

ROLE PLAYING

Translated and adapted from Fernandez, J. (1988). *Réussir une activité de formation*. Montreal: Éditions Saint-Martin, 204 p.

A training session often includes participants who hail from different environments, have never met before and have had different experiences in life and the workplace. What can be done so that everyone in such a diverse group understands and even experiences the same difficult or sensitive situation? What can be done so that the trainees not only understand the theory involved but actually live out the situation. Role playing can be of considerable help in this regard.

What it is

Everyone has appeared in skits in front of an audience at some time or another. The field trainer can tap that same method. The roles in a 10- to 30-minute presentation of this kind might include a health and safety committee member, a laid-off or injured worker and even the trainer himself or herself. The idea is for some participants to act out a real-life situation in front of the other participants in order to understand the situation and have the others understand it. This is a form of simulation, the difference being the theatrics involved in role playing. The play seeks to bring a person alive and portray a reality. Dramatized reality is primarily subjective, for it expresses the players' perception (see Fact Sheet 28: Simulation). This technique can be used in group training to portray the complexity of a situation and better visualize its various facets.

How it works

A situation is chosen because it is complex and hard to understand. The participants call on their own experiences to produce a scenario from the trainer's broadly outlined plot, content and character development (identity, personality and occupation). The scenario may feature more than one character, but the "cast" should be limited to keep the role-play manageable and no more than 10 or 20 minutes long. The scenario should be flexible so that the players (trainees) can be spontaneous and improvise instead of being tightly bound by a script.

The trainer helps the players and suggests ideas about how they should go about role playing. They agree on the interpretation of the scenario. The non-acting participants are spectators who take in the play with the aid of an observation worksheet.

Afterwards, the trainer and all session participants get together to analyze the role-play and talk about what they got out of it – what they discovered and what they learned. Everyone lays hold of the training content, in other words.

How it helps

Role playing explains, teaches and exemplifies. It provides a tangible model that readily lends itself to analysis and critical assessment. By way of example, a trainer can use role playing to address the liability provisions of workmen's compensation legislation. This could mean staging an occupational accident and "casting" participants as the people involved.

- This technique engages the participants in a life-like situation and provides the basic information required for analyzing, assessing and integrating.
- It highlights the important aspects of the situation. Where the situation is a work accident investigation, for example, role playing shows what the various health and safety officers do, the nature and content of the investigation, the significance of certain facts, the key points, and the contentions of employer and employee. Based on that scenario, the trainer can lead the group discussion to the measures prescribed in workmen's compensation legislation.
- It gives the participants a dynamic understanding of the situation and the possible complications involved. Indeed, a role-play is clearer and more interesting than the trainer's straight narrative of the facts.
- It allows the participants more dynamic contact with the situation under study. The role-play just described clearly shows what needs doing in case of an occupational injury and the different ways of understanding and handling the responsibilities involved. Basically, role playing makes things more tangible.

Analysis

Discussion after the role-play should draw out each participant's perception of the facts depicted and the factors involved. The real-life experience is unpacked, just as an alarm clock is disassembled to examine its parts and inner works. This analytical component is a vital part of role playing as a training technique.

Analysis also draws out the experiential content. It allows everyone involved to express their opinion and affords the trainer an opportunity to adjust, clarify and expand on what the participants were able to draw from the role-play. The trainer moves them from the scenario to the real situation.

During the analysis, the trainer defines concepts, reveals possible attitudes and spells out what action is needed. For example, what steps are involved in an occupational injury investigation? (A practical guide may be provided.) What is the attitude of the people involved? What does the law have to say?

Role playing is a technique much appreciated by participants in a training session. They get a clearer picture of the situations they have experienced on the job or elsewhere and have an opportunity to jump right in. They notice more and see the facts more clearly. In reliving an event, they better realize the possibilities and difficulties, as well as the means at their disposal. They identify with the situation and with reality. Through analysis, they share views and contemplate their actions and mistakes in order to improve the quality of their real-life interventions.

Some key points

1. The trainer should bear in mind that this is a training technique, not a stage play! After every role-play, the trainer should provide an analysis and broad summary, writing on the blackboard and pointing out the key points the participants need to remember.
2. The trainer should bear in mind that this type of simulation yields a great deal of unexpected information. The behaviour of the “players” conveys messages that, although unspoken or not acted out, could prove highly significant. Say that the trainer wants to show the group the measures prescribed by legislation benefiting pregnant workers who request precautionary leave from work. The trainer opts for role playing. The characters, a pregnant worker and her employer, meet to discuss the requested leave. If the participant playing the pregnant employee is petite, shy and unassuming whereas the employer is played by a hefty, self-assured individual, the scenario will subliminally convey a great many connotations and mental images. For example:
 - The female employee is weak.
 - The woman is weak and helpless.
 - The male employer is superior to the female employee.
 - etc.
3. Role playing is an effective technique provided it taps into the participants’ experience. The observers will not identify with a contrived situation.
4. Role playing must recognize the knowledge and experiences of both players and participants, who must be capable of recognizing and accepting the reality portrayed. Situations that arouse inner or interpersonal conflict are to be avoided, however.
5. The objective of role playing is to provide material to work with. The scenario should produce a positive learning experience. The players may make mistakes, but the trainer must see that the group members are successfully trained.

Bear in mind

1. Role playing is a powerful awareness builder. Like every process, it involves the whole person. The experiences portrayed are sometimes hard to take. The trainer must be respectful of all emerging awareness, without judging how sound or relevant it is.
2. Like every awareness building technique used for training purposes, role playing must have an instructional component and should therefore include structured sequences culminating in a learning evaluation.
3. Given its potential emotional implications, role playing is used as a training technique only if the trainer can be certain it will be a genuine learning opportunity. Participants should not leave without “closing the circle.”

Additional reading

Ancelin-Schutzenberger, Anne. *Le jeu de rôle*. Paris: Éditions ESF, 1981.

Fernandez, J. (1988). *Réussir une activité de formation*. Montreal: Éditions Saint-Martin, 204 p.