Using the Magic Shop in a Work Counselling Group

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1. Introduction

I have conducted a group of social workers since the beginning of the year 2001. The group has met 16 times so far. One session lasts 3 x 45 minutes. I have used all kinds of action methods, playback and both socio- and psychodrama, like role rehearsals, in this group. This was the first time I used the magic shop method. In the group there are 6 members and one of them is the superior for the rest of the group.

In this essay I shall describe how I have used the magic shop method in two sessions. For the first session on 23rd of May one of the group members was not able to participate and at the second session 29th of May two members couldn’t participate. In the first session we used the method and in the second session we processed the previous week’s work. The group met again only one week after. We usually meet every third week or once in a month. I had cancelled one meeting earlier during this spring and that is why we met once more before summer break.

2. The Magic shop as a method

The magic shop is based on the notion that the conductor himself is participating as a salesman. Group members can buy different kinds of characteristics for him/herself and also give up those characteristics that are harmless or not useful anymore. People are not only buying so called good things/characteristics. Many of those so called good things can also be harmless; being a trustworthy person you can also be boring and never surprise anyone or be a very organized person who can’t be very spontaneous. On the other hand one characteristic can be good for someone and bad for someone else; a forthright person can be cruel or a brave person can be stupid (Barbour,1992). The most important moment in the magic shop is when the salesman is making the deal with the customer. When the salesman and the customer are discussing about the amount of the characteristics she/he is buying and giving away. (Kellerman,1992). The salesman’s role is clear, he should make a realistic deal with the customer, who then can make a commitment for the change.

J.L. Moreno first wrote about the magic shop method in 1948 in his book Psychodrama, Vol 1. Moreno described how he used the method with one of his patients. (Barbour,1992). After Moreno some psychodramatists have written about the magic shop, but it has never been very popular at least to write about (Verhofstadt-Denève,2000). The magic shop is more like a psychodrama technique, but it can also use elements of playback.

When the salesman opens the magic shop, the customer wants to buy something. The conductor or the salesman should warm up himself and the group by moving some furniture or other things so that you can easily imagine the shop atmosphere. The salesman himself can also speak aloud like a salesman when he is expecting the customers to come to the shop (Barbour,1992). After the customer has told what he/she wants to buy, starts the salesman interviewing him/her about how much he/she wants to have a certain characteristic. After that the customer needs to decide what he/she is willing to give away. Making a deal should be very concrete, which is often both fun and very serious thing (Verhofstadt-Denève,2000). René F. Marineau has used the magic shop method together with drama. He has used both psychodrama and playback after the magic shop deal has been struck. (Marineau,1994-1997).
The magic shop is a metaphor for life, death and rebirth. We can’t get anything without giving something away. A part of us should die and then something new could be born. There is no personal growth without giving something up (Barbour, 1992).

3. The supervisor is giving the instructions

I always start the session by asking how everybody is doing. And this is how I started this session as well. After we have heard the feelings, we made a deal about using the magic shop method. I couldn't be sure that the group wanted to try the magic shop method this time. Sometimes some members of the group have acute cases to bring and then we of course would have concentrated on those. Then I asked permission to record the session for my studies. All the group members gave me the permission.

I started by moving some furniture to make place to look like a shop. “This is a shop where you can buy all kinds of characteristics for yourself. You can buy a characteristic that you feel that you don’t have at all or something that you have less than you want. As a salesman I also want something from you. It could be a characteristic that you have so much that it is disruptive in your worklife. Or you just have so much of it that you want to get rid of at least part of it. Because this is a work counselling group, please concentrate on those characteristics that you need mostly in your work.

Often we hope that we could be someone else, someone who is much better than we think we are ourselves. We would like to be for example more social, calmer, wiser, have more patience and so on. Think for a moment what kind of a characteristic or ability to do something that you feel you are missing or having less than you would like to have. And whenever you are ready, the shop is open. Just take your time and then please, come one by one to this shop. This shop is open until 4 pm and will open again next week if needed.

You can also buy more than one characteristics if you want to. It makes the deal more interesting and challenging. And please keep in your minds that you also need to give away something. The characteristics you are giving away could be needed elsewhere. So, you don’t have to worry about what kind of characteristics you’ll give away – they are all needed!”

4. The shop is open

First customer (C1): "I need more time to think about what I am willing to give away unless it could be the opposite of the characteristic I want to have.”
Salesman (S): “Of course it could be the opposite of the characteristic that you want to buy. But actually you don’t have to know it beforehand. It could come clearer to you when you’ll come to the shop. I ask you to concentrate on what you need more of. And of course it could be a technical ability as well.”

