



“Oh no. I *hate* role play!”

Sartaj Garewal makes the case for practising critical conversations with a skilled actor/trainer

For many it's a modern, workplace form of torture by humiliation and the epitome of work-related hell. The prospect alone of having to do a role play with peers drives fear into the psyches of many.

Why does role playing with peers at the office rarely yield any learning or development? Why is it usually so utterly futile and counterproductive?

Possibly because people imagine that they will have to 'act' and, as most do not see themselves as performers, this equates to being asked to do a school play... at the office... in front of all those people who are about as cynical as you are. When was this weird exercise ever part of the job description?!

More often than not, role-playing scenarios with colleagues do not work due to a variety of reasons. People in the same team or department know each other well so it becomes impossible to see colleagues as that supposed frustrated customer, eager-to-please supervisor or whoever they are supposed to be portraying.

The sheer artifice of suddenly imagining, say, reserved, withdrawn John, who you've sat next to for years, as a fiery, chest-beating manager with deadlines snapping at his heels requires an extraordinary suspension of disbelief. It may feel so uncomfortable for everyone that 'acting' is now required that often these exercises are worse than futile: they're counterproductive and can serve to heighten people's fears of experiential training.

Now imagine a scenario in which an experienced, external training organisation has taken time to carefully observe the culture and dynamics within a particular department or company. Based on those observations and with pointers about the organisation's overriding culture

and development needs from its own L&D team, these external trainers can create fictional case studies – fictional names, numbers, places but with real, relevant underlying dynamics that demand exploration – which accurately reflect the communication deficiencies that need targeting without citing specific examples or individuals.

Diagnostics done, training days are arranged using skilled and experienced actor/trainers who utilise a range of experiential methods to illustrate and communicate points of relevant learning.

Forum theatre

The day may kick off with forum theatre. Forum theatre has steadily grown in popularity and relaxes a group of participants as there is no expectation to 'act' whatsoever – leave that to the trained actor who doesn't mind being in the spotlight and is external to the organisation anyhow.

It was originally pioneered by Augusto Boal, an innovative theatre practitioner from Brazil who used the device to formulate community policy in the favelas of Rio. Eventually, Boal was asked to help formulate governmental policy using it. Forum theatre has now been adapted as a training tool for organisations.

What is forum theatre and how does it work? To begin with, two actors will play a short scene – for example, one actor is a manager and has to give her team member some less than fantastic feedback about his recent client presentation. We see an utterly ineffective meeting in which the manager is, let's say, so averse to rocking the boat and telling it like it is that nothing is communicated and the team member leaves with the feeling that it was a great presentation. Now the audience has an opportunity to question each character in turn about that meeting, what they

each want, what difficulties they encounter, their communication styles etc.

The scene is then re-run with the audience given the power to stop the action – much like a film director – each time the manager does or says something that is not as effective as it could be, to give the actor some top tips. And so we go on a journey of stop-start, advising the manager, observing how this new behaviour affects the team member's behaviour, getting our teeth into some healthy debate along the way and continuing until the characters have at least found some understanding of each other and a more effective means of communicating.

Thus it is experiential and learning is illustrated for all.

Forum theatre works well as, naturally, we all have an opinion, especially when watching a scene being played out and there is no pressure for participants to perform in any way. It acts as a catalyst for lively conversation and debate around personality and communication styles.

Role play case studies

With a training room buzzing with energy after forum theatre, it's time to explore pre-prepared case studies born out of diagnostic research. The actor has his own secret brief that directs him to challenge at times and guides him about 'what good should look like' in a particular instance.

