

The Purpose of Role Playing in Learning

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by Dave Piltz

Role playing is a favorite activity of almost every trainer. In fact role playing, along with case studies, may be the most widely used activity in training design. Do you agree, disagree, or say it depends? Would you answer differently if a widely esteemed expert made the statements? Would you answer differently if a colleague, who you don't respect, made the statements? In fact, is the way this paragraph is written a form of role playing?

The truth is there are as many forms of role playing as there are trainers' styles and backgrounds. To some, role plays look and feel like real-life simulations, e.g. an emergency response team on drill or a small group making a decision on the best customer service response to an irate customer. I've learned it doesn't matter what the role play looks like, what matters is that it's meaningful for the participants. To ensure your role play is effective and learning transfers to real-world use, ask these questions.

- ✓ Is the group ready?
- ✓ Will this build awareness?
- ✓ Will participants practice new skills?
- ✓ Can the experience be applied to multiple settings?

Let's take a closer look at each question.

Is the group ready?

This seems a basic question, but it is one to which many trainers rarely give much thought. The question speaks to the group's readiness on many levels -- comfort levels with each other, with awareness and skill building, with supervisors, with experiential learning, with debriefs and group activities. In my experience, few groups are ready for role playing activities the first time you work with them, whether or not they are an intact work group. Therefore, role play activities are best used in the 2nd or 3rd day of a training program or the third or fourth time with an intact-group. Thinking the group is ready for role-playing too soon can stop learning and create situations where you have to break down the walls of resistance in the future.

However if the group is ready, the next question concerning a role play is *will this build awareness?*

Role plays tend to be favorite activities in communication and customer service programs. That makes sense but often they are used in situations where participants aren't aware of their impact on others. If awareness exists, participants can review the experience and determine what they need to do differently to be more effective. That means the role play activity needs to help participants evaluate the behaviors they need

to change.

If your role play activity does provide participants with the ability to identify their growth areas, you are ready for the next question.

Will participants practice new skills?

Role play activities are fun and interesting when we get to apply skills we already know. They become effective learning tools when they structure learning so that participants have to apply a new skill, as for example, if you use a role play to teach the importance of patience and assertiveness in customer service interactions. You may choose to create a role play activity where the customer service agent, who has already identified that they do not have patience, has to just sit and smile for one-minute while another participant role plays an angry customer shouting at them. The angry customer could be the person who identified that they need to be more assertive when providing customer service.

It is important to create role-plays for participants to practice the skills they need.

Finally, you have to ask yourself, *can the experience be applied to multiple settings?*

Can the experience be applied to multiple settings?

It's great if the role play meets all the criteria above but applies only to one standard operating procedure, for example. The role play needs to highlight important and specific skills in the job but should also promote the use of those skills outside the workplace. Using the patience and assertiveness example above, both skills are specific to providing customer service but can be used in a myriad of situations outside of work.

The next time you plan to use role plays in your training, consider asking yourself these questions before finalizing your activity.