4.1. The first customer; buying

C1: "I've got one. I can start.”
S: "Okay, you are welcome. Please come to the shop.”
C1: "Okay. Hello. Do you have such a characteristic which helps me to keep things in order?”
S: “Of course I have. Being systematic and organized is often something that many people have too much of. They have had so much of it that they even think they are boring. So, I have my shop full of both. But please tell me something more. Why do you need more of those characteristics?”

C1: “For time management. I’m always busy at work and whenever I have the chance to do something else I would know where to start and what things are most important.”

S: “Tell me one example of a situation where you should have been more systematic and better organized.”

C1: “It is very concrete. I have a huge amount of papers on my desk and I just can’t handle them. If there is a meeting where I need a piece of information and I know it’s written somewhere there and I just can’t find the right paper. It takes a lot of time to find the right paper. And it’s impossible for me to just remember everything by heart.”

S: “If you think about the characteristics and your work, how much of those do you need?”

C1: “I don’t want to have too much of them. I need those only that much that it helps me to do my work.”

4.2. The first customer; giving up

S: “Okay. What are you willing to give up?”

C1: “I am willing to give up all the mess I have.”

S: “What makes all the mess you have?”

C1: “It’s just my way of working. I can’t finish the tasks I’m handling with. Because I’m doing thousand things at the same time. What do you call that?”

S: “Well, how do you call that (asks from the audience)?”

Somebody from the group: “Being chaotically busy”

C1: “Yes, I could give a part of that away.”

S: “By the way, how much do you enjoy being chaotically busy?”

C1: “Well, actually I do enjoy…that was a bad question! But I could still give that chaotic business away that much that it won’t bother my work.”

S: “Is this characteristic more like part of your personality?”

C1: “Yes.”

S: “If you have that characteristic, let say for example 100 kilos. How many kilos you are willing to give away without changing your personality?”

C1: “I could give 40 kilos.”

S: “40 kilos. Are you sure about the amount?”

C1: “Well, you mean that I don’t loose too much weight, you are right. I think 30 kilos is enough.”

4.3. The first customer; making the deal

S: “Well, you decide the amount. How much do you want to have the ability to organize/prioritize/keeping things in order? The same amount?”

C1: “At the maximum.”

S: “What would be the worst thing that could happen to you if you will be very systematic and having the ability to keep things in order?”

C1: “That everybody thinks I am brusque and boring.”

S: “And that is something that you want to avoid?”

C1: “Yes.”

S: “Please, don’t leave yet. We are not ready yet. We have just started to make the deal. So, when you take this amount of keeping things in order and the ability of organize things with you, where
do you put all that stuff? It is important that you know where you have it. Where do you have this hassling by the way?”

C1: "That is in my heart and the 30 kilos of that new stuff I’ll put in my head I think.”

S: "I recommend that too. I think that stuff will work best from the head. Well, now we have made the deal what you are giving away and what you will buy more. Now we have to take all that stuff from the closet. I have that systematic stuff terrible much in here, I have to be very careful. Here it comes, luckily I´m strong enough to carry this much. It might feel quite heavy at the beginning. (The customer almost falls down.) Be conscious that you are having this characteristics now in your head. And also be aware how that will effect in you. You will never be the same again.”

C1: "At least it´s heavy!”

S: "And it is as heavy as 30 kilos of chaotic business which you can now give to me. There will be many people who desperately need this chaotic business also. Please, feel that you have get something and you have also give up something.

4.4. The first customer; the change

S: "Please think about a situation where you have been before. You told earlier about those papers that are lying around on your desk. Let’s make a situation like that where we can see the difference now. What situation comes to your mind first?”

C1: "It has something to do with the papers of course, and sharing the information. It is such an everyday situation.”

S: "Make the situation here. Now you have the ability to keep things in order even it could make you a little bit brusque and boring. But you still have 70 kilos of chaotic business left.”

C1: "In this situation I received an e-mail and I am wondering should I print it or not. And then somebody comes to my door with something very urgent.”

S to the group: “Please, one person is coming with an urgent matter.”

Group member: "Hi there, I need to talk with you immediately about one customer.”

C1: "Well, tell me…”

K: "Just the moment, remember the 30 kilos…”

C1: "You mean that I could use that now?”

S: "Oh, yes.”

C1: "Let’s start from the beginning in that case.”

S: "You see, it’s not that easy, okay let’s try again. And remember what you have in your head, because of that this situation will be different.”

