The Principles Of Role-playing

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Role-playing is aimed at improving the ability to work with people, the ability to communicate successfully in face-to-face situations.

Role-playing simulates actual interpersonal situations. It includes recognition of psychological implications of a situation, of each man's personality. It includes the social skills one is able to bring to a situation.

In role-playing, trainees act parts or assume roles in a particular situation. Through it, the players improve their understanding of people. They increase conscious awareness of the effect of their own behavior on others, and analyze the effects of their own attitudes, mannerisms and even tone of voice.

In industrial situations, the technique must be handled carefully. It is a two-edged sword. In analysis of motivations of people who work closely together, some motivations or attitudes may be brought to attention which are difficult to deal with directly. For this reason, the trainer must have a thorough familiarity with the kinds of developments which might occur.

Definition

Most training directors would agree that role-playing occurs when two or more trainees are assigned parts or roles with some degree of description and asked to act out a situation. This statement can be an over-simplification and in practice, the director finds himself involved in questions of purpose, direction and goal. There are difficulties in semantics and complex attitudes can develop toward the role-playing session itself.

It is necessary to examine the exact purpose of a session to determine aspects to highlight, direct treatment and course, and length of discussion. Sessions may be grouped into three general types:

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A. *Individual-centered role-playing.* Focus is on the individual presenting the situation (i.e., the target role-player or protagonist). The leader concentrates on determining what problems the individual will face and helps him to resolve them. An attempt is made to help the trainee understand his own personality more completely and develop insight as to the impact his personality has on others. The objective is to increase the trainee's effectiveness in handling interpersonal relations.

B. *Problem-centered role-playing.* Focus is on problems such as handling dissatisfied workers or motivating others. Members of the group enact the situation and no attempt is made to focus action on any individual. The goal is to produce a better understanding of human relations.

C. *Method-centered role-playing.* Techniques are stressed such as; "How to interview," "Grievance handling," the typical "Job Instructor Training." The focus is neither on the individual nor on the inter-personal problems involved, but rather on procedure.

Three Role-playing Approaches Applied To J.I.T

These three definitions can be clarified by specific examples of application typical training sessions on Job Instruction:

A. *The Individual-centered Approach:* The leader is concerned with examining the "target player's" problem in training others. Perhaps the target player has always had difficulty in training others and a variety of such situations may be enacted. No effort is made to adhere to the JIT outline or to any other specific plan since the direction of the action is dependent on the target player. It might develop that the trainee has always had trouble in directing others or in assuming any kind of autocratic role. Situations are then enacted to examine the trainee's problem in regard to training and as related to many other problems concerning entire personality. Further enactments and discussion follows.

Most industrial trainers feel that the individual-centered approach goes beyond the scope of industrial training. Nevertheless, an understanding of this method is helpful in understanding role-playing techniques in general.

B. *The Problem-centered Approach:* Through role-playing, it is demonstrated that all trainees have common problems in handling Job Instruction Training. Such things as "developing empathy for the learner," "communicating instructions," "putting the worker at ease," etc. are examined with no attempt to focus the action on any one individual. Various members of the group participate and the emphasis of the entire session is on understanding people in the learning situation.

C. *The Method-centered Approach:* This type of session is carefully structured. The JIT approach is examined and enacted step-by-step. The personalities of the teacher and the pupil are secondary to the procedure. (This type of session is also useful for subjects having emphasis other than human relations.)

The problem-centered and method-centered approaches can be integrated to maximize effectiveness. The same basic methods can be used in practically any kind of human relations training.

Importance of Structure

Role-playing and subsequent discussion can be and has been as didactic as many lectures. The leader can act as imperiously authoritarian as in any other situation. It can also be as informal, low-pressure, almost casual, as the development type, non-directive conference.

Many sessions are structured and formal; others are unstructured and democratic. Some experienced users of the method have insisted that the democratic kind of session gets better results.

