

Role Play

International Facilitator's Companion

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imaginal training

BOX & COVER DESIGN Dick Rutgers bno, Groningen, the Netherlands
PRODUCTION & PAGE DESIGN DigiTAAL, Groningen, the Netherlands
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1 **The Theory**

Section One: **The Theory**

Role Playing is a training tool in which two or more people assume roles and interact with each other. After a period of “playing the role” they stop and there is a time of reflection led by the facilitator which can include the rest of the group. Both the actual role play and the reflection should be understood to be part of the total learning event. Learning occurs in both the awareness that is created during the actual role playing and in the reflection on the event. The reflection is particularly critical for the rest of the group which observed the event.

A role play is not a dramatized case study; rather its focus is on a particular relational or situational issue. It is not a directed teaching event in the sense that the teacher does not control the final outcome. The outcome flows from the given situation and the “acting out” of that situation by the participants. It is subjective rather than objective since it deals with the more emotive side of relationships and situations. It is not a game in that it deals with a “slice of real life.” The situation in which the role play is set may be fanciful but the relational aspect that is being dealt with in the role play needs to be related to “real life.” Finally training role plays are not “psycho-dramas” or therapy of a psychological nature.

Role plays are useful tools if the learning objectives have to do with personal or group interactions. They can create an awareness of human behavior with a particular focus on the emotive side of relationships. They are particularly effective in helping people see a number of options for dealing with a particular situation or relationship. They also tend to reveal the consequences of particular approaches to a situation.

Role plays focus on social skills which are called for in situations where people find themselves having to handle challenging human interactions (a complaining customer on the phone, a difficult passenger on a train or airplane, etc.) . They can also be used to create awareness by using “role reversal” (you, the telephone operator play the part of the complaining customer) which can help a person modify their responses.

Role plays are a valuable training tool in that they provide an opportunity to experience often stressful or difficult relational situations in a “safe environment.” They give both the participants and observers the opportunity to explore potential solutions in a risk-free and mistake-tolerant atmosphere. They are very helpful for creating awareness of what is motivating people in particular situations. They enable people to see how others respond to them and how they might modify their behavior to secure a different response.

Fundamentally there are two types of role plays. The first type is situation centered. In this type the roles of the actors are defined and the situation is left open to allow the group to explore the problem. The second type is human centered. In this type the situation is well defined and the roles are left more flexible in order to more fully explore the relationships in the situation. The appropriate type in any learning situation is determined by the learning objectives of the course and session.

Role plays have disadvantages. The trainer does not have total control of the outcome of the role play event because it depends on the abilities of the role players and their interpretation of the given situation and context. It usually requires a great deal of time and preparation to ensure that the role play addresses the intended objective of the session. It also depends upon people in the group being willing to risk themselves in front of their colleagues which in some cultures, in some situations and for some individuals can be difficult. Finally it must be “realistic” and something that flows from the participants’ own experience or potential experience.



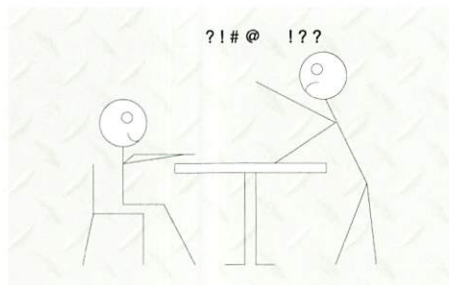
The Process

Section Two: The Process

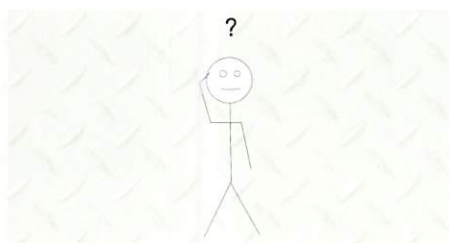
Role play situations are as various as human interactions. The key to a successful learning event is to have clarity on the learning objectives of the session and to design the event to fulfill those objectives.



The Context The facilitator should clearly explain the flow of the entire session and establish a secure environment in which the participants will feel free to risk themselves in the role play. It is critical to explain the role play situation and the characters that will be acted out. It is usually helpful to have a printed description of the role play situation and the roles the characters are expected to act out. This will give the participants confidence and encourage them to participate as actors in the event.



The Role Play Event The facilitator should carefully set the stage for the role play (arrange furniture, other materials, etc.). He should secure the people who will play the roles (either volunteers or by assignment) and make sure they understand how much time they have for the role play. The facilitator must watch the time and stop the actors when the time is up. If there are to be several versions of the role play (using different actors) the facilitator will need to control the flow from one event to the next. Usually a short reflection is held following each event.