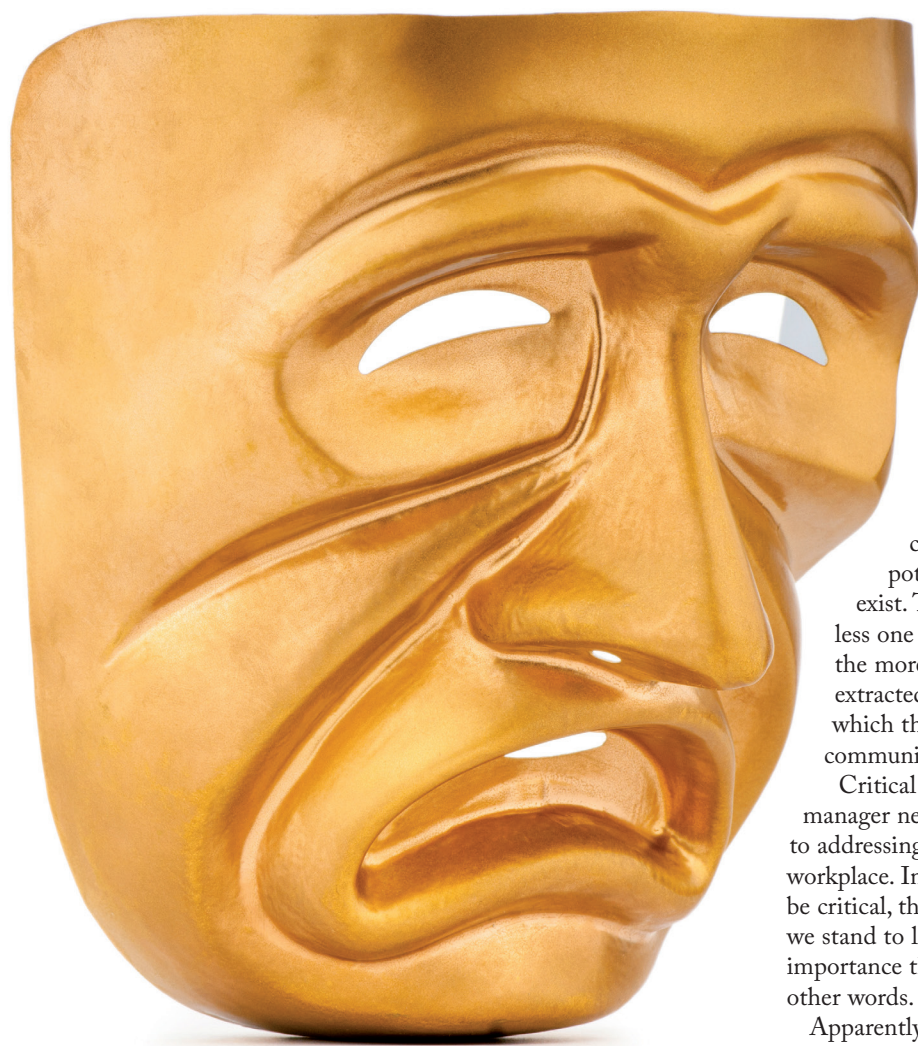
These case studies are played out as role plays in small groups with an actor/trainer assigned to each. Experienced actor/trainers can easily facilitate this process, explaining the set-up and then playing whatever character(s) the briefs direct them to, offering time-outs if the delegates get stuck. In that case, he facilitates some tips from peer observers or gently coaches the delegate into trying something different, for example, than his habitual response.

A safe, supportive environment is absolutely essential in ensuring that this interaction works successfully. The participants just have to be themselves and try to deal with whatever challenges and objections the actor throws their way. Role plays can be one-to-one or even one actor with a small group of participants, all of whom can chip in at will. Some companies will leave the actor/trainer to get on with role playing and facilitating without feeling the need to observe – a much healthier scenario than having managers in the corner scribbling away on clipboards.

Bespoke role play

Bespoke role plays focus on real instances taken verbatim directly from the individual participants

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themselves. This may be a challenging situation that someone has already been faced with, and wants to re-visit to see how he could try different approaches, or an upcoming situation that he wants to rehearse and train up for instead of jumping in and hoping for the best.

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Bespoke role play is not therapy, although key moments can certainly be therapeutic. Epiphanies are common. You often hear people comment after doing a one-to-one role play, or even just watching as an observer, that “oh, that’s exactly what my boss does...” It can feel spookily real at times.

Critical conversations

Role playing very simple, straightforward, mundane situations will not yield much in the way of growth or development, whereas focusing on critical or crucial conversations is where potential personal growth may well exist. The more there is at stake and the less one wants to explore a given situation, the more that optimum learning can be extracted. Critical conversations are those in which the stakes are high so clear, effective communication is imperative.

Critical conversations can range from a manager needing to motivate a team member, to addressing an instance of bullying in the workplace. In short, if we deem a conversation to be critical, there must be something sizable that we stand to lose and something of equal size and importance that we stand to gain. High stakes, in other words.

Apparently, the most critical situations for many people are telling a subordinate that they have a body odour problem or dealing with a crying male employee. It’s not surprising that we tend to avoid dealing with critical conversations, then.

The benefits

There are many advantages in using actor/trainers to play a multitude of characters in different role plays.

