

# **From Lone Wolf To Bridge Builder -**

**A Study of the Application of  
Action Methods In Coaching**

**Jenny Postlethwaite**

**May 2012**



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This paper provides an outline of the application of psychodramatic concepts (Action Methods) in my professional work as an executive coach, utilising for illustrative purposes a slice of work undertaken with a specific coaching counterpart, Andrew<sup>1</sup>. The paper incorporates –

- an introduction outlining the initiation of my coaching relationship with Andrew,
- a description of the key psychodramatic concept of the social and cultural atom,
- details of two coaching sessions with Andrew, reflecting relevant social and cultural atom aspects and psychodramatic efforts
- a conclusion, reflecting on the effectiveness for Andrew, of those efforts

## ***Background To Our Coaching Relationship***

I am contacted by John, an executive manager in Andrew's organisation, requesting me to provide coaching services for Andrew. Andrew, an internationally recognised IT expert, has taken on a new responsibility in addition to his existing work. Whereas he typically works primarily as a lone operator, this new responsibility requires Andrew to take a leadership role, to liaise with and co-ordinate the efforts of a range of internal and external stakeholders in order to fund, resource and operate a major project initiative.

John describes Andrew as being very effective in his area of technical expertise but experiencing a high degree of inter-personal conflict with the internal stakeholders, specifically a number of colleagues on whom Andrew is dependent to provide manpower for the project.

John also advises me that progress with establishment of the project has been very slow and that he is not happy with the strategic direction apparently being taken by Andrew. With this context in mind, John also requests me to facilitate a strategic planning session with Andrew and his colleagues. Prior to the strategy session Andrew and I meet to get to know each other and to consider together whether we will be a good match for coaching.

In these pre-coaching interactions I observed and experienced a broad range of behaviours and roles in relationship with Andrew. With me he is reasonably warm and open about himself. He freely shares with me the criticisms he has heard from others eg that he is "forceful", "abrasive", "a maverick", "a wild card" and "impetuous". He tells me that his wife describes him as "somewhat autistic", by which she means very narrow in his focus. And he tells me that he sees himself as highly competitive, egotistical, selfish and low in emotional intelligence. A lone wolf of sorts.

Andrew is also strong and assured in his appreciation of himself, telling me that he is honest, collaborative, innovative, easy to talk to, friendly, open, egalitarian and "different" in that he is always thinking "out of the square".

With me Andrew is very clear about his desire and determination to develop himself. He recognises that his leadership skills are underdeveloped and that he is not as effective as he would like to be in his new role. The move from working independently to working with others has been very challenging for him and he is struggling.

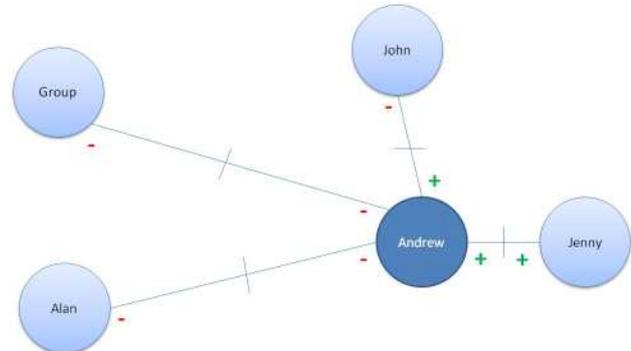
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<sup>1</sup> All names have been altered for this paper, to protect the confidentiality of the individuals involved

## The Social and Cultural Atom

The configuration of interpersonal relationships in which attractions and repulsions exist between a collection of individuals, and in which each individual expresses themselves through different roles, can be represented (in diagrammatic or tabular form) as a 'social and cultural atom'. (Clayton 1993:55)

The social atom component illustrates the nucleus of relations around an individual and the quality of feeling and strength of feeling in those relationships (Moreno 1993:24,25). For example, Andrew's social atom as I observed it **during the strategy session** is reflected diagrammatically at right. There is only one mutually positive relationship in play and the key relationships with Alan (the group leader) and the other group members, on whom Andrew is most dependent for his project success, are mutually negative and distant. And although Andrew feels close to and positive toward John, this is not reciprocated. The social atom diagram thus highlights Andrew's relative isolation.