The Reflection Following the role play the facilitator should lead a reflection which explores what has taken place in the role play event. The focus of the reflection is determined by the learning objectives of the event. This is where the participants articulate the awareness that has been created by the event, learnings and implications they are taking from the experience and how they see the event modifying their future behavior. The usual form of the reflection is a structured conversation.



The Closing The final step is a short closing. This should put closure on the event and give the participants permission to move on. It is sometimes useful for the facilitator to say a few final words about the significance of the event and how the event has prepared them for the next step in the course.



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Examples

This example depends on using the film “Bad News” by John Cleese but a presentation on the same points could be used before the role play.

Workshop: Giving Bad News

Rational Objective: To practice the skill of giving bad news to an employee effectively.

Existential Aim: To learn to confront ones own fears of giving bad news.

Step	Procedure	Time
Context	<i>We want to watch a film by John Cleese called Bad News. It is a typical John Cleese film - there is a lot of humour and it is aimed at explaining the basics of a skill.</i> Show the film	
Movements	1 Review the points of the film: <i>The function of giving bad news is to get the person to accept the news and to be prepared to act positively in the future.</i> I Preparation - before the interview you must prepare a the facts - why the decision has been made b your own emotions - <i>What is the response you most fear?</i> c the first paragraph of the interview - a short clear rationale for the decision and the decision. II Listen to their responses - when the decision has been clearly stated. a If emotional - keep calm and clearly explain the rationale. b If they don't respond (clam-up) - ask probing questions. c If they argue - stand ground, keep calm and restate the reasons for the decision.	
Conclusion	See below	

Workshop: Giving Bad News

Rational Objective: See above

Existential Aim: See above

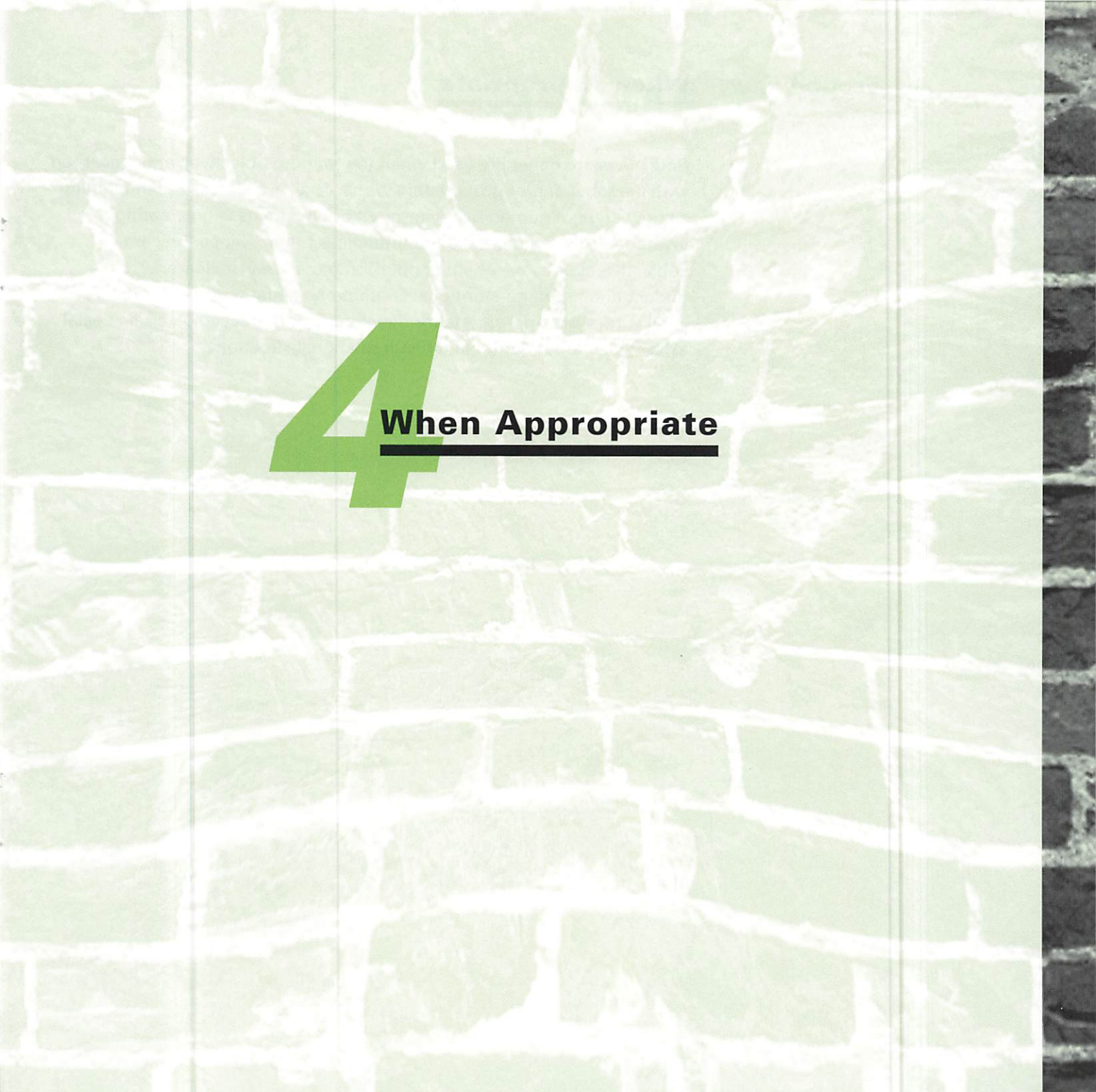
Step	Procedure	Time
Context	See above	
Movements	III Limit the damage - preserve the integrity of the organization and the individual. a Put the bad news in perspective - remind them of their strengths. b Making the news public (if necessary) - discuss the best way of doing it. c Point them toward the future - discuss what can happen next. 2 Role Play - Hand out the roles: the giver and the receiver of the bad news. Ask for volunteers. Give them 15 minutes to prepare. 3 After the role play: a To the Group: <i>What happened in the role play?</i> b To the person receiving the bad news: <i>What did you experience during the role?</i> c To the person giving the bad news: <i>What did you experience during the role?</i> d <i>What could you have done differently?</i> e <i>Anyone, what could be done to deliver the bad news more effectively?</i>	
Conclusion	See below	

