Structured and Spontaneous Role-Playing

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For the last 20 years role-playing as a training method has had an uncertain place in the repertories of management development specialists and industrial trainers. Evaluations of role-playing found in management literature have ranged from the enthusiasm which was typical of some early proponents of sensitivity training, to fairly critical conclusions regarding the usefulness of role-playing as an educational technique in industry.

Role-playing has never been accepted on a large scale in industry, unlike sensitivity training or the case method. Yet it continues to be with us and its use appears to grow slowly in popularity.

One of the problems concerning the use of role-playing involves the fact that there are almost no university or management training centers that regularly offer training in role-playing skills. Another complication is the lack of clear guidelines to relate role-playing methods to training objectives. This article has been written primarily to deal with this latter problem. It attempts to do so by (1) giving an overview of the total role-playing process; (2) comparing and contrasting the methods used in both structured role-playing (involving the use of the written case) and spontaneous role-playing; and (3) offering some guidelines about when and how to use certain role-playing techniques.

Background Information

For the purpose of historical clarification it should be pointed out that the originator of role-playing is J.L. Moreno, who practiced psychiatry in Austria until 1925, when he came to the United States. He originally developed a form of role-playing. *His term* for the method is psychodrama (now called spontaneous role-playing). Moreno first used psychodrama as a tool in psychotherapy in Austria in 1911. He first used psychodrama in the U.S. in the early 1930s as part of an effort to rehabilitate inmates of the Hudson School for Girls. Psychodrama was used first in business training in a program conducted by R.H. Macy's by Moreno in 1933. There was relatively little use of the technique of role-playing in industry in any form until after World War II. At that time there was a wide upsurge in supervisory training and, with it, the use of role-playing by many industrial trainers.

Role-playing came to achieve a degree of popularity in management training and supervisory development primarily through Norman R.F. Maier's work at the University of Michigan. He synthesized the case study method with psychodrama to develop a new form of training which became designated as role-playing. For the purpose of this article we will refer to his "invention" as "structured" role-playing.

Maier's main contribution was to transform role-playing (as it then existed) from a method only used by psychiatric professionals trained in psychodrama and develop it into a technique that could be used by an average trainer in the industry. Maier accomplished this

by doing two things: (1) shifting the objectives of role-playing from the psychotherapeutic areas to skill areas such as problem-solving and communications; and (2) made role-playing usable for vast numbers of trainers by developing and publishing a series of excellent cases complete with guidelines for instructors and written roles for participants. He also published a wide variety of experimental findings related to the subjects of problem-solving, factors in attitude formation, and communications based on his "structured" role plays.

Integration

From the early 1950s until recently, role-playing, as it was developed by Maier modified and popularized by various trainers of the National Training Laboratories and psychodrama tended to go in separate directions. Role-playing was used by industry and the schools, while only a limited number of professionals working in the field of psychotherapy tended to use psychodrama. As the use of role-playing slowly increases, specialists in fields of education and management development became interested in making role-playing a more dynamic and flexible training tool. At this time they turn to psychodrama.

Many institutions and people have played the role of catalysts in this process of synthesis. Organizations include Esalen and the National Training Laboratories. Leading practitioners include Malcolm Shaw and William Shutz.

Once the differences between structured role-playing and spontaneous role-playing (psychodrama) are understood it becomes easier to abandon the dichotomy between the two and for the experienced trainer to draw from each area to create more effective training.

Though structured role-playing has become primarily associated with skills development and while psychodrama has become primarily associated with psychotherapy, the boundaries between the two have been less rigid. For the purpose of putting spontaneous and structured role-playing in per-

spective, this article will compare and contrast the two forms as they have emerged over the last 20 years.

The article is basically designed to assist those using structured role-playing to have a clearer idea of the kinds of possibilities which exist for making greater use of spontaneous role-playing methods. Toward this end, four areas of structured and spontaneous role-playing will be examined: (1) the objectives, (2) the warm-up, (3) the enactment, and (4) post-enactment.

Objectives

The basic objectives of structured role-playing typically focus on making the individual more proficient in some area of his work or job-related skills. The basic objective of spontaneous role-playing is to help the individual to understand himself and others better, as well as to explore new approaches in dealing with problems of human relationships.

