Role Playing Can Be Effective

by

K. A. MOODY, Training Director

American Steel & Wire Co., Cleveland, Ohio

THE BEHAVIOR of most individuals is influenced by concepts of "roles." The father, consciously or unconsciously, is influenced in his behavior toward his children by a generalized pattern of "father" behavior his society has come to expect. From the doctor, the clergyman, the school teacher, etc. society expects fairly well-defined patterns of behavior. A role, then, is a behavior pattern which the individual learns as a member of a society or group, and which other people are predisposed to expect of him.

In such a sense we are all role-players. It's nothing new. Consider, for example, a group of children "playing house." That's definitely "role-playing." The adult who looks at and listens to the children will, perhaps, be amused at first and think of the scene as "just child's play" and "rather silly." But the thoughtful observer and auditor of children "playing house" will soon realize that he can learn a great deal about the children and about the families from which they come. From the spontaneous re-enactment of what the children apparently feel is typical adult behavior the observer can quickly gain useful insights which many other channels of information about the children and the families might not have revealed.

So it is when the "role-playing" is done by adults for adult purposes. In the sense in which we use the term to apply to a specific training technique "role-playing" is the enactment of more-or-less familiar scenes and situations. In such a case the individuals participating understand the situation well enough so that they need no script. If properly done the participants to some extent "lose themselves" in the role, get involved emotionally in a role typical of them or of others whom they know well. Properly done, the method can yield fruitful insights into human behavior which might not have been understood had they been put into words.

There are many possible uses for role-playing. The main values are in the study of human behavior. Some of the uses are:

1. As a means of conveying information about a specific situation or problem.

2. To develop solutions to behavior problems.

3. To try out proposed solutions to behavior problems. .

4. To practice human relations skills when not "playing for keeps." This builds confidence for the actual situation.

6. To develop understanding and to develop insights about other people or groups.

7. To recreate situations as a basis for group analysis.

8. As a research tool for social scientists.

9. To prepare people to meet anticipated problems.

10. To project results of specified behavior patterns.

11. For individual psychotherapy (not for amateurs if on a deep plane).

With all these possible values it can be appreciated that role-playing can be very effective in training for better human relations in industry. There has been a growing disillusionment for years with traditional methods of training in industrial relations because the trainees seemed to find such a gap between precept and practice. Other obstacles arose because industrial people couldn't express themselves in talking about behavior, nor could they abstract full meaning from the words and terms used by the instructor. In the class room the supervisory trainee may fully describe "rules" and "formulas" of successful human relations, but he may act in completely different fashion out in the shop. The old foreman respected by his men may not be able to tell anyone else just how he behaved so that his men did respect him. Role-playing can be useful for diagnosis, understanding, and practice in such situations.

There are no rigid rules or formulas in role-playing. Like chess, it has infinite variations. But it probably would be convenient to think of the role-playing technique as having a series of steps, and to give the prospective group leader some admonitions about each step:

1. *Sensitize Group To Need*

There must be a consensus—"This is a real problem. It is one we will find worthy of the time we spend working on it." If the problem does not seem "real" to the group role-playing will fail.

2. *A Situation Is Selected and Defined*

In this step the leader must be skillful in aiding the group without dominating it. The group must define the situation adequately, but not encumber it with too many facts. Too much participation by the leader in this step will thwart spontaneity in the later steps.

3. *Acceptance of Roles*

In order of preference three methods are:

a. members volunteer for roles

b. group assigns roles to members

c. leader assigns roles

In the early uses of the technique do not "type cast" too closely or there will be embarrassment which will hinder growth and acceptance of the technique. In some groups that need reassurance it may be helpful for the leader himself to take the initial "target" role. If the group has participated fully in previous steps and if the idea of role-playing is introduced naturally so that "stage fright" is minimized there will be little diffi-

ROLE PLAYING—

culty. If there has been wide-spread participation in preceding steps the group members will very likely be conditioned for and amenable to being role-players.

4. *Role-Players Must Be Given Confidence*

Role-players must be given enough detail to feel reasonably secure in their roles. The group may select general attitudes or type behavior the players are to show in their roles, but this ordinarily comes after the group feels "at home" with the technique. Beware, however, of overbriefing the participants. If the scene is structured in too much detail the participants are liable to lose the spontaneity which is one of the main ingredients in the technique. Their behavior then tends to become artificial and not realistic. The other extreme is equally as bad—leaving the role-players to "shift for themselves" when they have feelings of insecurity about their participation. The leader must get them "warmed up" so that they will play their roles with full understanding and thus perform to the best advantage for themselves and for the group.

5. *Developing Group Expectations*

The observers should be fairly well "set" in their expectations. They should have a pretty good idea what to look for in the role-play-ing scene. When a group becomes familiar with the technique, sections may be assigned to pay particular attention to ("identify with") particular participants. This is excellent for developing understanding. For beginning groups it may be helpful to have group discussion of what they will be looking for, or in certain situations the leader may develop a "clue sheet" of specific questions. Ordinarily during this step the role-playing participants are out of the room.

6. *The Actual Role-Playing*

During the role-playing the leader must split his attention between the scene and the spectators. The role-playing itself should be conducted long enough to get adequate facts for discussion by the group. In general, it is better to cut too soon than too late. If the participants have been going for some time and still have not brought out essential facts, the scene should be "cut," discussion may then be conducted on the facts that were developed, and then the additional facts may be reworked in a continuation of the role-playing.

7. *Evaluation and Discussion*

There will be enough facts to serve as an excellent springboard for discussion if the preceding steps have been successfully completed. In the discussion the leader must be careful to see that the participants do not vent ag-

gression on some particular role-playing participant. It is important for the discussion leader after role-playing to let the group "carry the ball" as much as possible in the discussion. If the leader starts out in such fashion that he is too definitely "running the meeting" after role-playing much of the effectiveness of the technique will be lost.

8. *Replaying*

There may be many reasons for replaying scenes. The most common one is to identify the effects of different types of behavior in the "target" role. In such cases the other role or roles should be filled by the people who undertook them initially. Sometimes the purpose of replaying is to have group members have practice and confidence in the "target" role.

There are other devices which may be used in connection with the role-playing. One that may be used very effectively, even during initial attempts at the technique, is to have the leader *interview* one or more of the role-players to fully develop just what feelings and emotions the individual was conscious of during the scene. This may bring out overtones which some of the group watching may have missed. It also helps point out to each of the participants just how the other participants were really reacting during the scene.

Another device, probably best deferred until the group has had some favorable experiences at role-playing, is to use the

commentator. In this case the leader, or other designated person, rings a bell or gives some other signal to "freeze" the action in the scene while he asks a pointed question or makes a remark to help the audience gain insights into what is actually going on in the scene. After the interruption the participants proceed as though they had not heard the comment. This actually works out better than might be expected since the role-players tend to use the break to plan their own behavior after the break, and are not "bothered" by the commentator.

Another device that may be used is that of the *soliloquy*, normally also reserved for the more adept group. In this case any one of the participants may "freeze" the action long enough to describe his inner feelings—especially if his role is a passive one which hinders him from expressing these feelings in his behavior. After the interruption the group proceeds as before.

☆   ☆   ☆   ☆