

# Don't just do something...stand there! An invitation to conversation

*Alf Lizzio is a lecturer in psychology and a member of the CRU committee. In this article he reminds us how important it is to take time to reflect, and to have conversations with each other. He even suggests some topics of conversation.*

There is no shortage of useful work to be done. As a society we have needs coming out of our ears and many good people are in action, working long hours, contributing above and beyond...and thank goodness for such commitment. However the righteous feeling that we sometimes get when we are over-committed should not be mistaken for the glow of success. While we all know that being busy is not the same as being effective, we can sometimes lose sight of this in the haze of everyday activity. We may do well to be a little cautious when we hear ourselves and others say things like: 'I've too much to do. Thinking about the 'big picture' is a luxury I can't afford, or At least we're doing something – we'll work out whether it's useful later, and some will be familiar with the words: 'I'm too busy chopping wood to stop and sharpen my axe. These are the siren songs of the short game.

An orientation to action is absolutely necessary – after all we don't want to be all talk and no action. I would suggest however that there might be benefits, to both our effectiveness and our personal satisfaction, if we supported our actions by regular and friendly questioning of each other about what it is that we think we are doing. I know this sounds simple but I don't hear these constructive conversations very often. Unless people have been quarantined in some type of workshop, making the space and time for critical reflection seems a challenge for most of us. It may be that our greatest strengths can also be our greatest weaknesses.

The activity trap is a sweet temptation for those of us helping-types who want to contribute. Current managerialist imperatives 'to do more with less' can be red flags to a helper's pride. We can fall into the collusive trap of priding ourselves on how well we can play the can-do efficiency game: 'We'll show them how well we can deliver under tough conditions! In treating ourselves as expendable commodities we reinforce managerialist assumptions about how the game of helping and service should be played. One aspect of the politics of helping is that human service systems will allow enthusiastic workers to exploit themselves under the rhetoric of 'doing a good job'. People burn out and are replaced, and so the un-reflective short game is maintained without end.

Good helpers are often characterised as those who are able to show unconditional acceptance and non-judgmental supportiveness. We readily identify with the idea of being supportive people, however we can take this too far, and in a kind of helper's trance over-generalise our sense of acceptance of inappropriate rules or unworkable limitations on our practice. Our identity as supportive people means that we can find critical questioning too challenging or uncomfortable to incorporate into our modus operandi.

Perhaps the most consequential effect of this is that we start to take self-protective shortcuts in how we engage with our work. We may believe that authentic relationships between people are critical but settle for workable procedures that demand less of us in our interactions. We may acknowledge that people are complex but feel saved from potentially messy and challenging situations by the promise of one right answer in problem-solving. We know that people are likely to feel justly treated when they have a voice in decision-making, but solutions may get imposed when we lack the confidence to enter into a dialogue that comes from having thought things through. We may tell others that learning and change are important, but are happy to just get through the day. We may have vague feelings of unease with the way things are, but don't

really want to admit these to ourselves because we fear the complications that might follow from acting on our insights.

Although it isn't the whole answer by a long way, giving ourselves permission to take time to get clear about what is most important can be useful. This is the first step in the training program for the long game. In case any unreformed helpers are wondering, this is real work and it's not 'being selfish'. Find someone, agree to be respectfully challenging of each other and start a conversation. Here are some possible conversation starters – who knows where they might lead!

**Identity**

What do I stand for?

What is the one thing I take as 'core' to who I am?

**Purpose**

What difference am I trying to make?

Why this and not something else?

Who agrees/disagrees with me on this? And how much do I care?

**Context**

What are the 'rules of the game' under which I am operating?

Who makes the rules? How do I feel about this?

Who are the winners and losers? How do I feel about this?

**Principles**

What simple but important principles inform my daily practice?

How do I know whether or not I am acting in accord with these?

**Inconsistencies**

Is what I actually do the same as what I say should be done?

What are the differences between my intentions and my impact?

**Voices**

Whose voice is heard most loudly in my practice? Why?

Whose voice is mediated or translated by others? Why?

Whose voice grates on me? What might I not want to hear?