The cultural atom component sets out the focal pattern of role relations around the individual (Moreno 1993:42). A role - the functioning form of behaviour as it emerges in response to other people or objects in specific times and places (Clayton 1994:123) - can be categorised according to its contribution to the adequate functioning of the individual within the context of their purpose. Thus roles may be seen as fragmenting, coping or progressive.

Progressive roles enhance the fulfilment of the individual's purpose (Clayton 1993:30), enlivening us in the here and now and enabling us to be creative and spontaneous, producing "an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation" (Moreno 1993:13).

This element of novelty is not present in coping roles. Our coping roles are developed in response to situations in which our survival is threatened (Clayton 1994:141). Under threat we mobilise mechanisms that have worked in the past and can be turned on at a moment's notice (Clayton 1993:44). Although of protective value, coping roles are not characterised by spontaneity and thus protect the status quo rather than producing new outcomes.

Fragmenting roles undermine our purpose, leaving us out of touch with both ourselves and others, unable to function in the here and now (Clayton 1993:30).

By way of illustration, in the table below I have categorised my tentative sense of Andrew's roles, as observed **during the workshop**, as fragmenting, coping and progressive **relative to his responsibility for leadership of the research project**.

Fragmenting Roles	Coping Roles			Progressive Roles	
	Moving Against	Moving Away	Moving Toward	Developing	Well Developed
Nil	Hectoring Lecturer			Trusting Learner	Determined Achiever
	Combative Self Defender				
	Gagged Victim				

The development of new roles and role systems, or any reorganisation or development in the relationship of a person with the outer world, that is to others within their atom, is referred to as social atom repair. (Clayton 1993:55).

Based on the coaching brief I have received from John, and discussion held directly with Andrew himself, my key objective in working with Andrew is to facilitate sufficient social atom repair to enable him to develop and sustain more effective professional relationships with his colleagues and other key internal and external project stakeholders.

The analytic focus of this paper picks up following the strategy session, from the point of my first coaching session with Andrew, outlining key aspects of that first and the subsequent coaching session.

### ***Our First Coaching Session***

Our first formal coaching session takes place 2 days after the strategy session.

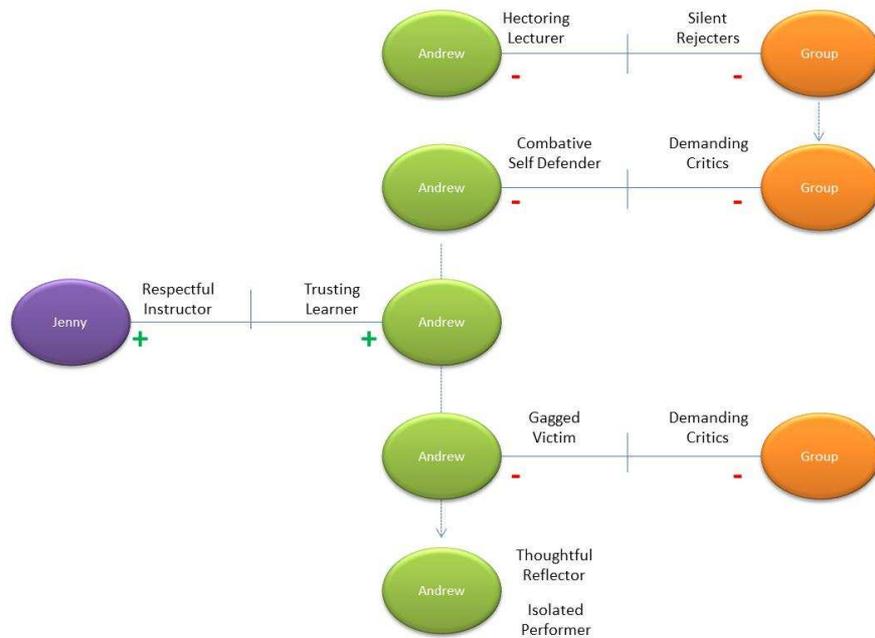
At the start of the session, in the context of being respectful and recognising his progressive roles, I share my appreciation of Andrew with him – specifically that I see him being a good sport in accepting challenging feedback from me during the strategy session, and of his dedication to reshaping himself to be a more effective communicator and leader.

