

Working through the drama: How theatre helps office workers in conflict resolution

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Is a colleague making unwanted advances towards you? Is your boss treating you unfairly? Are you the target of office gossip? These are some of the questions that people in the age group of 20-30 years have to deal with almost every day of their working lives. But few understand how to deal with the situation in the most effective manner.

So what is the solution? Theatre...



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Though theatre is known as an effective conflict resolution tool worldwide, corporate theatre has only recently started making its presence felt in India. But many companies are swearing by its merits. The ITC, for instance, evolved a training methodology for frontline managers into a theatre and drama-based programme.

Similarly, Hindustan Aeronautics is including theatre programmes that can address issues of tensions and how to handle them productively and effectively.

Safe environment

But why theatre? What can theatre provide that trained HR professionals cannot? According to Mohan Madgulkar, an actor, and India manager of STEPS Drama, corporate theatre can provide a "safe" environment whereby complex corporate issues can be tackled.

"We perform a role play of incidents that our corporate clients want to discuss, say bullying or aggressive behaviour. After we perform it, we ask corporate executives to analyse what was said and suggest alternatives. This facilitates learning," he says.

While Steps Drama is one of the bigger names, others too are quietly entering the field. Bangalore-based Ranji David left his job as a senior training manager at Tech Mahindra to start up the theatre firm Yours Truly with Nandini Rao. The company has already worked for clients such as Puma and Nokia with the focus being on team management.

"The focus of these workshops was to help corporate professionals cope with and understand changes in their role and at workforce. The workshop presented scenarios whereby one could introspect on the answers given and how they related to one's own situation," says Rao. On the business side, corporate theatre is doing well. Steps Drama, which is a Britain-based organisation (it opened its India branch in 2010), has become a must for managerial training, with revenues for over 2 million pounds a year.

In India, the versatility of a theatre workshop to deal with a variety of issues in a short span of time makes it an ideal tool for leaders and subordinates. "We get managers saying they were surprised at certain emotions exhibited by the staff and we also found staff surprised at the thought processes of their leaders," Madgulkar said.

But that is not all. Some companies that want to emphasise certain norms, company culture and management techniques can use theatre to explain why such behaviour is the most ideal over a number of other options.

Management

As Rao points out: "Companies have sent up a management manual after a lot of thought and theatre is a great tool to explain why and how it works in real life."

He adds that after the theatre workshop, it is not uncommon for executives to espouse higher levels of motivation and greater affinity with the company's culture and way of working. Finally, since the whole workshop is on videotape, the company can review the results to their heart's content.

Naturally, more corporates are delighted with the outcome. Puma executives recently attended a workshops organised by Yours Truly.