

## Parallel Lines Roleplay

*the shortest way to do a roleplay with everyone in a complex challenge*

### Set-Up the Roleplay

- ▶ **Frame the role-play (introduce the topic)** • For example, if the topic is on nonviolent intervention say: "We're going to explore options for personally intervening in a violent situation." Or for a role-play on fundraising, "We're going to explore initiatives to help with effective fundraising."
- ▶ **Get people creating two parallel lines** • This reduces resistance because people are too busy pushing back their chairs and trying to figure out what "two parallel lines" means. Get their bodies in motion and there's little likelihood of resistance to this task. Note also that we do not use the word "roleplay," because that word is itself a red flag for many people. Instead, we're going to "explore options" or "practice possible choices" etc.
- ▶ **Make sure the lines are equal numbers** • When the two lines are formed, ask them to shake hands with the person across. That instruction (a) helps people bond for the exercise, and (b) sorts out those who don't have a partner.
- ▶ **Explain the scenario** • Whatever the scenario, one role should be the *initiator*, the role the activists would be doing – i.e. the person who is trying a new behavior. The other person would be playing a role, e.g. the person being asked for money, the dog-beater, etc.
- ▶ **Set up boundaries for the role-play** • "We're generating options here, so be creative and try a bunch of things. The way this exercise works is that I'll start things off by saying 'Begin' and after awhile I'll say 'Stop.'" You may need to add appropriate rules, like no physical contact, hitting, etc.
- ▶ **Give people a minute to get into the role** • "Take a minute to get into role. Go inside and find that part of you that sometimes can get (irritated, reluctant to give money, etc). Use that part for this exercise. And those intervening, think of what new behavior you might try.... BEGIN!"

### Run the Roleplay

- ▶ **Observe the roleplay** and stop it as soon as energy starts to slacken. "STOP!"  
It's OK that it takes a bit of time for people to go back to where they were, because that time is meaningful transition. Laugh along with them. For the perfectionists who worry that they didn't do it "right," the relaxed facilitator laughing is a relief! (Participants laughing after a roleplay, by the way, isn't about comedy, it's about emotional release. Needed, and welcome.)

### Debrief the Roleplay

Here's where this particular format gets its reputation for brevity, because we "cut to the chase," in the following way:

- ▶ **Ask the INTERVENORS for their feelings** • You'll probably need to be forceful about this: it's their feelings you want, not their stories of what they did or their self-critiques. Coach them by giving examples of feelings, if need be. Feelings indicate deeper motivations and invite greater awareness than merely the surface behaviors.

- ▶ **Get options from the NON-INTERVENORS** • Ask the people on the other line what the intervenors tried and was *even if only slightly effective*. Obviously, here you're trying to coach that line *both* to notice their internal reactions as well as the behaviors of their partners. Not easy. Be patient, and if someone says something their partner did that didn't work, just go right on and once again say "We're looking for anything your partner did that slightly worked in some way." If you keep re-phrasing this elicitive question, you'll get useful responses.
- ▶ **Summarize** • Quickly summarize a few of the behaviors that worked: "asked a question. . . made eye contact. . . picked up the dog. . . expressed empathy. . . surprised you with a distraction"

## Re-Run the Roleplay

- ▶ **Reverse roles** • Do it exactly the same way and you'll be rewarded by people doing a much better job at every point: they'll try harder to get into role, they'll be more creative, they'll be more emotional, they'll be more aware. As you announce that we're doing it again reversing roles be sure to emphasize exploring options, so it's fine to do again what was done and also fine to try new things, and it's OK to try a bunch of things. Also, thank the folks who are now fulfilling a different role in advance.

**Debrief** in the same way as above.

## Generalization Step

Bring the group to the chairs facing the newsprint and title the newsprint: "What worked?" Get them to recall what they were saying in the reflection debrief; your writing it down serves the visual learners as well as supporting the generalization process. As you write, feel free to probe underneath what anyone says, or even contradict it: "Can eye contact really make a difference to someone who is angry?" Allow discussion so people can bring up other examples from their own lives or anecdotes they've heard of. As people reach for their personal life experience or stories they've heard, they are in fact generalizing. If you have a story of an intervention you made, this is a great time to tell it.

If appropriate and there's time, this may also be a teachable moment to refer to larger theory, e.g. the third party nonviolent intervention that is being done in various parts of the world (such as Peace Brigades International work); this can stretch their worldview by showing nonviolent intervention as both personal but also a political force on a macro level.

*METHODOLOGY NOTE: This format is "quick and dirty" because of the debrief: the facilitator asks ONLY ONE SIDE for feelings, and ONLY ONE SIDE for effective behaviors/options. Then in role reversal the debrief includes one side for feelings and one side for effective behaviors. The quickness of this format makes avoids a focus on one scenario for a long time.*

*A version of this is done by Alternatives to Violence Project, a workshop series done largely in prisons, who uses a dog-beating roleplay they call "hassle lines." We call it parallel lines because the application can be wide: fundraising, practicing energy levels, de-escalation, training interventions, and much, much more. Just to stretch your imagination, some trainers invite people to be nonverbal and debrief it with practicing energy awareness in conflict scenarios. You get the idea.*

- George Lakey and Daniel Hunter