

Rehearsing for Profit

You're running a business. Things have been going well, but you know they could be better. If it's communication that concerns you, Theatre4Business might have the answer. T4B is a ground-breaking company based in Dartington and London that sees parallels between producing a play and providing a product or service. Diana Theodores, theatre director, lecturer and one of four partners in the team, believes T4B could take your company to the next level.

T4B is both a research project and a business that began with funding from the South-west's Centre for Creative Enterprise and Participation. In just two years, it has run courses for local organisations such as Netrank, Regen SW and HERDA-SW, corporates such as Tate & Lyle and Kellogg's, local authorities and many smaller organisations. As the result of a workshop, Tony Everett, Chairman of Netrank, wrote: "Within three months, sales have increased by over 20%. Coincidence? I think not and I congratulate Theatre4Business on their huge contribution."

The four women partners know from their work in theatre that collaboration on performance can have a profound effect on personal growth. "If this phenomenon is transferred to the business world, it can re-energise any organisation," says partner Josie Sutcliffe who is a Business Fellow at Dartington College of Arts. Josie also coaches at Exeter University's Centre for Leadership Studies and, together with Diana, has produced modules on communication for the School of Management at Cranfield University.

So how does it all function? Prior to a workshop there will be a series of conversations with the client company. Courses are bespoke and there's plenty of room for fine-tuning. They range from workshops with groups of around 12 participants to conferences with 600, and can last for half a day or three days and more.

A course can cover anything from one-to-one coaching or personal impact and effectiveness, to staff-motivation, presentation skills, communication, team-building, work-life balance and unlocking creativity. It can be designed for all levels of staff – from chief executives down and will also include a follow-up session to track the impact of the work.

A company might be looking for improved communication, a rekindling of energy, or perhaps a re-visioning of its purpose following change. "A company is a community," says partner Mary Lidgate, "and like a community that has broken down, it can split into non-communicating groups." Mary has directed large-scale community theatre projects, and works with the Business Education Partnership in West Kent. She's also an Associate Director of CarbonSense, a company dedicated to the reduction of carbon emissions, so she's T4B's specialist on environmental issues.

As well as their interest in environmental concerns, the partners in T4B have a strong ethical focus and believe their work can affect the health of an entire organisation. "We give people the tools for much higher quality conversations on business matters," says Diana. The result is the ability to go beyond simple communication to make valuable connections with both colleagues and clients.



A ground-breaking Dartington company is taking the principles used in theatre and transferring them to improve productivity in business. Jean Rose reports

T4B has an extensive body of research to draw on, and these women believe that their understanding of how people learn has been crucial in their success. They live and breathe a sense of empathy with others and a dynamic approach to making business organisations the best they can be, and they stress that profit should not be seen merely in monetary terms.

The team cites research showing that 93% of any communication is dependent on voice, body language and facial expression. Didi Hopkins, the fourth member of the group, likes to think of a workshop as a laboratory. Didi has worked in radio, TV and film, now runs her own theatre, and is an Associate of the National Theatre. "We supply the nuts and bolts," she says, "that enable someone to make their performance congruent, so that their behaviour totally supports the remaining 7% – the message they want to get across. In this way, the 'fluffy stuff' of artistic endeavour can be hard-edged."

Everything comes back to the individual. "Everyone has a deep, creative core," says Diana, "and we focus on natural strengths and assets, not on what's wrong." There's no role-play involved and no influence exerted. "People have their own solutions," she goes on. "We create an arena for them to explore issues and take risks."

Group cohesion is crucial in a business and T4B understand this fully. "We use the metaphor of a theatrical spotlight," says Didi. "When attention is focused on an individual, he or she will shine more brightly if fully supported by the rest of the group." Mary nods. "You grow incredibly in confidence when others make you look good," she says.

T4B's future plans include addressing the position of women in the workplace. This spring they are launching a new programme, 'Gain Weight at Work', for business women who want to be seen and heard in the boardroom. There will be one-off sessions as well as bespoke courses for individual companies. □

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Above Diana Theodores (left) and Josie Sutcliffe