I have an impression, thus far in our relationship, of Andrew being detached and unobservant, from both his own emotional state and what is happening with and for those around him. Taking this into account, I have pre-determined that the most effective immediate intervention may be for me to now mirror back to him the dynamic of the strategy session as I experienced it.

I ask Andrew what was his experience during the strategy session of me not allowing him to interrupt or respond at one point, when others were expressing their views.

<u><i>Dialogue</i></u>	<u><i>Tentative Role Description</i></u>
<i>Andrew : That was the hardest day of my professional career. (He wraps his arms around his body as he says this, in a mirror of how he was in the moment in the strategy session, holding himself in.)</i>	Gagged / Defenceless Victim
<i>Jenny : What made it hard?</i>	
<i>Andrew : Not being able to respond when what they were saying was critical of me.</i>	Gagged / Defenceless Victim
<i>Jenny : What do you make of that now?</i>	
<i>Andrew : I had to knuckle down and listen. And I've thought through all the points they raised and have worked out how to address them.</i>	Thoughtful Reflector + Isolated Performer

My impression of the dynamic progression of roles between Andrew and others (illustrated diagrammatically overleaf), immediately preceding, during and post that moment in the workshop, is that it forms a closed system with all parties entrenched in coping roles. In order for change to occur Andrew will not only require development of new roles to facilitate his own change of behaviour but also to build his resilience in the face of the combative behaviour of the group itself.



Later in the session I continue with the mirroring as we talk about Andrew's style of communication.

*Jenny : My observation of you was that you used very strong language – “this WILL DEFINITELY happen” etc. Lots of telling. There was nothing tentative in the expression of your views, no leaving space for them to offer theirs.*

*Andrew : Hmmm. Yes. I delivered it like a technical presentation, where you have to be very firm and justify yourself and be ready to respond to criticism.*

Blinkered Self Justifier

*Jenny : This is a different situation.*

*Andrew : Yes. I can see now how that style has been causing me trouble with the others.*

Thoughtful Reflector

*Jenny : I didn't notice you ask many questions.*

*Andrew : But I did!! I asked John lots of questions.*

Combative Self Defender

*Jenny : Yes you did. But he was the only one. With the others you only seemed to speak when you wanted to disagree with what they were saying.*

*Andrew : Oh, yes. I do do that. My wife gets unhappy with me about it. Like the other day she said “let's do x at the weekend” and I said “ok” and went to walk away and she looked really ..... I don't know what.”*

Puzzled Observer of Others

*Jenny : She wanted you to discuss it with her?*

*Andrew : Yes!! She was unhappy that I just said get on with it.*

*Jenny : Hmmm.*

*Andrew : I know I only tend to speak when I disagree. Otherwise I just say “Ok, move on”.*

Blinkered Self Justifier

(Delivered in a dismissive tone and with a toss of his head.)

(& Brusque Decider)

*Jenny : Owww! I feel like I've just been dismissed. Move on! Like you aren't interested in me. If I was on the receiving end of that I reckon that's how I would feel.*

*Andrew : Hmmm, yes. I could do more to provide positive reinforcement to others in conversation.*

Thoughtful Reflector

Jenny : *What difference would that make do you think?*

Andrew : *My wife would be happier. And I think it would make it much better with the others at work as well.* Empathetic Communicator / Emotional Bridge Builder

This role of Empathetic Communicator / Emotional Bridge Builder is very new for Andrew and although embryonic is clearly progressive.

