

## Freeze Frame - a technique from Psychodrama

If you caught sight of a spilling glass within reach I have no doubt you would instinctively reach out to prevent it falling. You wouldn't even think about it.

However, a toddler would not have such a response. Although very basic, this is a learned reaction. It's just that it doesn't require any conscious evaluation or processing. What is also pretty much for sure is that it would be a feeling that triggered your response. That feeling might be accompanied by a conscious verbal thought, like 'Oh No' or 'stop it' or it might not.

What is important to insight workers is the idea that in very many circumstances it is feelings that trigger behaviour rather than reason. As Pascal remarked, "the heart has reasons that reason does not know at all!" Sometimes in complex circumstances – like say driving your car over ice – you might have to employ conscious knowledge to inhibit your feeling response, as for example, to skidding by braking. ***Much of the time we choose and act based upon a feeling which may or may not touch consciousness.***

In Behavioural Economics these short cuts are generally thought of as heuristics. They allow us to act quickly based upon known outcomes or previous experiences so that we don't spend ages figuring out a choice. It is our early learning and experiences that configure many of these heuristics and these early times are spent under fairly constant direction from parents and teachers.

Thus a lot of our '**learned concepts of life**' are condensed into what Damasio calls '**somatic markers**' which produce an automated response when similar situations occur later in life. He rather charmingly calls it 'The Feeling of What Happens' in his later book.

The important point for those seeking insight is that ***many of our everyday, reasonable responses – like catching the falling glass – are directly under the control of our emotions.*** Indeed, feelings often drive our behaviour without ever becoming conscious. Thus to explore these phenomena we must find a way to work with the emotions arising from a situation.

One of my favourite techniques for doing this uses what I call '**Freeze Frames**'. In this exercise, carried out with a group, we find a **Protagonist**, ( a volunteer who is ready to help us create a still freeze frame from a moment in h/her experience and to cast the various characters from among the other members of the group.) The other group members volunteer to be the '**Cast**'. *It is important that the chosen Frame represents a moment of frustration or elation relevant to the goods or service under investigation.*

Next, the protagonist chooses a moment that exemplifies his feeling in a particular experience: we have had people choose '**entering my bank**', '**boarding a flight**', '**trying to choose from a buffet**' '**doing the laundry at home**'. The appropriate scene depends, of course, on the nature and

objectives of your study. As you can see it does not have to be a sublime or catastrophic moment!

Working with the facilitator, the protagonist then starts to describe the topography of the situation - when, where, who - and is asked to pick a significant moment of the experience to represent as a Freeze Frame. Then, as needed the setting can be configured to reflect this moment, furniture moved or removed, objects designated to stand in for the actual objects in the real experience and so on.

Once the Protagonist is happy with the setting and the rest of the group know what is what, we move on to the cast of characters.

There are two classes of these:

1. **External people:** people in the outside world who were actually there. These might include lead characters and 'extras' like in a film
2. **Internal people:** these are characters who represent the internal voices in the Protagonist's head as they experienced them in the situation. Common internal people are parents, partners, colleagues, each with their own tone of voice & attitudes. We must not forget that inner voice that appears as the protagonist's own commentary on experience too.

Next the Protagonist must choose from the group people to play each of the important roles and then to add the extras as available. Each chosen character gets a brief from the Protagonist which includes both an action(s) and tone of voice or, if you like, a feeling relating to that action. At this time some attention will need to be given to sequence. In what order do the events both external and internal occur? Does one event initiate others?

As h/she goes on with the facilitator lending a hand the protagonist builds a 3D representation of the significant moment, with the settings, the sequence, leading and supporting actors in place. With each actor the protagonist gives them a short brief on the effect they are to create and practices with them to get the right actions and tone of voice.

This usually takes 20 -30 minutes and then the Freeze Frame is ready to be run. The facilitator asks permission to freeze the frame as the tableau plays out and when he does he can ask any of the participants what is going on for them. Most particularly, what they are attending to and how they're feeling.

Once the tableau has run, the facilitator and the protagonist debrief all the participants and the protagonist describes how well the tableau matched his real-life experience and what he has noticed that is new or significant.

To finish, all of the group members, whether actors in the tableau or not are invited to comment on how they would have reacted to similar circumstances. In this way we find out how widespread the

events and emotions typified by the tableau are, whether there are a range of ways of responding, some more productive than others and what needs to change to make the process better.

This exercise can be a wonderful eye-opener for clients who are trying to learn what customers' experiences are really like.