

# THE ROLE OF ROLE PLAYS

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**N**egotiation, influencing and conflict resolution are key skills in any workplace. In training programs designed to build these skills, role plays are a key skills development tool.

Not surprisingly, many people are apprehensive about participating in a role play. They may question whether role plays are genuinely effective in the transfer of learning, or ask for the scenarios to be customised to have stronger factual similarity with the participants' real world context and challenges.

This article looks at the role of role plays in teaching essential communication skills, and whether participants get more value from using scenarios that are factually similar or factually different to their real world context and challenges.

## Why use role plays?

Despite the resistance that participants may have towards role plays, they can aid learning.

In explaining the benefits of role plays, we could use the analogy of stroke correction in swimming. A person may be a competent swimmer seeking coaching to improve their stroke. The coach can give them all the advice in the world, but until that swimmer gets in the water and puts this advice into practice, it is hard to know what will work. Knowledge and experience are vastly different things.

Role plays provide a valuable opportunity for participants to learn through experience. They allow participants to experiment with new behaviours in a safe environment where the stakes are low. If you were practicing your new swimming techniques, would you choose to do it in a pool with a lifeguard on duty or jump straight in to the choppy waters of Bass Strait?

Lawrence Susskind, Vice Chair of Harvard Law School's Program on

Negotiation is a firm supporter of role plays, or simulations, in the teaching of negotiations skills. He states that the experiential learning model suggests that students need to take part in a structured learning experience, reflect on that experience, abstract concepts from that reflection, and then apply those concepts in a subsequent experience (Susskind 1999).

Role plays also give participants an opportunity to receive constructive feedback from facilitators and other participants - so that they can consider how their strategies are being received and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

## Scenarios

Once you have recognised the value of using role plays in communication skills training, the next question is whether those role plays should be based on scenarios that are factually similar to the participants' everyday scenarios or whether they should be factually different.

Roger Fisher, co-author of *Getting to Yes*, points out that when role play scenarios are too familiar to participants, they have a tendency to argue and fight with the content. Scenarios, particularly for introductory role plays, should be able to be understood quickly and must highlight key themes (such as understanding interests or creating value). Taking participants out of their everyday situations allows them to focus on the process rather than the content, hopefully facilitating an *aha* moment where they experience a key lesson from the exercise.

Of course, there are also downsides to using role plays that are different to the participants' usual situations. The key risk is that the participants won't be able to make the link between the lessons learned in the role play and how they can change their behaviour in real life. Some critics also question the motivation of participants where the facts of the role play are not linked to real life.

The following summarises the main

pros and cons of both factually similar and factually different role plays.

### **Factually similar role plays**

- Support the theory that learning will be more effective if the learning environment is familiar to participants.
- May overcome participant objections about relevance.
- May encourage the same motivation and emotion as in a real situation.
- May enhance 'low-road' learning transfer, where the participants use the skills in a familiar environment and then replicate that behaviour without mindfully doing so.

### **Factually different role plays**

- Participants may focus so much on the degree to which the role play is consistent with their real life experience that they miss the deeper learning points.
- Familiar facts may trigger participants to fall into established behaviour patterns, blocking them from seeing new approaches.
- Participants may feel fear of failing in a scenario where they are expected to have content expertise. This may prevent them from experimenting with new approaches.
- May better facilitate 'high-road' learning transfer where skills are abstracted, understood and applied in a range of different contexts.
- Artificially simplified and shortened role plays are faster to run and debrief in a time-constrained learning environment.
- Artificial scenarios can be targeted to clearly highlight particular concepts that may not be as clear in a real life scenario. This can help participants to focus on the process rather than the facts.

The conclusion we might draw from this is that where the participants are being introduced to the skills and behaviours for the first time, the benefits of factually different role plays will tend to outweigh the benefits of factually similar role plays.

Carefully constructed case studies that take participants outside of the familiar are a great way to introduce new concepts and assist participants to focus on building skills and behaviours while minimising the risk of them being distracted by the status quo. Our standard programs all use tried and tested scenarios that provide a richness of context and concepts in a way that can be delivered within the time constraints of a program. Once the participants have an understanding of the skills and behaviours, factually similar role plays will assist them to incorporate those skills into their own practice.

### **How do I decide which type of role play to use?**

There are three key areas when considering whether this customisation will add value to the training:

#### **What knowledge do participants already have?**

Where the training is at a relatively basic or introductory level, it is more useful to take participants outside of their usual context. This helps participants to focus on the skills and behaviours rather than being concerned with whether or not the content of the scenario is aligned with their real world situations.

In advanced programs, the focus is less on recognising and learning skills and more on enhancing the way the skills are used in the real world. This means that 'real world' scenarios could be more appropriate.

#### **How similar are the participants?**

Even within one organisation, participants can come from a diverse range of 'real worlds'. A scenario may be based on an organisation's industry, but the experiences of that industry will differ for different parts of the business. For example, working with a large company you may have participants from the operations side of the business, procurement, IT and sales - each of whom bring very different challenges to

the workshop.

In this situation, customisation may be more difficult. To use a highly contextualised scenario that is not directly relevant to all participants may leave some participants feeling isolated or reduce their motivation to participate.

### **What are the objectives for the training?**

Where a client is more focused on developing knowledge or understanding around the areas, organisations, business or industry, this may warrant using a similar fact role play, irrespective of the other two factors. Ultimately, the choice between a factually similar or factually different scenario is one that is best made by considering all of the relevant factors.

### **References**

Susskind, L and Corburn, J 1999, Using simulations to teach negotiation: Pedagogical Theory and Practice *Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School Working Paper 99-1*. viewed 29 June 2016 <http://web.mit.edu/publicdisputes/teach/corburn.pdf>

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