Structured Role-Playing

Objectives:

1. To develop such skills as: (a) problem-solving; (b) non-directive interviewing; (c) the conduct of patterned interviews such as those used in hiring, performance appraisal and exit interviews.

2. To teach procedures such as: (a) the steps of company-union grievance procedure; (b) Job Instruction Training.

3. To modify job attitudes related to interpersonal relations, e.g., superior-subordinate relations.

Spontaneous Role-Playing (Psychodrama)

Objectives:

1. To aid participants to achieve insight into their own behavior.

2. To aid participants to achieve insight into the behavior of others.

3. To modify attitudes related to job, family or social life.

4. To aid participants to achieve new ways of dealing with problem situations.

5. To develop diagnostic information concerning the style and approaches of participants to certain types of problem situations.

Whether the instructor is using spontaneous or structured role-playing it is necessary to develop some class motivation and involvement in role-playing. The group must feel that the subject is relevant to their particular needs. Warm-ups for the use of structured role-plays typically take considerable planning.

Warm-ups for conducting spontaneous role-plays take considerably less planning but require a high degree of skill in moving group members toward revealing their problems and/or their basic feelings. These "revelations" become the basis for the spontaneous role-play.

Structured Role-Playing

The Warm-Up

1. *The Prefocused Discussion:* The class is started with a discussion, of a topic chosen by the instructor. The topic is related to the written role-play that the instructor plans to use after the "warm-up" discussion. Examples of how an instructor might start such discussions are:

a. "What problems is this group experiencing with discipline?"

b. "What problems are you encountering with subordinates who have low productivity?"

c. "What methods do you use in getting acceptance of a decision which affects all members of your work group?"

Participants are encouraged to discuss and compare experiences and problems they have related to the topic. The instructor encourages the group to do most of the talking and as much as time will allow, encourage all class members to air their feelings on the topic.

2. *Problem Census as Pre-Selected Topic:* In this type of warm-up, an abbreviated form of the prefocused discussion is first developed. It is then followed by a problem census. The problems developed are specifically related to the topic and are posted on the blackboard. The instructor may then summarize the problems — pointing out certain commonalities and differences of the problems listed. He then might say something like, "Today, we have an exercise that will touch on some of the problems you have raised. After the exercise let's go back and see to what extent the exercise can give us any new insights into these problems."

3. *The Selected Case:* The instructor selects a written case he thinks appropriate for a role-play. A discussion is developed in which the case is analyzed with some members of the group suggesting possible solutions. The instructor allows class members with solutions to demonstrate how they actually would handle the problem by role-playing their approach to the solution.

4. *Lecture:* The instructor attempts to warm up the group by presenting a lecture on a topic related to a selected role-playing case. For example, the instructor might conclude his lecture by saying, "Well, those are some of the principles involved in dealing with poorly motivated employees. Let's see if we can put some of these ideas, using a role-playing case related to this subject."

5. *Film:* The film is used in a manner similar to that of the lecture. Again it is assumed that the subject matter of the film is closely related to the structured role-playing case which has been selected by the instructor.

Spontaneous Role-Playing

The Warm-Up

1. *Open Ended Problem Census:* The instructor may ask the group about the kinds of problems which they would like to have discussed. These can be posted on the blackboard. By checking with the group he can generally achieve agreement on one or two topics of common interest which can be developed into a role-play.

Example: Agreement develops in the group that they would like to work on the area involving the handling of the employee who is chronically late for work. (This type of role-play would be called a sociodrama as it represents a general problem for which most members of the group will have a concern.)

On some occasions the problem

census will lead to a situation where one person in the group seems agreeable and interested, and if the problem is sufficiently related to the educational objective of the program, the instructor will often develop a spontaneous role-play from the problem presented by the "warmed up" person.

As this role-play will involve primarily one person's problem, the enactment will be known as psychodrama as compared to a sociodrama where the problem would be common to most of the group members.

2. *Sociometric Warm-Up:* The sociometric warm-up is often used with "stranger groups" such as those which are found at public workshops, programs conducted by universities, management associations, in-service programs conducted with a cross-section of personnel coming from the same organization.

