

# More Realistic Role-Playing

a tailor-made approach with a real "people" factor

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For years, most of us have used role-playing as a reasonably effective means of training, particularly for first-line supervisors and especially for labor relations exposure.

However, in most role-playing circumstances, the criteria for discussion are rather clear-cut and structured. This has resulted in many instances where role-playing has restricted the imagination, ingenuity and analytical ability of the individual. In short, we have not sufficiently approached realism.

A few years ago, we experimented with what we considered to be a somewhat different concept. Since each participant was given a different personality and often different facts, opinions, superfluous personal information and

biases, we then used the term "script cases." This term is particularly adaptable to combination male-female groups or majority-minority groups.

## Script-Case vs. Role Playing

Basically, a role-playing situation has all participants using the same pertinent facts. A script-case uses a common problem (case), but then provides each participant with facts (which may differ) plus personal opinions, personal considerations and non-related facts. A script-case usually provides individuals with more leeway in how they want to "play" the role and often has unexpected results.

Let's examine a typical labor relations case: "On Monday, March 1st, a utility-truck driver

was instructed by the foreman to check the tires on his truck before leaving the plant. The utility-truck driver appeared to do so; however, just after leaving the plant, he lost control of the truck and it slid into a ditch, causing considerable damage to the truck. Upon immediate investigation, the foreman found that the right front tire had no tread left and had blown out. Thereupon, the utility-truck driver was given both a written reprimand and a tongue-lashing by the foreman.

"The utility-truck driver immediately sought out the shop steward and a grievance was filed. Usually, this type of grievance meeting is held at the 'first step' within two working days; however, it is Monday morning, March 15th,

and the meeting is about to commence. The grievant, shop steward and supervisor are all present. A second supervisor who was present at the time of the incident is not present at this meeting, since he was not directly involved." (Copies of the appropriate section of the labor agreement are provided.)

In a role-playing situation, you probably would assign the role of utility-truck driver to supervisor A, the role of foreman to supervisor B, etc. The participants would then attempt to work out a solution. In many instances, this rather simple case may develop a somewhat sterile participation.

### Script-Case Application

However, let's apply the script-case approach to the problem. Each of the four supervisors would be given a separate script with instructions *not* to show the script to anyone except the moderator. For example, the grievant firmly believes that the instructions were to "check the tire pressures." Conversely, the foreman truthfully feels the instructions were to "check the tires." The other foreman was a witness to exactly what was said, but is not immediately present. Samples of superfluous facts include the immediate supervisor having a meeting scheduled in 15 minutes with his superior and the shop steward coming down with the flu and really wanting to go home. Some opinions and biases may include the immediate supervisor's dislike for grievance meetings (the reason for procrastinating) and the shop steward being torn by a dislike for both immediate supervisor (he's too tough!) and the grievant. The shop steward fully intends to "hard time" the supervisor. The moderator is provided with a copy of each script.

With the stage so set, the participants endeavor to probe for information or to equivocate. Each has been keyed to a personality which well may result in unexpected turns of events, including the use of subtle personal pressures. A quick-thinking individual often makes the tenor and direction unpredictable for the whole group. An experienced shop steward often can give a young supervisor a short, intensive, shocking course in practical labor relations in a free-wheeling session.

Jointly with a Union International representative, I conducted such a program for supervisors and local union officers. When the roles were reversed, we actually had to adjourn for coffee breaks to keep the enthusiasm from turning to "heat." The moderator often finds this to be the case, rather than having to act as a catalyst.

### "People" Factor

Possibly the essence of the script-case is the combination of emotional involvement along with the challenge of sorting out and evaluating the real facts. A white person playing the role of a black person is a prime example of emotional involvement and revelation.

Although the illustration is a fairly simple one, we have developed quite complex script-cases for team projects in the more sophisticated management areas, ranging from production control to management by objectives to organizational development. Basically, the more sophisticated programs still capitalize on the same fundamentals... those of asking the right questions and of organizing and verifying the facts... but with the more exhilarating experience of coping with the unpredictability of the "people" factor.

Consequently, we feel that the script-case approach is unlimited in its potential applications.

Although preparation is much more involved than routine role-playing, the approach can be "tailor-made" to particular situations and the enthusiasm and positive involvement of most participants is, in itself, very rewarding.

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## Will you be there?

