

Guide To Writing Role Playing Cases

Wallace Wohlking

Prepared role playing cases as found in existing texts¹ can be very valuable in teaching skills in interpersonal communications and problem solving. There is no substitute, however, for a case that is written for a specific group when the trainer is attempting to achieve a specific training objective. Therefore, there will be many times when the instructor will want to prepare his own case. This guide is to aid the training specialist in taking material from his own training situation and translating it into role playing cases specifically designed for his own organization.

Case Should be Valid To Trainee

The case should be developed so that it appears to have *relevance* to trainee's current duties or likely future assignments. This quality tends to heighten trainee motivation and interest.

Methods of Achieving Validity

1. Use *problems* which are trainee's, directly from the trainee's working experience.

2. Effective dealing with the case must have implicit importance to the trainee's current or future job.
3. Use realistic elements. Use vocabulary consistent with trainee's perception of case. (This tends to be more important the further down one goes in the organizational hierarchy.)

Case Should Be Effective Teaching

In addition to having relevance for the trainee, the case should have the characteristics which will make it an effective teaching instrument. The case should be designed and written so that it: (1) is easily understood; (2) stimulates and motivates the trainee; (3) allows the training group to identify with the problem; (4) allows creative, non-stereotypic approaches by the role players in dealing with the problem; (5) does not contain material of a nature that diverts trainees from achieving the basic training objectives.

1. *Comprehensibility*. The trainee is typically expected to read and

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grasp his role in five to ten minutes. Therefore, case should be written in such a way as to be understood quickly.

- Consider the use of a title which reflects the issue involved; for example, "The Case of delayed Report."
 - Avoid long, complex sentences.
 - Avoid including unnecessary facts and data.
2. *Identifiability.* Case should allow trainee to readily identify with role.
- Use second person in writing case.
 - Establish identity in first sentence. Example, you are John Fleet, Personnel Director of the Components Division.
 - Role should be familiar to trainee.
 - If writing for male and female training groups, consider use of "Two-way" names; examples: Lee, Leslie, Marion.
 - Ages should not be too disparate with those in training group.
3. *Role Maneuverability.* Case should be written to allow role players to respond in a creative, individualistic fashion. This will tend to provide valuable post role-play discussion material.
- State problem or concern, but do not state *how to handle case*.
 - Describe *apparent* behavior.
 - Avoid moralistic descriptions of behavior (lazy, greedy, stubborn, etc.). Use of these terms has tendency to cause prejudice and will tend to cause stereotyped responses in role players who have the burden of dealing with the problem situation.
4. *Focus:* Cases should be written to encourage trainee to focus on process rather than content.

- Avoid cases which unnecessarily involve digressions into complicated technical problems or processes.

- Beware of using content which is so closely identified with particular on-the-job problems associated with known personalities that it directs attention from teaching objectives.
- Spell out anything that is likely to become a key issue in the case.
- State relevant motivation in a tentative manner, avoid describing motivations in moralistic or conclusive manner.

5. *Conflict:* Cases need conflicting motivations and goals to sustain involvement of the role players as well as the observing group. The term "conflict" is here used as encompassing a broad range of differences (from slight to intense) between people. The term is also used to include an individual's inner conflict.

Listed below are six categories of conflict. These various forms of conflict are seen as resulting from: (1) conflicting internal emotions and motives; (2) conflicting allegiances; (3) perceptual differences; (4) divergent goals; (5) competition; (6) structured interaction.

In life it is rare that any one incident involving conflict will fall neatly into any particular category. However, by describing some of the major categories of conflict, it is hoped that the trainer will be able to identify better those problems which are susceptible to training approaches and solutions and those which are not.

Sources of Conflict

1. *Conflicting Emotions and Motives:* A conflict within the individual, often manifesting itself as a poor

performance symptom in which the individual is torn by conflicting emotional pressures and drives.

Example: The ambitious employee who is fearful of undertaking increased responsibility.

Example: The hard working conscientious maintenance worker who is afraid of mounting ladders and who is fearful of revealing this fear to his boss. Role playing can effectively be used to demonstrate non-directive interviewing skills which may help an individual understand better his own conflicting needs and drives.²

2. *Conflicting Allegiance*: The conflict emerges as a result of conflicting expectations which organizational units and groups have of one person.

Example: The foreman who is expected to get high production by management and who is expected to be a "good guy" by his workers.

Role playing can be useful in identifying the nature and intensity of conflicting pressures. It can be also used to explore ways of resolving conflicting demands on one individual. However, unless such demands and pressures are relieved, the mere fact of role playing the problem is not likely to assist much in its resolution.

3. *Perceptual Differences*: Conflict arises over distorted or limited perceptions of a given phenomenon by two or more people or groups.

Example: A foreman who has limited interactions with workers can be seen by one employee as unfriendly and aloof and by another as someone who is a good guy because he does not bother the workers.

Role playing is an excellent device for resolving conflict arising out of distortion in communication and perception. Role reversal is par-

ticularly effective in dealing with this type of conflict.³

4. *Divergent Goals*: Conflict arises as a result of difference of goals between the individual and the organization.