The instructor might ask questions as:

a. Who knows whom here?
b. How many of you work together?
c. How many of you have been in a workshop together?
d. Speaking to one person at a time, "What do you do?"
e. Speaking to one person or speaking to the entire group, "What was your interest in coming here?"

The instructor can also, by using visual cues, develop some notions of the clusters and relationships which exist in the group. Clues can be found by observing such things as:

a. Who is sitting next to whom?
b. Which persons are sitting in isolation?
c. Which people are talking to each other and with what degree of involvement?

Using the information obtained from questioning and observing the group, the instructor can to some degree determine the types of sub-groups which are present. With this information he can develop often some tentative ideas as to what conflicts in values or attitudes exist in the group. These conflicts can be identified and clarified through further discussion. They can be used then as the basis of enactments between individuals in the group who have different sets of values.

The Enactment

The common denominator of structured enactments is that they are based on written cases. These cases are complete with separate written roles giving individual identities and attitudes. The separate roles are distributed to the role players just prior to enactment. Current practice in the use of structured role-plays is characterized by few or no interventions of the instructor during enactment. The instructor may allow the entire role-play to proceed uninterrupted until the role players themselves bring the enactment to an end.

If the instructor feels that the role-play is becoming repetitious,

he may bring it to an end saying something like, "I think we've covered the main points; let's bring it to an end here," or, he may say, "O.K., you have two minutes to bring this to a conclusion."

By way of contrast, during the spontaneous enactment, the instructor is much more active. He intervenes frequently using a wide variety of techniques in the process. He seeks to bring feelings to the surface through the various techniques listed below. Below is a comparison of the techniques used in conducting the structured enactment as contrasted with techniques associated with spontaneous role-playing.

Structured Role-Playing

Enactment Techniques

1. *Role Rotation:* To demonstrate how a given problem may be handled in a variety of ways, the instructor may ask different players to replay the same role. For example, the case involving a discipline interview with an employee, the person playing the problem employee is kept constant, while in successive replays the role of the manager is played by different role players. This technique can bring out the different styles and strategies possible in such an interview.

2. *The Intervention Interview:* When the intervention interview is used in the structured enactment role-play it tends to be used with a different purpose as compared with its use in the spontaneous enactment. In the structured role-play, the interview is designed to help the role player explore his *effectiveness* in dealing with the other player(s).

Typical interview questions are:

a. "To what extent do you feel you are using the techniques we talked about in the earlier part of this session as being appropriate for this type of problem?"

b. "How effective do you think your approach is?"

c. "If you were to start this interview again from the beginning, what would you do differently?"

Such questions call to the role player's attention the manner in which he has applied certain procedures and principles discussed in the warm-up or in a previous session. The questions can also make him aware of how he may have departed from certain concepts of problem-solving or interpersonal communication.

After the interview has been concluded (it should be brief, not exceeding about five minutes), the role-play is resumed. At that time the role player usually has an improved idea of how to apply previously discussed techniques, procedures or principles.
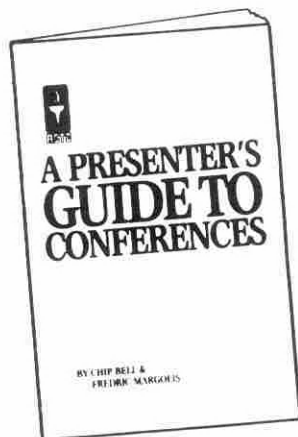
3. *Auxiliary Ego:* On occasion, the instructor will assign an auxiliary ego to one of the players. This might typically be done when a supervisor interviews a subordinate. In this case the instructor may assign an auxiliary ego to the subordinate. This is done to help the supervisor know how his approach "really" affects the subordinate. The auxiliary ego is not encouraged to move into psychological levels as deep as those which may be attempted in the spontaneous role-play.

4. *Multiple Enactments:* Since the structured role is usually characterized by written role instructions, and little or no trainer intervention, it becomes possible to conduct several enactments of one case at the same time.