The most interesting results are the reaction of participants. Sometimes both insist, in most positive ways, that the sessions have been meaningful experiences, and given them new viewpoints. Others have felt that the experience was a complete waste of time. Why does one session seem effective, another ineffective? Probable explanations might be the flexibility of the leader, to know where he was going and why, to recognize the group purpose and the situation demands, to vary approaches and to apply the most suitable approach, technique and method.

Meaningfulness of the situation, as participants are concerned, seems independent of the structuring of the action, or the democracy employed by the leader. Awareness of purpose and goal, and use of the right techniques at the right moment seem crucial. The leader must be completely familiar with the varieties of purposes which may be achieved and appreciated, and the several ways which are appropriate to reach them. Treatment of every aspect of the method, including recognition of the advantages and disadvantages, limitations and rationale for employment of each approach

as well as the sequence of techniques to be employed, are the necessary next steps for investigators of the method.

Role-playing: Hot and Cold

Practitioners say that role-playing begins when the session catches fire—that is, when all or most participants feel that the problem has real meaning. Often participants are neutral or indifferent spectators; sometimes they identify, sometimes they feel—in an intense and personal way—that something is happening outside themselves which they had better feel and experience.

Individuals can suddenly feel involved either as actors or as observers, but they must feel personally involved for maximum learning. However, there are occasions when role-playing can be considered to have been a useful training device, or to have produced results without heat or personal involvement. If we are trying, in the industrial situation, to teach industrial supervisors effective ways to communicate management directives to subordinates, we might put all our emphasis on methods of acting or of procedure. In such a case, the training director is really telling the group:

"This is the way such and such a problem must be handled. In this case, there is a 'ONE BEST WAY.' We don't need to worry about circumstances or individual differences of opinion as to how to succeed."

A training man might ask: "Why use role-playing at all in this case?" The answer is that the trainer is using the technique as an instructor would when he demands that a man learning a new operation demonstrate what he has

learned. After instruction in the procedure, the trainer might say: "Now let's try out this procedure, to be sure we all understand it."

In sessions of this type, we do not hope to change any basic or deep-seated attitudes, or to develop insights into the nature of the dynamic relationships between people, or even to exchange personal feelings or our ideas on complex personal relationships. We are merely aiming at the establishment of a kind of procedure which is quite specific. It is hoped that the procedure will be "stamped in" the minds of the participants by such active "carry-out" of its repetition; that the method can be practiced until proficiency is achieved. At this point, the training man might well say: "I never hope to run a training session in which personal involvement does not occur." *Certainly* he is right. However, there are a number of training sessions in which personal involvement is desired, but a high degree of emotional involvement is *not* a necessary condition.

If one were training foremen in the principles of first aid, or in handling safety equipment, comparatively little emotional involvement would be demanded, even though participants felt involved personally.

Role-playing for Objective Skills and Subjective Attitudes

Even in the most apparently objective situations, some attitudes and feelings must be considered. One might attend a session about completion of merit rating forms, but if he happened to be tired or irritated, a negative attitude might develop toward the procedures

discussed, though they were unrelated to the attitude cause. Industry originally developed conference methods to encourage minimal amounts of personal involvement in such situations.

Some training men have felt that the primary use of role-playing was to practice and develop objective skills as safety methods. They have in mind that the main use is to enable the leader and group members to criticize each other's effectiveness in using whatever device or procedure is in process of being mastered at the moment. But some who have used it most effectively and most often, feel strongly that the method has a wider and more important application in the changing of subtle but important attitudes. How often have speakers made the point in lectures that it is necessary to see any problem the way the men involved see it—and how often have we been struck with the lip service it has received! Men can agree with but not apply such principles in their daily lives unless some means can be found to put flesh and blood into the idea, to have it acquire a living force in the attitudes the supervisor uses in daily living.

The stress is on the subjective, on development of new attitudes and insights. Participants become more aware of their own feelings, feelings of others, how their feelings cause them to act, and the effect of their actions, bearing, tone of voice. Actually living various situations seems to be a graphic and effective way to bring home the power and range of applications of central ideas which are essential to good supervision.

