The uses of Role-play and Forum Theatre in Business

Role-play - its uses

Role-play (with and without an actor) is being used as the tool of choice in many businesses particularly when they are looking to extend their people's skills in such areas as sales, customer service and generally within soft-skills and management development.

Role-playing opposite and actor allows participants to test their existing skills and to apply new learning against what is approaching a real situation. The reality of any role-play is generally dependent upon the actor playing opposite the participant as there is an inherent need to lift the character they play off of the scenario page and into the room. This requires actors with good improvisation skills and a reasonable knowledge of the situations being played.

Early in its use (the early 1990's) there was a tendency to 'cram' as many participants into a session as possible. This meant that each participant would only have one attempt at the role-play and the emphasis was on the analysis of the workshop leader, feedback from the group and possibly the actor. Now days, it is more likely that there will be fewer participants (or more actors), allowing each participant more time to try out and 'flex' the skills that they have been learning.

Also, the actor is seen as a more important source of feedback – they can provide input on how each participant affected their emotional state, their reactions to specific strategies used can provide a high degree of insight into how participants need to adjust the strategies they are using.

The structure and approach to the use of role-play within a workshop still remains the same – it is usually situated towards the end of a workshop. The theory section within a workshop is generally given priority, the approach tending to be to learn the theory and then apply it. This has the effect on participants of needing to take on board a number of concepts that are usually new to them, retaining the meaning and importance of those concepts and then applying them at a later point.

I would suggest that not only does this minimise the use of role-play and the actors involved, it also places a greater pressure on participants when trying to apply all that they have learnt in, what is effectively, a short space of time. People have differing learning styles and therefore need to assimilate information in a different way, but the common theme to any learning process should be the application of those new skills.

It has been my experience that by using a role-play format throughout a workshop – for example, by breaking the learning process up into sections dealing with specific a concept or related concepts – the participants gain a greater insight into those concepts, can apply any basic strategies (or see them applied in real-time – mistakes and all), and can gain a greater understanding of why those concepts and strategies are more appropriate, more effective, and why they may provide better outcomes.

There are also added benefits from such an approach – the interactions between the actors and participants become less traumatic as it becomes a more iterative process, reducing the pressure to perform for some participants, an effect that can alter the way they perform within a role-play. Also, the actors are accepted as part of the team (whereas they can be seen as 'visiting' just to do role-play), and creativity increases – because of the more dynamic quality of the process.

But there are times that 'one-off' role-plays can be much more effective – a prime example is assessment centres. Since an assessment centre will focus on the current abilities of a person, a role-play carried out with an actor who the participant has never met before, provides a stage upon which more can be discovered about an individual's abilities within certain situations or interactions.

Plus, it also makes the actor feel better as it's like watching other people do auditions – always a more pleasant prospect than doing them yourself.

Forum Theatre – Next Step from Role-play?

First of all for those who haven't experienced it I will provide an outline of how Forum Theatre works – at least how it works the way I use it.

The objective of Forum Theatre, as it is used within the training and management development area, is to engage the participants into exploring how personal interactions work in as deep a way as possible by watching actors play out one or more scenarios. And to look at how outcomes can change when different behavioural approaches are used (in both positive and negative ways). They can then, with the actors, experiment around the ways in which they could use these different behaviours within their workplace.   This initial form of Forum Theatre helps them do this without them feeling pressurised by having to role-play any of scenarios.

The Process:

The facilitator will outline the Forum Theatre process **and** the subject matter – the topic.

The actors will then perform one of the scenarios that have either been scripted and rehearsed, or improvised from a scenario. The Facilitator will then split the audience (Participants) into 2 teams, each of which will support one of the actors (there usually are 2 actors within each scenario, although this can be expanded). The initial brief is for each team to support and help 'their actor' in achieving his or her aim (as is apparent from the action of the scene). This is achieved through a start/stop process – after the first performance of the scene, the actors run it again and any member of either team can stop the action, merely by calling out 'STOP!' The actors will then each go to consult with their team.