At the conclusion of the session I ask Andrew what he is taking away from our discussion.

Andrew : *Talking, presenting like I am giving a technical presentation isn't working for me here. I need to listen more and not defend myself or react to what they are saying straight away.* Thoughtful Reflector

*But it is my nature. I am very good at that. It is a well developed skill and makes me successful as a technical expert.* Combative Self Defender

Jenny : *It is an over-developed role. Not your "unchangeable nature". It is your habit.*

Andrew : (Pauses, face opens up) *Oh. Yes. A habit!* Delighted Self Observer / Discoverer

Jenny : *And our work is to complement that existing role with some others that are more appropriate to your responsibilities and objectives as the Director.*

Andrew : *Yes.* (Nodding thoughtfully) Thoughtful Reflector

Andrew settled upon some actions for himself – to practice his 'listening without interrupting' and his offering of 'positive reinforcement' (ie empathetic communication / emotional bridge building) - and the session concluded.

Over the course of our first session Andrew, in relationship with me, continued to display his progressive role of Trusting Learner. This role, together with his well-developed Thoughtful Reflector and embryonic Empathetic Communicator / Emotional Bridge Builder and Delighted Self Observer roles are beginning to form a mutually reinforcing progressive cluster.

Fragmenting Roles	Coping Roles			Progressive Roles	
	Moving Against	Moving Away	Moving Toward	Developing	Well Developed
Nil	Hectoring Lecturer	Isolated Performer	Puzzled Observer of Others	Trusting Learner	Determined Achiever
	Combative Self Defender	Blinkered Analyst		Delighted Self Observer	Thoughtful Reflector
	Gagged / Defenceless Victim			Empathetic Communicator	
	Blinkered Self Justifier			Emotional Bridge Builder	
	Brusque Decider				

*A Summary Of The Roles From Session 1*

Prior to this first session I had focused on doubling Andrew to aid the development of rapport and trust. During the session my focus was more on mirroring, in order to aid Andrew's self-awareness. And I complemented this with a limited amount of role naming and framing of our work as role development.

At this point my forward intention was to continue with the same basic approach, leveraging Andrew's progressive Trusting Learner and Thoughtful Reflector roles to assist him in building greater self-awareness, including a focus on coaching him to pay more physical attention to others in the moment – literally to look at them and actively empathise - so that he might have more information to assist him in being more responsive in the moment, rather than isolating himself. And also to see if we could awaken in support of this, a hitherto absent role – Naive Enquirer - in relation to both himself and other people.

### ***Our Second Coaching Session***

Andrew arrives late to the session. Before we get beyond “Hello”, he is anxiously apologetic regarding his failure to complete some administrative tasks from our first session. We start talking about that and he then, without warning, suddenly decides to dart away to get us a coffee. As he returns with the coffee his phone rings and he answers it, again walking away and leaving me.

As these events unfold they provide me with further experience for role reversing into how others, who have a different relationship with Andrew than I, may be experiencing him and this reinforces my impression that at this early stage Andrew would benefit from supportive doubling and mirroring to help him become more aware of himself and his impact on others.

I resolve to see what use I can make of what has just happened in the here and now of our meeting, during our subsequent discussion. We finally get started over 15 mins past the appointed time.

*Andrew : That phone call was from my wife, about organising a builder for our home extensions.*

*Jenny : You are very busy.... On lots of fronts.*

*Andrew : (Shoulders drop slightly. Looks reflective, then dejected.)*

Exhausted Performer

*Yes. On lots of fronts.*

The doubling has been successful in connecting him to his inner experience. I ask Andrew to draw me a picture of all the things he is busy with, as a means of concretising his current reality. He starts with family issues and then moves on to work. He draws a few items and then puts the pen down. I request him to keep drawing and ask questions to draw him out further. More and more issues are concretised. The page is eventually filled.