In the acquisition of objective skills type of training, the group is encouraged

to think and act in terms of increasing awareness of facts. In the subjective attitude type, they are encouraged to act in terms of feelings and emotions.

Cold role-playing works very well for the objective type. The trainer can utilize "canned" skits, demonstrations, films and short lectures in the same context as cold role-playing. Subjective training demands the utmost in personal emotional involvement if there is to result any real change in the thinking of groups or individuals. Its development is similar in general plan and emergence to non-directive conferences and interviews and to some developmental conference training methods.

A number of situations demand "heat" in the session, for growth to take place. The more the participants can feel involved, the more they recognize the effects of their own behavior.

Where the session is problem-centered, or emphasis is on development of an individual, the atmosphere must be "hot." In individual-centered or in problem-centered sessions, we quickly get into deep water. Biases, prejudices, and deep-seated habitual attitudes of all members are touched upon; areas of sensitivity are explored, and feelings of all types emerge.

Where the emphasis is on acquisition of method, the emotional involvement is much less important or even unimportant. The atmosphere of interest would help in such situations, but it is not vital.

OBJECTIVE SITUATIONS

Lectures or discussions can be used to establish details of the method studied. Visual aids spell out logical steps of the operation. The procedure may be practiced through acting and the 'bugs' and misunderstandings ironed out. Even here, the trainer must be aware of attitudes and the mood or climate.

SUBJECTIVE SITUATIONS

By far, the greatest number of problems in management training directly involves the feelings and attitudes, hidden or overt, of the people being trained for administrative roles. Every day duties of discipline and correction, employee counselling, conference leading, evaluative interviews, building constructive motivation in workers, require development of empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others. The supervisor must be positive, optimistic and friendly, rather than negative, cynical and sarcastic. He must develop insight. He must know why he does things, why management does them, and why workers do and say the things they do.

Cold role-playing and method-centered approaches get nowhere when they attack such problems, but rather, show insensitivity of the trainer to the feelings and needs of the participants. Resistances and defenses are so set and strong that we cannot make any gain in understanding unless the situation seems to be really close to us, similar to our concern with our own relationships with people.

Role-playing is most effective when the feelings or attitudes of participants must be changed, altered, or at least brought to the state of acute awareness of the training objective. This is true in any kind of interviewing or counselling, in teaching people how to ad-

dress groups effectively, conference leadership, and in other areas.

Relative to role-playing as training in subjective situations, a discussion of the three phases, (*warm-up, enactment,* and *post-enactment analysis*) follow.

Establishing Warm-up Atmosphere

1. The participants must be brought to a "group-centered" feeling.

A statement of the objective by the group helps. This objective is quickly shattered and hard to rebuild if the leader acts as the authority on the discussion.

2. A feeling of group responsibility must be established among the participants. They must feel that the meeting is *their* meeting and that the conclusions reached are theirs.

3. Leader must establish an "action atmosphere." Intellectualizing on theories and facts regarding the problems under discussion should be discouraged. The members should be encouraged to talk and think in terms of feelings and of specific experiences. Each feeling expressed must be referred to the group for analysis. Thus, when an idea or feeling is expressed, the leader should ask: "Has anyone else ever had a similar experience" or "how does this idea compare with your experience?"

4. The problem must be real and meaningful to all participants.

5. A low-pressure, non-punitive atmosphere must be maintained.

WARM-UP EXAMPLE

Subject: Counselling.
Method: Problem-centered Role-playing.

Objective: To warm up the group so they will be receptive to a more extensive examination and discussion of their own attitudes toward counselling others.

Leader: "As you know, today we're going to talk about counselling subordinates. It's something we all know quite a bit about since most of us have been doing it for some time. Have you ever run into people who don't respond to counselling very well?"

Group: "Yes."

Leader: "Why don't some people respond?"

Mr. A: "Some people just won't listen."

Leader: "Have any of you ever run into situations in which the people you're talking to just don't seem to be really listening?"

Group: (After discussion, the group agrees that there are people whom they just can't seem to reach; they can't obtain real listening.) The leader then selects the individual who seems to be most involved in the question of non-listeners. This person must also be someone who appears willing to role-play.