Group member again: "I need to talk with you immediately about one customer.”

C1: "Could you wait a moment I need to do one thing first…”

S to the member of the group: "Don’t give up – be more demanding!”

Group member: “I need to talk to you!!!”

C1: ”You just need to wait for a moment. I need to finishing this first.”

S: "So you are really finishing that first?”

C1: "Now, you can tell me what was that you wanted to talk about?”

S: "Cut. Are you satisfied? Earlier you stopped everything when somebody came in from that door. Do you feel that you are brusque or boring? Or could you be a person who acts like this?”

C1: "A part of this is something that I already do with the customers, in other words I can set the limits with them. But I just don’t succeed in doing that with the others: colleagues, subordinates or with my superior. And it didn’t feel that bad.”

S: "Do you think that finishing things is valuable for you or printing papers from your computer and putting them in order?”

A1: "Well no, a human being is always more important to me. But if I would that paper later in a meeting and I had forgotten to print it, that would also be a waste of my time. Then I need to go in
the middle of the meeting to print it out. It sometimes just feels that those papers doesn't matter so much. But it could make my worklife more fluently.”

S: “Could you promise me to try to remember the 30 kilos of that new stuff in your head and using it in a future? It seems like the human beings is winning the papers. Let’s watch that.”

S to the group: “Can we have one person to be a human being and the other person to be papers. Let’s watch what’s happening.”

The group is performing. A human being is “winning”.

S: Is this a typical situation? Or do you think some papers win over human beings? Or does it really matter?”

C1: “Well, I really hope that humans will win in a future as well. But I need to remember that papers are also important, because I could forget to take care of somebodys problem if I forget the papers.”

S: ”So could you think that papers are actually for the human beings in the end? Could you make a commitment to take care of the papers even if somebody needs to wait a moment?”

C1: ”I am sure, my intuition tells me how is the best way to act. But I can try because finishing things even paperwork – there is a point.”

S: ”I am asking you again. Are you willing to make a commitment?”

C1: ”I am. I am ready to try if it is working. And I am ready to make choices.”

S: ”Now you are sitting there with 30 kilos of the ability to be more systematic and better organized in your head. Are you regreting the deal?

C1: ”No, I’m not. And I know that you will open the shop again… Thank you.”

K: ”Thank you.”

S: Who is the next customer? We don’t have do it in the same way, you can also just buy what you want. So, who is the next customer?

4.5. The other customers of the day

This first customer was only one example of how the magic shop can be used. After her there where two more customers. With them the process went a little differently.

With the next customer I first had a long discussion. We needed clarify the characteristic she wanted. Before coming to the shop, the second customer had decided that she wanted to give up being over responsible towards others. And what she wanted to buy was not that clear. She first offered irresponsibility, but I didn’t accept that. Being irresponsible is the opposite to being responsible. When giving up being over responsible she already shall be responsible. I asked help from the group. The members of the group know each other quite well, so asking help in this case was possible. One member of the group suggested that she take more space in the group or be more brave. I asked the second customer if she would accepted that. First she thought that it’s not relevant for her, but after she were thinking that more, she said that she doesn’t bring herself and her thoughts out enough because of her personal history. I also succested her being more brave or trusting of herself as well as the other people more. She chose trust in the end.

I asked the second customer what would happen if she trusted herself as well as the other people around her more? She answered that the quality of her life would be better and she would have more space to live. But she was also afraid that she would loose control of her life after that. But she decided to take a risk and buy more trust for herself. She opened a box herself, where the trust was coming over her as a shower. After that I asked her to feel how the trust is effecting her and I asked her to turn towards the group. The second customer described her physical reactions as pleasant. After she gave me a permission, I took the over responsibility out of her chest and put it in another
box. The situation was tested with an imaginary picture of her future. I also asked her to make a commitment to this change with a concrete action. The second customer thought a situation at her workplace, where something which should be done urgently automatically would be in her responsibility, but this time she refused to take it. And in this imaginary future she succeeded with it.

When interviewing the third customer we found easily the characteristics she wanted to buy and give up. She wanted to give up being over protective towards others and get more patience for herself. We made a situation at the stage, where being more patient would help her to make her work better. In the enactment she was having a foreign customer who didn’t or didn’t want to understand her explanations about that she couldn’t give the money to the customer that he wanted. One member from the group was acting a foreign customer and she was acting herself.

