

THE ORIGINS OF RESTORATIVE CONFERENCING

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I feel very privileged standing here today, having been asked to introduce you to the documentary 'Burning Bridges'. This is a story about a restorative conference and six young men who burned and destroyed a historic wooden covered bridge. The story begins with a journey; in fact, a number of journeys for those whose lives were impacted in some way by what these young men did. These journeys converge at a point where various folk come together to meet or participate in what we now call a 'restorative conference'. It was both an end and a beginning point.



Terry
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But let us travel back even further, to where my first formal experience of a restorative conference began, in 1991, as a police officer in Wagga Wagga, in southern New South Wales, Australia. As police, we were unhappy with how the courts were dealing with young offenders, and so, inspired by the development of family group conferences in New Zealand, we decided to change the way we officially

'cautioned' young offenders. The idea of using a meeting to issue the caution made sense.

The first meeting involved dealing with four young men who had stolen an expensive vintage motorcycle. The owner had spent some years restoring the motorcycle. It was returned to him in a damaged condition. It would be an understatement to say that the victim was angry, even more so when I suggested that he might like to meet with the offenders and their families to talk about what had happened. He wanted blood, and nothing short of putting these young offenders before court was going to satisfy. Nonetheless he was prepared to go along with what I was proposing.

Armed with nothing more than a general sense of what I needed to do, I decided to facilitate the meeting in two stages. The initial stage involved the offenders and their families. This was an opportunity to discover what had happened and who had been affected. In the second stage I included the victim, as this seemed to be the next logical step towards allowing the victim to be heard and, importantly, working out what was needed to make things right. I am happy to report that this meeting was a wonderful experience for all involved. The victim really appreciated the opportunity of being heard and was impressed with the offenders' preparedness to take responsibility. The offenders and their families found the process very worthwhile, whilst at the same time confronting. Sadly, six months after the meeting, a bull killed one of the four offenders, a rodeo champion, during a competition. His mother rang me to say how important the meeting had been for her son, as it had allowed him to 'fix' things with all involved.

This conference also proved to be the first step in what was to be a steep learning curve for me as a conference facilitator. In the months that followed I had the opportunity to facilitate many meetings with offenders, victims, and their families. This experience helped me to develop a simple facilitator guide or script capable of obtaining consistent outcomes regardless of the seriousness of the incident or the number of people involved. It is best known as the Real Justice conference script.

In the last 16 years I have lost count of the number of restorative conferences I have facilitated. Some of these have been for horrific crimes such as murder, rape, sexual abuse, and so on. Most have been for mundane day-to-day issues in families, communities, workplaces,

schools, and a variety of other settings. What has changed most as I look back is that the restorative conference is no longer seen as a discrete intervention where the focus is almost exclusively on what happens in the conference, but rather on what results when the journeys of the various individuals converge. This is often the end point, where closure and healing can begin, as well as a beginning point, where all involved draw on their learning to strengthen relationships and build a better tomorrow.

This means that the facilitation role focuses on assisting individuals on their journey through the use of the restorative questions found in the script. When engaging offenders (or those responsible for the harm) this involves asking the following questions:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you did? In what way?
- What do you need to do to make things right?

For those who have been harmed (victims' and offenders' families) we ask the following questions:

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What impact has this incident had on you?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

The key to effective facilitation has to do with the use of Socratic engagement (simply asking questions). This style helps others, through restorative conversations, to develop their own capacity to make sense and meaning about what has happened and, importantly, to work out what is needed to make things right. This allows everyone to work out what is best for him or her and, on occasion, does not necessarily involve participating in a restorative conference.

As you watch the documentary, I want you to observe how the two facilitators (John Bailie and Bob Costello) use a modelling process consistent with what I have just described. The explicit nature of their practice ensures that those involved are most likely to say that their restorative experience:

- Was respectful, as it focused on the unacceptable behaviour whilst valuing all involved.

- Was fair, as it provided an opportunity for everyone to be heard.
- Focused on harm and relationships, not on blame and punishment.
- Helped develop empathy through a shared understanding of each other's journey.
- Provided the offenders with a genuine opportunity to take responsibility and accountability.

Importantly, it was most likely that the offenders would have learnt from this experience and key relationships would have been repaired and strengthened. Our world today desperately needs more restorative conversations and journeys.

Thank you for listening and enjoy the documentary.