The objective of the team is to provide the actor with alternative strategies (language, behaviours, attitudes, etc) with which he/she can achieve his/her character's objective. There is a time-limit on each stop and the Facilitator will bring the actors back to the performance area once this is reached. The team who stopped the action will start the process and will decide where it will start from (it can start from any point that has already been covered). Also, at some point the Facilitator will switch the teams to support the 'other' actor – so both teams can look at the other side of the equation.

Once the teams become happy with the process the Facilitator can adjust each team's aims to look at specific issues, which usually evolve around specific behaviours and/or attitudes. For example this process can be very useful when exploring or dealing with bullying, sexism, racism, violent or aggressive behaviour, prejudice, bigotry, anger management, assertiveness, sales skills, customer care skills… in fact, it can be used or adapted to work on any face-to-face (or voice-to-voice) interaction between two or more people. Through the Forum Theatre process the teams can compete with each other to define behavioural strategies that are more appropriate to the business culture they work in. They can also explore alternative or adjusted strategies – since different people have different strengths, a different approach may work for one person better than it will for others. This can be achieved by adjusting or changing the character traits that the actors are using within a scenario (and also possibly changing the situation). Thus, as you can see, there is a wide range of dynamics that can be used to explore and discover alternative ways of being in many types of interactions between people.

As you will have noticed, the basic Forum process doesn't allow the participants to be directly, physically involved in the action of any of the scenarios that are used (although there is no reason why one or more participants can't role-play part of a scenario). As mentioned before, this takes the pressure of having to role-play off of them – it becomes more of a vicarious process. But it does have the added benefit of allowing them to engage with the issues that surround the subject matter in a far deeper way. They get to see how different behaviours work, and they are behaviours that they define, that they may well have experienced.

But, since that act of 'doing' is left out there is a need to incorporate a 'doing' process for at least some of the participants for people to use such strategies confidently within the workplace.

This is achieved by adapting the Forum process so that smaller teams of participants can work with a single actor on agreed scenarios. This will allow at least one member of each smaller group to replace one of the actors whilst allowing the rest of that group to continue to support that person via the stop/start process. In this adaptation of the Forum process the actor can also provide feedback, as would occur within a role-play, allowing those who experience this Forum Role-play to 'play' with and adjust, or radically change the strategies they have looked at in the standard Forum process. This added real-time experience means that those strategies are more likely to work back in the workplace,

because the person's confidence will be higher, and they will have alternatives that they have experienced that they can revert to.

Role-Play verses Forum Theatre

Which to use? The easiest way to decide is to look at your objectives and your budget.

Role-play carried out in an integral way, can provide a positive result in getting people to gaining some understanding why they should be changing what they do and how they do it. And it can be effective at transferring learnt skills back into the workplace, but this will usually rest on just how well the individual engaged with the role-play process. Role-play is a simple process that most people understand (even if they aren't enthusiastic at doing it).

The cost of role-plays will usually depend upon how many actors you decide to employ, which is itself dependent upon how many participants will be involved.

Forum Theatre is by far more effective at getting participants into engage deeply with a topic. It provides the participants with an opportunity to experience a much deeper understanding of the problem under discussion, the concepts and issues that surround it and routes to a range of possible solutions and strategies. This deeper understanding emerges from the level of discussion that is inherently included with the process. This can also develop into an empathetic process between the participants and the characters – some participants can 'see themselves' within some situations and thus can relate closely to how they may have 'got it wrong', and thus how they can change what they do. If Forum Role-play is used, then these understandings can be tested, and the role-play format is less pressurised for most participants as they have been immersed in the process. That said, some people will still avoid carrying out a role-play, but they will still have gained a significant amount from the process.

Thus Forum Theatre (and its adaptations) is far more effective at transferring newly learnt behaviours back into the workplace, **but** it is more likely to be more expensive as it usually requires *at least* one Facilitator and two actors. Generally speaking the number of actors with Forum Theatre will only increase if there are a significantly large number of participants – when used at a conference, for example.

Both can be placed to run within a workshop that will contain other techniques.