Workshop: Giving Bad News

Rational Objective: See above

Existential Aim: See above

Step	Procedure	Notes
Context	See above	
Movements	(The role play can be done several times with different people depending on the time. You can also do role plays for each of the 3 parts of the film and one for the whole process at the end.)	
Conclusion	1 What is giving bad news? 2 What is difficult about it ? 3 What is easy? 4 What do you struggle with in doing it? 5 How could you improve the way you give it?	

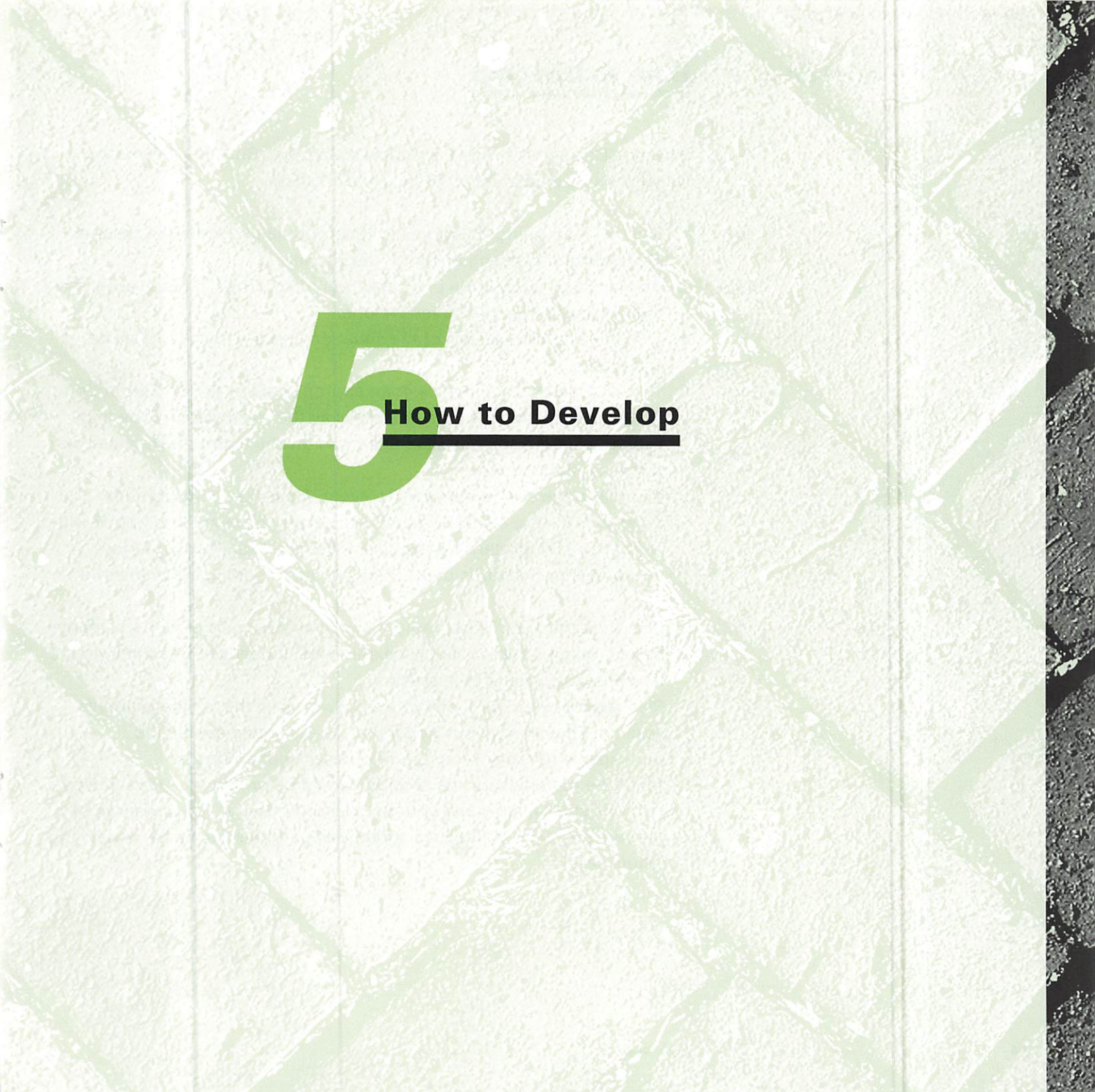


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When Appropriate

Section Four: **When Appropriate**

Role plays are generally used when the training objectives are concerned with personal and/or group interactions. They are also useful in building a knowledge of human behavior or where the focus is on creating awareness of how our behavior influences others. Since they are subjective events, they help people come to a new or clearer understanding of the emotional content of a situation or relationship. Finally, they are appropriate for developing and practicing certain social skills which are required in difficult relational situations.



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How to Develop

Section Five: How to Develop

Use the “Designing a Role Play” worksheet, the “Role Play Workshop Design” worksheet and the “Role(s)” Worksheet.

- 1** Review the training objectives for the module and write the rational objective and existential aim for the session.
- 2** Brainstorm possible role plays that would accomplish these objectives and decide on the most effective one.
- 3** Think through the details of the situation and the roles that will be acted out.
- 4** Write a draft of these details in an appropriate format for distribution to the participants. In some role plays all the roles will be shown to everyone and in some cases the person (or the team) playing the role will see only their role.
- 5** Think through the context for the event. This should include the objectives for the event, what will happen in the event and how it will happen. It is important that you establish the “safe” environment necessary for the participants to be willing to participate in the role play.
