

How to Set Up and Run Roleplays

A roleplay is an improvised dramatic enactment of a problem situation in order to find new and creative ways to respond. It invites empathy into “opponents,” identifying possible problems, and increase confidence and competence through applying different theories/tactics. This may be done in preparation for an anticipated situation or for evaluating a past one.

The steps in roleplay

1. **Select a situation.** Either (a) use a scenario developed by the trainers, or (b) ask the participants to identify the problems they expect might occur or they fear will occur. If drawing scenarios from the group, one possible process is to ask trios to talk about the kinds of problem situations they think will come up. Early on in a group, choose simple scenarios.

2. **Explain the situation:** what groups/individuals are involved, what their roles are, what is the physical setting. If the scenario was drawn from the group, ask for the help of a participant who raised the situation to set the scene and players. Explain enough of background to make the situation clear, so roles will not be played solely from stereotypes.

Since a roleplay is used to learn how to handle a particular situation, it is usually best to define carefully either the situation or the role to the players, but not both. Leave room for creative response by the participants.

3. **Cast roles.** Ask for volunteers among participants. If no one comes forward, ask specific people to play roles. If possible, cast people in roles with which they do not identify strongly. Ask roleplayers to take fictitious names, whether they will be used or not.

“Amy, you are going to play the role of Jack, a peacekeeper. Tom, what name do you want to use for the heckler? OK, Joe it is.”

4. **Prepare the roleplayers.** Allow a few minutes for people to get into their roles and to plan their strategy. Ask people to think about other aspects of the character they are playing (job, family, motivation...) to make the roles realistic. If the role is unfamiliar or to add a twist, the trainer can help with special or secret instructions to a roleplayer, e.g.:

(Quietly, to one person): “Malkia, you are supposedly an innocent bystander in this roleplay. However, when Jose starts yelling, I want you to go over and yell back at him and even begin to start an argument.”

If groups of people must act together in the roleplay, give them time to develop their approach.

5. **Prepare the observers.** Observation is important. Suggest specific things observers should watch for, e.g. different physical actions, words, gestures, tone. Ask them not to say or do anything which might distract the roleplayers. If the roleplay causes emotional reactions in participants, ask them to share their feelings early in the debriefing.

6. **Set the scene.** You establish the scene, the physical layout and any other relevant details.

“OK, this is the street running this way. The speaker’s platform is over here. The crowd is on this side. The speaker is already addressing the crowd.”

7. **Run the roleplay.** Give a clear signal to begin the roleplay once the players are ready. Tell them from the start what signal you will use to stop the roleplay.

8. **Cut the roleplay.** Stop the roleplay when enough issues have been uncovered, or the action seems to come to an end, or when people want to stop. Keep the learning goals in mind when deciding. Stop the action if someone is about to get hurt, or the roleplay dissolves into laughter. If roleplayers didn’t get “into” their roles, start again. If someone over-identifies with a role (indicated by showing great tension), stop and assist the person to step out of role.

9. **Debrief.** Debriefing allows people to examine what took place; it is essential for learning. Set a tone of exploration rather than judgement; draw the learnings from the participants rather than provide answers yourself.

Some trainers divide the evaluation into three sections: a) feelings, reactions, tensions; b) tactics, approaches, motivations/goals; c) general lessons or theoretical connections. We recommend starting by asking the players how they felt in their roles. If practical, give each person a chance to speak.

“Malkia, how did it feel to be Barbara the heckler? What was going on in Barbara’s mind? . . . Now Jose, how did you feel as Miguel the demonstrator who lost his cool?”

Emphasize non-judgemental examination of specific actions, not seeking the “right way.” Always use the names of the characters, not the names of the participants during the debriefing.

“Let’s look at what happened when Jack grabbed Joe’s arm. What did you notice? How did Joe react?”

Ask observers for their impressions. Discourage negative evaluation of participants which tells them what they “should have done.” Frame suggestions as additional options which can be used in a re-run of the roleplay. Emphasize that “mistakes” provide an excellent source for learning. Compliment people for acting boldly in difficult situations.

“Jack gave us a wonderful chance to look at the effects of different ways to intervene. How did he try to get Joe under control? “Right, first he took his arm by the elbow. How did Joe react? ... Then what did Jack try? He asked Joe how to get to the train station? What effect did that have? . . . Now let’s think together what we might do in Jack’s position. What are some options?”

As the discussion continues, draw out the learnings, add stories and theories. Be as specific as possible about potential alternative actions. You can run it again, of course, to try more options!

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