Leader: "Mr. A, you seem to have a good understanding of how 'people-who-won't-listen' act. Suppose you give us a little more thorough picture of how these people behave."

A variety of approaches can be utilized to structure this first situation. It can be done subtly with the leader saying: "Suppose, Mr. A, you try to be one of these unresponsive people. I'll be the interviewer. Let's say your name is Joe and I call you in because the quality of your work is not too good." The leader asks simple questions such as: "You're

a good worker but lately your quality hasn't been so good. What's the trouble?" (The leader should not try to show off his skill as an interviewer but try to come fairly close to what he thinks other group members might do.) After discussion, the group agrees that Mr. A is playing Joe's part fairly well, or they make suggestions as to how it should be played, and the leader asks other participants to act as interviewers. He also may have other participants try Joe's part. No one is asked to leave their seats and no elaborate structuring is attempted.

In other cases, the leader may find it necessary to structure the situation carefully. He may ask several people to leave the room while the exact nature of the situation is established and the group decides just how "Joe" (the interviewee) should act. The absent members can then be called back and given detailed descriptions of the role. The aim is participation and acceptance of method. Since this is still the warm-up, the leader should avoid getting actively involved with a player but try to establish a feeling of group response.

Several other reasons for unresponsive subordinates may be suggested. The specific focus is not particularly important at this time, for the leader is concerned only with establishing a common problem for warm up.

The warm-up under way, the leader asks other people to try various roles. Discussion is encouraged and directed toward one objective: Group agreement on recognizing that individuals who cannot respond or listen to the counsellors present real problems.

The problem must be accepted as real before meaningful discussion or en-actments can occur. When group acceptance of the problem is achieved, that is, when the participants begin to move from one role to another, the warm-up may have progressed to the learning point. The warm-up never ends—it is a part of the entire session. From time to time, the group may cool down and then warm-up techniques are again used.

A transition can occur gradually as the leader brings more meaningful enactments into focus. Quite different enactments and verbal exchanges accomplish this objective. In some situations, particularly where the group is passive and inactive and has not accepted its responsibility in working out problems, a more directive approach is used to move out of the warm-up. A directive approach should be used rarely, usually only when the leader has obtained considerable personal acceptance from the group. It probably should not be used in the first session with a new group. The warm-up usually continues through a number of sessions.

Challenging: The Directive Approach to Active Participation

This is a verbatim report of an actual case with a group of instructors in training to teach counselling methods. The action was handled as though the participants were supervisors counselling their subordinates:

Warm-up: After discussion, the group developed their own problem situation— counselling a subordinate who was not dependable and lacked initiative.

First Enactment:

A (As interviewer): Come in, Mr. B. How are you?

B: Everything's fine.

A: You know we have an executive development program. Let me tell you a little about it . . .

B: Sounds fine!

*   *   *

Leader: Tell me, Mr. B, how do you really feel?

B: I think it's a good idea but I wish he'd get to the point.

Leader: O.K., let's go on.

*   *   *

A: Now, in general, your work has been very good; for example . . .

B: I'm glad to hear that.

A: There are a few things which you can do to become more effective. For example, the way you get your assignments done . . . Frankly there are some situations in which you could be more dependable.

B: I'm not sure I know what you mean.

A: Let me give you some examples: (Gives several instances.)

*   *   *

Leader: What do you think, Mr. B?

B: Well, he's the boss, so I'm not going to argue much but I can't see it . . .

*   *   *

After discussion, another team is asked to act out the same situation. Mr. C tries a more indirect approach:

C (As interviewer): . . . You know, from time to time, all of us have trouble meeting deadlines. I'm sure you'll agree that this happens to you from time to time. What causes it?

D: Well, (pause) sometimes you just have too much to do . . .

*   *   *

Leader: What's Mr. C trying to get at, Mr. D?

D: I'll be damned if I know, but if he doesn't like the way I handle my assignments, why doesn't he tell me so?