Actors have spent all their time training, on stage and in front of a camera, striving to portray other people as truthfully as possible. They are used to assuming a range of differing personas and characters. They can, more believably than quiet, reserved John who you may have sat next to for years, become the stressed-out line manager, the results-driven CEO or the put-upon graduate. And let’s not forget that, unlike many of us, actors enjoy acting.

Skilled actor/trainers are slightly different to regular actors as they should possess a wealth of practical knowledge about behaviour models,

emotional intelligence, personality styles, motivational drivers and coaching tools and are flexible enough to incorporate the client company's favoured learning models. Naturally the actor/trainer will also have a solid theatre background, drama training and screen credits. Many business actors have degrees in law or finance with relevant employment to boot, thereby adding authenticity when they play professionals in the workplace.

Experienced and trained actors know from working on stage and in front of a camera exactly how to use their voice and physicality to communicate messages effectively. Therefore, they are probably the best people to coach employees on developing specifics around voice and body language, should that be needed.

The actor/trainer needs to have dual roles operating concurrently: to be the character, react how the character reacts and be in the moment during the conversation with the learner, and also be a neutral observer, recording moments and observations of the learner's actions and behaviour for post-role-play feedback and any consequent coaching. It's a lot like patting your head and rubbing your belly at the same time.

The actor/trainer can adapt the level of challenge to appropriately match the participant's skill level, ensuring that he provides a level of realistic challenge without being too easy or unnecessarily tough.

Role plays can also be filmed, if agreed by all concerned, so that playback offers the most immediate feedback for the participant.

Both forum theatre and role play often illustrate the effectiveness of using open questions to probe and discover. Actors love giving tight yes or no answers to a string of closed questions to make the point that, in order to find out what's going on in a given situation, you have to activate your curiosity by using short open questions.

Issues that arise from role plays cover a range of topics and can then be addressed via whatever specific coaching the individual needs. Building rapport more effectively, developing stronger listening skills – active listening, becoming more assertive and less strident – and so on.

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The greatest benefit of such experiential training is that it provides participants with an opportunity to feel what it's like to do things differently.

Feedback

How many of us are really willing to accept direct feedback from peers and line managers? It is much easier for a 'neutral' outsider to give positive and developmental feedback than it is for somebody else from within the same organisation. There's simply too much history and too many underlying dynamics for feedback



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in the workplace to be taken on board as it should.

Actors will tend to give their feedback based on what they experienced, felt, thought and observed. Consequently, such feedback is difficult to repudiate as anything that was sensed, felt or thought in the moment, during a role play, is clearly valid, ie that was the impact of the particular behaviour or action. In everyday life we don't get the benefit of receiving direct, constructive feedback. Indeed, work life is a game of perception most of the time. Hence the potency of such training, which can really expedite the growth and awareness of interpersonal skills, is demonstrated.

Participants often find that non-judgmental feedback from an external, unbiased actor/trainer is the most worthwhile part of the process.

The AID model – where A = action, I = impact, D = do differently – is often used to provide feedback. In other words, 'when you interrupted me (the action), I felt belittled (the impact). If you were to listen to me without interrupting, I feel we may make quicker progress on this project (the do differently bit)'. Very simple, very powerful.

Providing feedback in the simple and clean 'when you did... I felt...' and 'when you said... I thought...' model is certainly part of the learning and a tool that the participants can take away to help them give feedback too. This is immediate,

direct feedback, delivered in a simple, valid and very human way. The actual emotional and/or intellectual impact the participant's words and actions had on the character are fed back.

Peer feedback is important too. The actor/trainer will facilitate this so any feedback offered is only based on observation from what took place in that particular researched brief and does not veer into negative commentary.

Although the idea of role play is anathema to many people – in such instances it will rarely yield any positive learning for the delegate if he is negative about the very prospect of it – such training works best when all are willing and relaxed enough to see that there is no such thing as failure in a training context and that the more one attempts to give it a go and try something new, the greater the learning that can be taken away.

An overall objective for all involved is to develop self-awareness with regard to communication skills. People in business, particularly throughout various strata of middle management, are often very strident or plain unassuming at the other end of the behavioural spectrum.

This training works and is completely unlike the plethora of company away days on which people are forced to bond while crossing a river with a plant pot and tennis ball. The accent is on helping people to improve and develop where they themselves are willing to explore.

Business schools and universities are great at teaching and inculcating theory and process. The work environment continues this obsession with day-to-day process management. Very little at business school or in the workplace has prepared us to be effective conversationalists and communicators. By adopting a growth mentality and working with a skilled actor/trainer, we can develop interpersonal and listening skills extremely effectively. **TJ**

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