*Jenny : What do you make of this as you look at it?*

*Andrew : (Shoulders slump) It is overwhelming.*

Exhausted Performer

*Jenny : How are you managing in the midst of that?*

*Andrew (Pauses and starts talking about prioritisation. Then pauses again mid-sentence) ... What I am struck by is how much, how often I have to keep changing focus from thing to thing.*

Thoughtful Reflector

*Jenny : And what is the impact of that for you?*

*Andrew : I have to be very focused. Very linear.*

Blinkered Analyst

*Jenny : What does that mean?*

*Andrew : Well, in my conversations with you I try to be reflective and our range is very broad. But when I'm talking with others (at work) it is very focused on the task, the agenda, what they want.*

Thoughtful Reflector

*Jenny : How do you think they experience that?*

*Andrew : At a loss as to how to respond to my question, he shrugs his shoulders.*

Isolated Performer

I drop the invitation to reverse roles and return to mirroring, describing in a little detail to Andrew how I had experienced our coming together at the beginning of the session. Our conversation continues and at various points Andrew breaks off, picks up his pen and adds something further to the picture of things which are keeping him busy. This action is typically not in the immediate context of our conversation. His attention is clearly divided between the picture and our conversation.

<p>Andrew : (Interrupting me) <i>I'm adding XYZ. It is important.</i></p>	<p>Blinkered Analyst / Isolated Performer</p>
<p>Jenny : I decide to follow that emerging warm up. <i>Hmmm. What is it about XYZ that makes it important to you?</i></p>	
<p>Andrew (Noticing that I have changed tack with him) <i>You ad lib a lot don't you.</i></p>	<p>Puzzled Observer of Others</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>I try to work with what you bring forward in the moment. To meet you where you are.</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : <i>You weren't planning to talk about any of this were you?</i></p>	<p>Naïve Enquirer</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>No, I'm working with you. I'm not here to deliver a lecture. How is that for you?</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : <i>Good.</i> (Long pause) <i>It lets me bring up my own thoughts.</i></p>	<p>Thoughtful Reflector Valuer of Own Thoughts</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>How would it be if I were presenting you with a lecture?</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : <i>I'd just follow what you were telling me.</i></p>	<p>Trusting Learner</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>I believe that you can find your own answers once your awareness is expanded.</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : (petulantly) <i>But I don't know the answers.</i></p>	<p>Petulant Child</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>More awareness will make a difference.</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : <i>Oh.... Yes.</i></p>	<p>Trusting Learner</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>What do you recall from our last session?</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : (Puts his hands to his head, closes his eyes, tilts his head back) <i>I don't remember.</i></p>	<p>Exhausted Performer</p>
<p>Jenny : <i>How did you go with your actions?</i></p>	
<p>Andrew : (Pause) <i>I don't remember what they were.</i></p>	<p>Exhausted Performer Thoughtful Reflector</p>
<p>But then Andrew suddenly warms up and becomes spontaneous – he sits up straight in his chair, looks more lively, starts speaking clearly and strongly.</p>	
<p>Andrew : <i>But I <u>AM</u> trying to be more reflective. Last week at the conference ...</i> and he goes on to tell me a story of how he had become aware of the dynamics that were unfolding when he was presenting to a group. They had been highly interactive when other speakers presented, but not when he presented. He described his delivery as dogmatic. He was unable to change his behaviour in the moment, however, he was able to clearly reflect on it after the event</p>	<p>Delighted Self Observer</p>

Andrew's Thoughtful Reflector role has expanded significantly and, when he actively applies his attention to what is happening around him, he is more aware, in the moment, of how his style is a contributing factor to the inter-personal outcomes he is experiencing.

At the end of the session I ask Andrew how was it for him today. He responds initially by regurgitating much of the conversation content.