After doing this scene, we started the actual deal making. The salesman took the extra 10 liters of being over protected from the third customers head. The stuff was put to the box where the salesman already had “some not worrying – stuff”. The salesman could easily make a mix for future customers. Patience was put to her head to the same place where over protection was before. The customer left the shop smiling.

5. Sharing

After the shop was closed, we started to share the experiences and feelings. I told those who were customers that they can share about their experiences and feelings as customers and of course everybody can share their own experiences, which were connected to the work that was made. According this group, magic shop method felt very interesting and helpful. First they discussed about that how interesting was just to follow the deal making itself. Those who were customers told more about their feelings. The customer number 1 told how hard it was to change her own behaviour even she had decided to do so. The other group members didn’t share feelings so much. As a conductor of this group I was wondering why the others didn’t share so much. And I came to a conclusion that the characteristics that they saw probably was very familiar by the others as well, but there were only two group members who did not come to the shop so there were not so many people to make the sharing either.

It could also be that because the magic shop is based on a discussion between the salesman and the customer and it is not always that touching to everyone else. Also not so many people can participate. This group was used to the action methods and they found the method itself interesting. During the discussion the group members made commitments to try to change their working styles and then support one another in real worklife in a future. They also decide that they can give some feedback to each other if they notice any changes in their actions. Or vice versa if they notice that those who bought new characteristics are not using them. They also came to the conclusion that group members would support each other by pointing out when people did not use the characteristics they had exchanged at the magic shop. When someone who is overresponsible or patience comes to a person who likes to hassle around they need to practice new characteristics.
6. Next week session: processing

We met each other once again during the next week. We usually meet every third week or once in a month. I had cancelled one meeting earlier during this spring and that is why we met once more before summer break.

In this session we were processing the magic shop work. As a work counsellor/supervisor I asked if they had noticed any changes so far or if they had recognized situations where they needed their new characteristics. Because of having only one week gap between these two sessions I didn’t expect too much for the change.

The first customer told that her experience was more impressing than she thought one week earlier. She has had a discussion with one of her superiors and it didn’t feel effective at all after the experience she had last week. She told that especially that part where the salesman put “the be more organized-stuff” to her shoulders and then she had to show the new way of behaving, felt most effective. The second customer told that she got feedback from the other groupmember as they agreed earlier. She had taken too much responsibility in one situation. She also had tried to act another way in a situation which had felt good to her. She also told that she has been thinking a lot of her life situation after the last week´s session.

The third customer has not noticed any changes and she thought that maybe she didn’t choose the most important things in her life. But still she was thinking about the session and she said she need to think even more. We made a deal that we would continue with these themes in the autumn.

The members of the group discussed also about all the themes that was seeing last time. They discussed about how for example being protective and responsible is something that they do every day because of being social workers. And how for example being impatience is effected their interaction with each other.

7. Conclusions

The magic shop’s most important objective is to make the customer to realize in his/herself a characteristics or a way of acting, which he/she wants to change. Making a deal with the customer by interviewing him/her we will find out the changes that he/she is willing to make a commitment with. As important is to give up those characteristics or develop them more which are disruptive to his/her work or life. Using drama in an interview makes it even more effective and helps the person to make a stronger commitment when seeing and experiencing it.

I have used the magic shop most like Marineau. In my experience I also think that using both magic shop and drama together makes it more effective. Using drama or playback you can make a test where you can see if it is realistic in the protagonist´s world. I think the third customer is an example of this. With the third customer I didn’t do any reality test /drama work after the deal making. And she told one week after that she hasn’t notice any changes in her behaviour. The other two customers reported about some changes already after a week. When I’ll meet the group after the summer it would be very interesting to hear from all of them how they have succeeded with the changes.

The magic shop is used mostly in therapeutic groups, because it is very effective way to handle changes. This is the core of therapeutic work. How to get one´s life in balance and what kind of
changes it takes to be satisfied and happy. In a work counselling group we are not concentrating the life itself. We are concentrating more to work life, so people mainly focus on changing their their behaviour at work. We are looking for new ways of acting and new point of views to people’s work and how they as a person could make changes to be better a worker. And then of course more satisfied and happy. I think the magic shop method relates well also to work counselling because it is not too reveal but still people have to reflect themselves. Also the magic shop could be fun and using humour makes serious things easier to handle.

Moreno writes in his roletheory about over and under developed roles. The magic shop method is actually doing the same thing. People come to the shop to buy missing or under developed roles and they give up over developed roles. The magic shop’s objective is to change people’s under or over developed roles so that they can achieve a well-functioning role repertoire.
Bibliography