Example: An employee wants large amounts of time off in order to go hunting at the height of the organization's production activity.

Role playing in cases of this nature can be used to assist the individual in conflict how to better integrate his personal goals with that of the organization. However, if the divergence between the goals of the individual and that of the organization is intense, role playing such situations will probably be only of limited value.

5. *Competition*: Two or more persons maneuver or compete for advantage against the other.

Example: Two managers who feel in competition with each other for a promotion to a given executive position.

In the opinion of the writer, the prepared role playing is of limited value in teaching how to resolve conflict emanating from conflicting drives for position, especially when the stakes are high and where the situation can objectively be seen as having a "win-lose" quality. Role playing can be used to illustrate, explain, and discuss power conflict problems, but it is not likely that it can be used to reduce the motivations that created the conflict in the first place.

6. *Structured Interaction*: Conflict may arise from an unpleasant interaction or series of interactions which are structured in a particular task or assignment. The structure may be related to such dimensions as: (1) the organization's technology; (2) a procedure which

is necessitated by the work process; (3) a set of informal norms which determine the manner in which individuals are expected to behave in a given situation.

Example: Because of defective equipment in the production department, the quality control department sends back to production an unusually large number of units for reprocessing. The men in production are angry at the quality control people, because the production men feel that the poor-quality items are the results of poor equipment and not poor workmanship.

If the role play allows for modification of the structure, then the problem which arises out of structured interaction may be fruitfully attacked by the role players. Cases of this type are excellent for developing the problem-solving skills of the trainees.⁴

In reality there are many times when the structure cannot readily be altered. In the opinion of the writer, role playing such cases are of limited value unless the basic source of the frustration can be eliminated.

Example: A man who is continually fatigued from working on a large auto assembly line which moves too fast for him, in frustration loses his temper with his foreman.⁵

Some limited benefits may be achieved by role playing such a case. A discussion between the

foreman and the worker might result in some minor reduction in frustration and a better understanding of each of the problems. However, it is obvious that the basic solution in this case would have to be found in the areas of either: (1) job transfer or (2) the reduction of the speed of the production line. In modern industry both solutions would be unlikely.

Multiple Sources of Conflict

In life, most problems between humans involve several dimensions and to be effective one must identify and deal with several sources of conflict.

Example: A steward and a foreman disagree over the interpretation of a seniority clause as it applies to the promotion of a particular worker.

In such cases there may be discord which simultaneously involves several sources of conflict. The grievance could be part of the competition for employee loyalties between the union and the company. It could include role conflict (does the foreman play good guy to the workers? or does he play his managerial role for the sake of efficiency?). It would also be likely that there would be differences in perception over the true meaning of the seniority clause.

In writing role playing cases, however, it is recommended that the number of conflict sources be restricted in order to simplify the achievement of the training objectives.

References

1. In the opinion of the author, the most useful collection of role playing cases can be found in "Supervisory and Executive Development: A Manual for Role Playing" by Maier, Solem, Maier, published by John Wiley & Sons (also available in paperback from the same publisher). Other useful texts by Norman Maier which include role playing cases are "Principles of Human Relations" published by John Wiley & Sons, (this book contains many of the cases which were later published in "Supervisory and Executive Development") and "Psychology in Industry," published by Houghton Mifflin Company.

2. Other examples of this type of case can be found in "Principles of Human Relations" by Norman Maier. See, "The Case of Marjorie Winkler," "The Case of Miss Everett," and "The Case of the Lineman."
3. For a useful example of this type of case see "A Problem with Old Girls" in "Supervisory and Executive Development: A Manual for Role Playing."
4. The book, "Supervisory and Executive Development: A Manual for Role Playing," contains an excellent collection of this type of role playing cases. In particular see "Unscheduled Coffee Breaks," "Painters and Inspectors," and "The Safety Belt Rule."
5. For another example of a case where the freedom to modify structure is limited see "Case 13. The Introduction of New Belting Machines" in "Principles of Human Relations."

Bliss to Visit

Turkish Training Directors

ASTD Executive Director Gordon M. Bliss is visiting Turkey from mid-October through mid-November as a result of the cordial relationships that have developed between ASTD and Turkish training and development people. His schedule includes conferences with officials of the Turkish Society of Training Directors, the Turkish State Personnel Department and the Turkish Management Association. While there, he will also conduct seminars for professional training people in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir.

The trip was arranged by the Agency for International Development officials in Ankara, Mr. Jerry R. Hopper, and in Washington, D. C., Mr. William Richter.

Many ASTD members, chapters and members' companies have discussed training and development with and provided observation opportunities to international training visitors since World War II. A number of ASTD members have worked closely with overseas training personnel through the auspices of various governmental agencies and private channels. ASTD



has always warmly supported these efforts which may lead ultimately to the establishment of an international society of training and development people. It is hoped that Mr. Bliss' visit to Turkey will be another step in the evolution of such an organization.