization.

Keywords

Ending – Formative Psychology Applications – Humanistic Psychology
Organizations – Spectrum – Transitional

Spectrum Therapy is a humanistic and existentially based psychotherapy practice and training organization accredited by the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy. We founded Spectrum in 1976, and subsequently two other directors joined us (one of whom, Maggie McKenzie, is also actively involved in working with Stanley Keleman and with Formative Psychology). This year we celebrate our 30th birthday.

From when we two first started to work together, we were both interested in increasing individual responsibility within the therapeutic process. We saw responsibility not as an end result of therapeutic work but as a necessary part of it, in fact a primary ingredient. We understood that taking responsibility was directly linked to increasing people's capacity to be self-determining and we focused our attention on clinical approaches and methodologies that supported this view. We identified with a humanistic and existential frame of thinking.

Humanistic psychology appealed to us on the basis that it respected the relationship people had with themselves and did not support a hierarchically bound therapeutic relationship. Humanistic psychotherapy emphasized dialogue and exploration as the basis of therapy. Existential psychotherapy emphasized a functional view of how a person lived their day-to-day life and the dilemmas they experienced.

We formed our approach to working with people intuitively and with much thought. We sought a variety of teachers and studied many therapeutic approaches. In the early 1970s, Jenner met Stanley and sponsored his work while she was running a center in Holland. In the mid-1970s, we brought Stanley and his work to London. The appeal to us of Stanley's work was that it embodied values that were important to us and his practical methodology held a key to what was missing in our work: The way in which to teach a person step-by-step how to directly influence and interact with their experience and how to use the body's experience as the basis for self-knowing.

There was something about Stanley's work that eluded us. We had been following a set of psychological ideals and not understanding that anatomical structures generate experiences, that emotional experiences existed within and were part and parcel of anatomical structure and that emotional anatomy relates form to feeling. We understood intellectually that the body was the basis of experience, but had been trained to interpret and understand psychological experience in a cognitive and disembodied way. We knew Formative Psychology worked from personal experience and we applied ourselves to continue studying and practicing. It was many years before it became clear to us that we had been trying to apply a psychological frame to an anatomical process.

During this transition of shifting from a psychological to an anatomical paradigm we felt unformed and experienced disorientation, frustration, confusion, helplessness and feelings of inadequacy. However, we had experienced enough value in practicing the methodology to sustain us through the transition and over the years the main thrust of our work and the work of our organization has become Formative.

One of the most unexpected and successful developments in our work with Formative Psychology occurred in 1999 when our organization went through a difficult time. One of four directors chose to leave in a sudden and unexpected manner. This event and its effects were a great deal more far-reaching and complicated than is possible to share in this paper, but the event and its effects left many of our clients, trainees and practitioners, as well as the core staff and remaining directors, in a state of bewilderment and shock. It was the first time in the 23 years since we founded the organization that we had experienced such major upheaval.

This was a profoundly threatening and unsettling time for us personally and organizationally. After much thought, discussion and soul-searching, we decided to continue, recommit and stabilize the organization. Our goal in this crisis was simply to survive. We knew we did not want to let something that had come from the

outside determine the manner of ending for us as an organization. If we were to end, we wanted to form the ending ourselves.

We were in contact with Stanley in person, by phone and by email throughout this period. As always, he was immediate, pragmatic, generous, wise and constantly urging and reminding us to form the situation, rather than be formed by it. It was our first experience of Stanley facilitating group and organizational change. This was a significant moment, for it deepened our understanding of the many ways in which Formative principles could be applied.

The nature of the ending had been both explosive and protracted. Stanley made the point that breaking out is a way of ending and an attempt to re-organize. The impact of this ending had been to take us into an experience of chaos. In a very short period of time we had gone from experiencing and perceiving ourselves as a healthy, strong, alpha organization in which we saw ourselves and functioned as young, vital, successful, achieving, professionals to experiencing and perceiving ourselves as being in a massive, survival threatening event. It completely disorganized how we saw ourselves. Suddenly, the future was clearly unsure. We felt certain we would go on, but we didn't know how.

On his annual spring trip to Europe in 2000, Stanley came and worked with us in our staff group to help us find our way through the morass of anger, anxiety, hurt and defensiveness we were working in. We began to look at what was ending. One of the important outcomes of this meeting was that by understanding the process we were going through, we were able to move away from trying to find reasons, make the affair personal or apportion blame. We now viewed the situation as a transition rather than a crisis. This was empowering in freeing us from the empty circular questions of *why*, *what if* and *if only*. By ending our picture of one person leaving as creating a crisis, we developed a picture of greater mobility, flux and change, a picture of an organization at a particular phase in its life, making a transition to another phase in its life. We started to understand the ending of one form and shape in the staff and organization as the beginning of a new form and shape.

We came to realize that, as a core staff and as an organization, we were in transition. Most of us were in our fifties and sixties and hadn't really recognized until this event that we had been growing the organization and over-extending to conform to an outdated alpha value system. We realized at a personal level we could no longer sustain these alpha expectations we had of ourselves. We were at a different phase in our lives without registering or knowing it. Because of this disparity, the organization was in jeopardy unless we could re-organize its needs to be in alignment with our own. The work for us, then, was to become clear about who we were, what we wanted, what we could support and maintain. Our focus became less organizational, and we became more concerned with ourselves and our quality of life as a beginning of forming a view of ourselves and the organization from a *second adult* perspective. This was a relief. We didn't have to find all the answers for the future of the organization; we simply needed to work out where we were and what we wanted for the future as we engaged in it.

We saw how we had become much closer and more open with each other through dealing with this crisis, how we ended some outdated and inhibiting hierarchical boundaries as a group and learned to depend on one another, how we had developed a stronger sense of ownership, responsibility, strength and gravitas as a staff and how the situation had reinforced our ethical and professional boundaries. This was also a transitional journey for each person in which everyone redefined their relationships to themselves and to the group. As well as becoming clearer, we each became stronger. We began to see who we were, who we had been and, who we were becoming: A group and an organization moving into a *second adult* phase, much less driven. We could begin to plan and talk and think about where we might be going and organize ourselves to go there. As a result of this, a sense of optimism, possibility, goodwill, good health, resilience radiated out from the staff through the organization.

What we have seen since 1999 is that the tasks and responsibilities of the organization that we, as founder directors, felt ourselves to be carrying alone have become shared tasks and responsibilities. We have stepped back, others have stepped forward, there is more dialogue about decisions and policies, and there is more creativity in relation to individual and organizational work. The celebration of our 30th birthday this year is a manifestation of Stanley's presence and of the Formative work in the life of our group and organization.

Biography

Terry Cooper is a UKCP registered and Accredited Psychotherapist and founder-director of Spectrum Therapy, a Centre for Personal and Professional Excellence in London, England. Email: terrycooper@spectrumtherapy.co.uk.

Jenner Roth is a UKCP registered and Accredited Psychotherapist and founder-director of Spectrum Therapy, a Centre for Personal and Professional Excellence in in London, England. Email: jennerroth@spectrumtherapy.co.uk.