*   *   *

Several similar, short situations were enacted and a discussion followed. Members were encouraged to make criticisms, not of each other, but of the enactments in general. The group felt that their own performance had been inadequate and that teaching others to counsel would be difficult. Nevertheless, they remained quite passive and unconcerned. The leader then asked several questions.

Leader: Do you feel that developing subordinates is an important supervisory responsibility?

Group: Yes, of course, there's no doubt about it.

Leader: Do you feel that counselling really is an important and useful tool for developing subordinates?

Group: (The group proceeded to present strong arguments in favor of counselling; the discussion became more animated because they were defending their own raison d'etre.)

Leader: Despite the importance of this technique, we agreed earlier that we didn't do such a good job. How can we expect to teach others when we have so much trouble ourselves. What's happening here anyway? We said earlier we weren't really "getting to" the interviewee. We're going to be teaching others how to "get to" their subordinates. We said that our interviews lacked warmth, yet I'm sure you'd agree that warmth is an extremely important element in this kind of interview.

The group accepted this criticism as a challenge without hostility toward the leader. This may be due partly to their

earlier personal acceptance of the leader but, it is doubtful whether the criticism would have been accepted if it hadn't been made by the participants themselves earlier. As a result of the challenge, this group begins to examine their own methods more critically. They begin to be ready for more meaningful enactments and discussions.

We have stated that this challenging approach should be used only occasionally during the warm-up. It is permissible to employ direct comments during any enactment, if these interpretations are used with empathy and good timing.

The Enactment

The warm-up prepares for the enactment of meaningful situations to produce new skills and perhaps new insights. Presumably, the leader has made certain decisions:

1. Method: He has decided to focus on methods, problems, individuals, or a combination of any of these.

2. Involvement: Depending partially on the focus, partially on the participants, the leader has made some decision as to kind and extent of involvement. Thus, if deeply imbedded "mental sets" stand in the way of improved performance, the leader may decide upon a problem-centered approach with as intense a warm-up as possible, to maximize involvement.

METHODS OF CONDUCTING ENACTMENT

A wide range of techniques and approaches is available to the role-playing leader. Some brief definitions of the major techniques and nomenclature are:

Protagonist: The principal player who provides the focus for the action.

Auxiliary Ego: The supporting player, with whom the protagonist is involved. The interviewer is the protaganist and the interviewee is the auxiliary ego.

Role Reversal: Where the principal player (protagonist) and the supporting player (auxiliary ego) change places. In the example, the interviewer becomes the interviewee and vice-versa.

Soliloquy: Occasionally the action is stopped and one of the players is asked to express his ideas about some aspect of the problem or his own feelings. In the interviewing situation, the interviewee might be asked "how do you feel about this interview?" or, "what do you think of this interviewer?"

Surplus Reality: To dramatize one aspect of a problem, the participants may be encouraged to "over-play" their roles, usually to build up emotional content. At the outset of sessions, the participants are often preoccupied with the facts in the case. Surplus reality, as supplied by an experienced auxiliary ego, can direct attention to emotional content.

CONDUCTING THE ENACTMENT

Each role-playing enactment is different and a complete examination of an enactment would involve copious data. Therefore, a few guide procedures will provide useful references for potential practitioners:

1. Continue warm-up: All ingredients of a good warm-up are also requisites for meaningful enactments. (Group-centered feeling; group sense of responsibility; action atmosphere; problem must

be accepted as meaningful; low-pressure, non-punitive atmosphere.)

2. Establish primary relationship or situation: If a problem involves a supervisor and his subordinate, this relationship must obviously be presented. A simple enactment may be adequate to indicate the nature of relationship and problem. Role reversal and soliloquy can be used to further portray the problem.

3. Investigate the primary relationship or situation: Through role-reversal and enactment of other situations relative to the primary relationship, a better understanding of the relationship can be developed. In a method or problem-centered enactment, other members of the group may also assume the protagonist or auxiliary roles.