For example, if there are two roles in the case, the instructor has the group count off as A's and B's. All of the A's receive one role; the B's receive the other role. Such multiple enactments can be conducted with cases that have almost any number of roles. When it occurs that the number of roles do not exactly match the number of persons in the group, those without roles can be assigned to be observers of individual enactments. (Observer sheets can be distributed or oral instructions given relating to the factors which should be looked for in the enactment process.)

The role-playing groups can then be situated around the classrooms. With experience, the instructor can determine approxi-

mately how long a given role-playing case will take to complete. Thus, he may announce at the start of the enactment the approximate amount of time the class will have to complete the role-play.

5. *Use of Observer Sheets:* The use of observer sheets cannot be strictly classified as an enactment technique, but it is a group activity which is used with structured role-play enactments. Before the enactment, non-role players may be given observer sheets which will assist the observer to look at a variety of dimensions of the role play. The types of questions on the form will vary, depending on the instructor's training objectives.

For example, these questions might be used in a role-play on interviewing techniques. Questions and instructions found on the observer sheets may include:

a. Who did most of the talking in the early stages of the role-play (the first 10 minutes)?

b. Who did most of the talking in the later phase of the role-play?

c. To what extent was the person being interviewed encouraged to air his views?

d. Record each instance where one of the role players interrupts the other.

e. Record each instance where the interviewer interrupts the interviewee, or ignores what the interviewee says.

f. Record each time the interviewer changes the subject.

g. Did the interviewer make a decision and was it clearly communicated to the interviewee?

h. Were the reasons for the decision clearly given to the interviewee?

i. Did the interviewer indicate that he would follow up on the decision?

Spontaneous Role-Playing

Enactment Techniques

1. *Role Reversal:* In this technique role players exchange roles for brief periods of time. This is done by the instructor saying to two of the players, "Change roles." The players then must change their positions. If they have been sitting, they exchange chairs. If they have been standing, they change positions.

There are several reasons for using role reversal in the spontaneous role-play.

a. *To develop more information:* Often the only person who knows much about the problem being enacted is the protagonist (the person who has the problem and wants to experiment in acting out the handling of the problem). Consequently, it may be necessary to generate accurate information about the problem and to offer the other role player(s) more complete information about the character(s) being portrayed.

b. *To develop insight:* Role reversal is often used when the protagonist has placed the other role player in a difficult situation, typically through a question, a demand, or an accusation. The instructor then reverses roles. The protagonist becomes the "recipient" of his own behavior and must deal with the demand he has just made on the other role player. Shortly after this role reversal has occurred, roles can be reversed to

the original position. Commonly, this technique distinctly modifies the protagonist's behavior during the role play.

2. *The Intervention Interview:* This technique is designed to make the interviewee become more aware of his own feelings and attitudes during the role-play. The instructor may use such questions as:

"How do you feel about the person you're talking to?"

"How do you think he feels about you?"

After the instructor has interviewed the role player, using "feeling"-oriented questions, the role-play is resumed. The primary purpose of the intervention interview makes the person interviewed become more aware of his own attitudes and feelings as well as those of the other players.

3. *The Auxiliary Ego:* This is the device in which the instructor assigns a person to "assist" one of the role players in thinking and talking. The "assistance" is pri-

marily designed to bring out the unspoken feelings he may be having about himself and the other role-player(s). The device is *not* designed to help the role-player to think out new cognitive formulations of the problems, nor is it designed to develop new techniques or strategies in dealing with the other role-player(s).

When the auxiliary ego is assigned to one of the role-players, he becomes known as the person's "double." He may talk while the person he is assigned to is thinking or conversing with the other role-players.

If the auxiliary ego is reasonably accurate in perceiving and stating the feelings of the person for whom he is doubling, the action will tend to move into a deeper level. Then it becomes more likely that players will start to deal with more meaningful and important elements of their conflict.

4. *The Multiple Chair Technique:* This technique may be appropriate when the enactment appears to be staying at a superficial level. After empty chairs representing all the roles involved are set up, the secondary role-players are asked to leave temporarily. The chief actor is then asked to play all the roles. Frequently, moving from one chair to another may have the effect of wearing the player out, lowering his defenses, and tending to move him toward being more open about his real feelings. The role-play may be resumed with the other players.