Jenny : *What are you aware of in relation to how you are answering the question?*

Andrew : *It's very functional.*

Thoughtful Reflector

Jenny : *Yes. So how was it today? Exciting? Confusing? Exhausting? Boring? Confronting?*

Andrew : (After a long pause) *Enlightening. Enlightening to work out what is important, getting the balance right. Being present in the moment.*

Delighted Self Observer

In the course of this second coaching session a further set of existing and newly developing roles – Petulant Child, Exhausted Performer and Naïve Enquirer etc - have become evident and can be added to the map of Andrew’s overall role system.

Looking at the pattern of Andrew’s role system observed thus far, whilst he does exhibit coping roles across the Against, Away and Toward spectrum, as well as a range of emerging progressive roles, as a general rule in his everyday work world his predominant role pattern comprises a set of Against and Away coping roles (highlighted in red in the following table).

Fragmenting Roles	Coping Roles			Progressive Roles	
	Moving Against	Moving Away	Moving Toward	Developing	Well Developed
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	Combative Self Defender	Blinkered Analyst		Delighted Self Observer	Thoughtful Reflector
	Gagged / Defenceless Victim	Exhausted Performer		Empathetic Communicator	
	Blinkered Self Justifier			Emotional Bridge Builder	
	Brusque Decider			Naïve Enquirer	
				Valuer of Own Thoughts	

*Andrew’s Role System, highlighting those roles most commonly adopted in his everyday work world*

In relationship with me, a person who moves toward him rather than against him, Andrew actively demonstrates that he is capable of situational awareness and thoughtful reflection when encouraged, pushed and sufficiently self-motivated. His motivating force of self-development and desire for success as Project Director is evident and strong. However, his overdeveloped coping roles are still strongly evident in his narrative and even, to a limited extent, are active in his relationship with me.

Thus whilst Andrew generally responds constructively to those (such as me, his coach) who move toward him, his combative and isolating coping roles quickly emerge when this is not the case. And they escalate rapidly in the face of opposition.

In future sessions I anticipate a continuing focus on supportive mirroring with Andrew to assist him to become more actively aware of this dynamic. This is likely to involve introducing more role reversal to help develop his empathy, together with role training to assist him in anchoring his emerging progressive roles and to develop further proactive progressive roles eg Empathetic Planner, which may contribute to his effectiveness in pursuing his objectives.

The focus of our ongoing work will be to reshape Andrew's social atom toward less isolated, more mutually positive relationships with those on whom he is dependent for the success of his project.

### ***In Conclusion***

The focus of this paper is my initial exposure to Andrew and what transpired during the first 2 of 10 scheduled coaching sessions. As such it reflects very early days in terms of his progressive role development. Our work together continues to evolve.

My active move toward him, through adequate doubling has, I think, been fundamental to the success of Andrew's social atom repair thus far. His social atom has expanded to include a relationship in which he can be safely and constructively challenged without being hijacked by his over-developed combative and isolating coping roles.

Following on from that, respectful mirroring has been a key component in raising Andrew's self and situational awareness. He has, much of the time, been a genuinely surprised and taken aback receiver of this mirroring. Both in terms of the actual content ("Did I really do that? No, I can't have done that? Is that what they did? Really? I didn't notice that.") and the non-critical, non-attacking, supportive manner of its delivery. This has modelled a role which is very different from Andrew's combative norm and which hopefully he will consider taking up himself at some point.

And in an overall sense, the focus on role analysis and role development - even though not explicitly described in those terms to Andrew - has created a space in which Andrew can consider how to develop progressive new roles and new habits, leveraging his existing strengths, rather than seeing them only as limitations inconsistent with his new organisational role. This enables him to bring more of the whole of himself to the fore. His cultural atom has, at least in relationship with me as his coach, expanded to encompass a range of emerging progressive roles.

Jenny Postlethwaite  
May 2012

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