4. Try new methods of handling primary relationship by:

a. Suggestion of group, i.e., group may suggest new approaches or responses to the protagonist. Should be used only where two, or preferably more, people have played the protagonist's role and confined principally to method-centered sessions.

b. Group discussion. The group, including players, may decide on a different method of approach. Care must be taken to avoid threatening any individual player by asking him to do something embarrassing or anxiety-creating. The best way to avoid doing this is to avoid focusing action on one individual. As the practitioner gains more experience, mild anxiety-creating situations can be used in getting to the objective of greater insight.

c. Role reversal and soliloquy: By placing a participant in the protago-

nist role for several minutes and then reversing him to the auxiliary role, a slightly new point of view may be developed. This may be further enhanced by soliloquy. Example: a supervisor counselling a subordinate may act out the supervisor's role without being sensitive to the hostility or fear of his subordinate. When placed in the subordinate's role and faced with the supervisor, he may become more sensitive to the subordinate's feelings. By asking questions of the supervisor, *while he is in the subordinate's role,* he may be forced into a better appreciation of the inter-personal aspects.

It is impossible to catalog the many possibilities for insights and new points of view to evolve during role-playing. Nor is it possible to itemize every possible technique. The leader must draw upon his own resources in conducting these sessions. However, a general and empirical statement of objectives may give the new practitioner some "bench marks."

Here are some things the trainer should try to accomplish:

1. *Flexibility.* Through enactments, role reversal, soliloquy, etc., the trainees learn to move from one role to another, re-examine their points of view, to become more flexible in inter-personal relationships. The leader must strive to keep the trainees moving in a non-punitive atmosphere (i.e., the trainees should not be afraid to try new approaches and to experiment with new feelings).

2. *Catharsis.* Frequently, before a man can think clearly about a new situation, he must get rid of some negative feelings. We've all heard some one

say, "I got a load off my mind and I feel much better." Role-playing provides the opportunity to get a "load off their minds." If feelings are hostile, they can be diffused harmlessly through "play acting."

Many training people have had the experience of a participant becoming angry or hostile toward the leader. In role-playing, this hostility can be diffused through the group, through enactments with various members. Hostility can be directed toward group members without lasting effect since the members are not themselves but are playing a role. This presupposes that when attitude-changing is a goal, the trainer must face the fact that hostility may be, in fact probably will be, aroused.

3. *Spontaneity*. As attitudes are examined and new approaches and responses develop, spontaneity should be encouraged. Ideally, the process works something like this:

a. The trainee becomes more aware of his own point of view and through role-reversal, etc., he begins to appreciate the impact of his behavior.

b. Through group discussion and additional enactments, the trainee develops the desire to experiment with new responses.

c. As experimentation continues, the leader places the trainee in situations where he can become more spontaneous.

Post-Enactment Analysis

The third major step in role-playing (after warm-up and enactment) is post-enactment analysis and is often used with enactment. It may involve group discussion of the principles enacted earlier. It may be a group decision-making process, based on the ideas generated by enactment. Regardless of the nature of post-enactment analysis, one fundamental rule should not be violated: The *role-playing enactment and analysis should never be used as opportunity to criticize an individual participant's performance.* (The few exceptions to this rule are so rare that they will not be considered here.) An individual may criticize his own performance but it should not be encouraged. By violating these two precepts many training groups build negative feelings toward role-playing. Many post-enactment analysis approaches avoid these pitfalls:

1. *Omit analysis:* In many instances, no analysis or interpretation is necessary. For example, if a substantial number have participated in a given situation and, through enactment, role-reversal and soliloquy have experimented with new approaches, further discussion may be unnecessary.

2. *Diffused criticism:* The best method for permitting constructive criticism is to diffuse criticism and suggestions. The leader asks six or ten people to try a given role such as supervisor conducting merit-review with a subordinate. The group is asked to suggest improvements common to all enactments. Thus, three important objectives are obtained: (a) No one individual is embarrassed unduly; (b) The group's attention is directed toward common problems and basic principles—individual personalities are not highlighted; (c) A feeling of group cohesiveness is engendered since the group learns that they have many problems in common.