5. *One-Word Exchanges:* This technique may also be used when the role-players are excessively verbal without coming to grips with the real problem. The players are asked to carry on a conversation in which they can use only one word at a time. A typical conversation might go something like this:

Player A: Fear
Player B: Sorry
Player A: Tense
Player B: Relax
Player A: No
Player B: Yes
Player A: Why?
Player B: Try
Etc.

This type of exchange may give the instructor new clues which will allow him to move the role-play into a new and more meaningful direction.

6. *The Mirror Technique:* To give a role-player a better idea of how he affects other people, the instructor has several of the group members imitate the behavior and attitudes of the player. The "mirroring" may be done verbally or nonverbally.

7. *Non-Verbal Techniques:*

Physical communication: On occasion, role plays get bogged down in much verbalization and little expression of feelings. When this occurs the instructor may temporarily stop the role-play and ask the players to communicate their feelings toward each other physically. No words may be used. Reactions from the players may include:

a. shaking one's fist at another player

b. embracing another person

c. shaking hands, etc.

After this has occurred the role-play can be resumed.

Breakouts: On occasion, one of the role-players may seem frustrated by his inability to express himself, the hopelessness of coping with the situation before him, or his inability to achieve emotional release through the role-playing of his problem. When this occurs the instructor may ask five to seven participants to surround the role-player, locking arms in a circle. The role-player is then asked to break out of the circle. This effort often leads to a catharsis of the role-player's emotions and allows him to move into a new phase of his feelings.

Lifting: Occasionally an enactment will indicate that one of the role-players has developed an utter sense of helplessness about himself and his situation. When this is observed, the instructor may ask that the player lie flat on the floor. He then asks the group (a minimum of seven or eight members are needed) to put their hands under the player and lift him slowly toward the ceiling. He is then lowered and rocked slowly for about a minute and then slowly lowered to the floor. This exercise often gives the role-player a feeling of trust in the group of strong group support and allows him to try other ways of dealing with his problem.
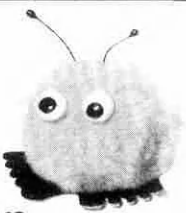
Post-Enactment

Each role-play needs some degree of closure. The insights of learning that develop during the enactment should be brought out in such a way that both the role-players and the other group members have a clearer understanding of the implications for themselves of the role play(s) in which they have participated or which they have witnessed.

Structured Role Plays

Post-Enactment Techniques

1. *Group Critique:* The role-players' interaction is discussed in terms of how previously discussed principles and techniques were applied or not applied. For example, the session has focused on communication skills. A discussion is led by the instructor on those techniques used in the role-play that: (1) aided and increased the communication between players

and (2) blocked or hindered communications between the players. Emphasis is placed on the kinds of interactions which occurred rather than on the behavior and attitudes of individual role-players. When making references to the enactment, participants should use the names of the fictional role-players rather than those of the participants playing the roles.

2. *Observer Reports:* The post-enactment discussion can be conducted by having the observers report or summarize the data they developed on their observer sheets. This can lead to a general discussion about the problems of applying the principles of communications or problem-solving in actual or on-the-job situations. The instructor summarizes the discussion.

3. *Comparison with Other Data:* In cases where the instructor uses the Norman Maier role-play involving specific changes in job assignments, work locations, etc., group decision data can be posted on the blackboard.

When the role-play has been conducted on a multiple enactment basis, various group solutions can be compared and contrasted. In some cases group solutions can be contrasted with the solutions developed by other groups and reported in Maier's book, *Problem Solving Discussions and Conferences.* This book reports on several of the cases which are in Maier's *Supervisory and Executive Development,* giving statistical breakdowns of the solutions developed by various groups in role-playing experiments.

For example, the case entitled the "New Truck Problem" (see *See Supervisory and Executive Development: A Manual for Role Playing* by N. Maier, A. Solem and A. Maier) is perhaps the most widely-used structured role-playing case in the American management training field. It involves the problem of a department which is about to receive a new truck. The department includes five mobile repair men. Each man, to some degree, has justification for making a claim on the new truck.

The case generally generates a great deal of excitement and can lead to some interesting insights about how groups make decisions and handle conflict. The results are quite diverse with respect to (1) who gets the new truck, (2) how many individuals receive different trucks, (3) who and how many persons are dissatisfied, etc. Two of the experiments Maier has done using this case are of interest.

In these experiments all the "foremen" have had discussion leadership training. The results of these experiments are reported on page 40 of *Problem Solving Discussion and Conferences* (see chart).

As a result of comparing class decisions with the above data, some interesting conclusions can be developed about group decision-making and those factors which create group satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Spontaneous Role Plays
Post-Enactment Techniques
1. *Group Reaction to Role-Play:*

DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP SKILL AND SATISFACTION

Reported method used	No. of groups	Groups with all satisfied, %	Groups with one dissatisfied, %	Groups with two or more dissatisfied, %
Group decision	62	75.8	21.0	3.2
Mixed	12	16.7	66.7	16.7
Foreman dominated	24	4.2	54.2	41.7

Satisfaction with Solution and Number of
Crew Members Receiving a Different Truck

	Different trucks to:				
	1 man	2 men	3 men	4 men	5 men
Number of groups	7	41	30	12	8
Percent of groups with all satisfied	28.6	51.2	50.0	66.7	50.0

The most typical post-enactment technique follows these steps:

a. The instructor asks each role-player how he felt about the enactment. He asks about the feelings, emotions, tensions and satisfactions which developed during the enactment. Generally, the protagonist will be asked for his reactions last in order that he can also comment on the reactions the other role-players have had on him.

b. The instructor then asks the group for its reactions to the role-play. The group is encouraged to comment on the extent to which they identified with any of the role-players and the feelings which they may have experienced during the course of the role-play. Group members should be encouraged to emphasize the emotions they experienced but discouraged from (1) analyzing the behavior of the role-players; (2) labeling the behavior of the role-players and (3) giving unsolicited advice to any of the role-players.

2. *Behind the Back Techniques:* On occasion when the instructor decides the group may be too inhibited to reveal fully their true feelings about the chief actor in a role play, and when the instructor thinks that the ego strength of the protagonist is sufficiently strong, he may use the "behind the back" technique. In this situation the chief actor sits in a chair in front of the room with his back to the group. Members of the group are then asked to comment on their reaction to his behavior during the role play. After everyone in the group has had an opportunity to comment, he is then allowed to turn around and comment on his own feelings during the role-play, as well as on the reactions of the group members.

3. *Non-Verbal Expression:* This method is often used in combination with the "Group Reaction to Enactment." After steps 1 and 2 of "Group Reaction" have been completed, the instructor may ask each member of the group to express his reaction to the chief actor in a nonverbal manner. This technique is desirable in situations in which group support for the chief actor is deemed by the instructor to be an important ingredient to give closure to the session and impart a sense of reassurance to the chief actor who may have over-exposed his defenses during the role-play. The nonverbal reaction will typically take the form of handshakes, hugs or approving nods.

In general, the instructor should avoid this particular technique if he feels that general nonverbal reactions will be negative and destructive to the chief actor.

4. *Chief Actor Asks the Group for Feedback:* This technique may also be used in combination with obtaining a "Group Reaction to Enactment." In this case the instructor asks the chief protagonist to ask each member of the group for reactions which the group member may have had to him. The protagonist then has the opportunity to state his feelings about the feedback. The instructor may summarize at this point.

Conclusion

As we have seen, both spontaneous role-playing and structured role-playing represent efforts to make the individual more effective in dealing with some problem or challenge in his life. Traditionally, spontaneous role-playing placed considerable emphasis on achieving this objective through attempting to give an individual greater insight into his own behavior and his ego state (as well as insight into the behavior of others).

Structured role-playing, in contrast, has placed greater emphasis on developing the individual's specific skills to deal with concerns relating to problem-solving and communication.

If instructors can develop a greater synthesis of the two forms of role-playing in their own teaching, they will then be able to assist those they work with to achieve an objective important to all human beings, the ability to cope successfully with the challenge of the human environment.

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