- 6** Plan the reflection. This should focus on ensuring that the participants benefit fully from the role play experience. It needs to be related to the learning objectives of the session.
- 7** Plan the closure. These are your final words as the facilitator in this session. They should put closure to the event and enable the participants to move on to the next event in the module.
- 8** All of the materials for the session should be produced and reviewed for consistency, logic and completeness. If possible, do a trial run of the role play with colleagues and/or have another facilitator review the whole session.



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Worksheets

Designing a Role Play

Rational Objective:	Existential Aim:
Possible Role Plays:	
Situation:	
Roles:	
Draft:	
Reflection:	

Role Play Workshop Design
Name of Role Play

Rational Objective:		Existential Aim:	
Step	Procedure		Notes
Context			
Move- ments	Role play		
	Reflec- tions		
Conclusion			

Role (s)

Designing a Role Play

Rational Objective: <i>Put the Rational Objective of the session in this box.</i>	Existential Aim: <i>Put the Existential Aim of the session in this box.</i>
Possible Role Plays: <i>In this box brainstorm possible role plays that would accomplish these objectives. Decide which one is the most effective.</i>	
Situation: <i>Brainstorm the details of the situation in this box.</i>	
Roles: <i>Brainstorm details of the roles in this box.</i>	
Draft: <i>Write out a draft of the details of the situation and roles in this box.</i>	
Reflection: <i>Plan the reflection in this box (the Basic Conversation Method is useful for this).</i>	

Role Play Workshop Design
Name of Role Play Put the name of the role play here

Rational Objective: Transfer the Rational Objective to this box.		Existential Aim: Transfer the Existential Aim to this box.		
Step		Procedure		Notes
Context		Write out the context here. Include how the session will start, the objective of the role play, what will happen, and how it will happen.		
Move-ments	Role play	Put the instruction to the people playing the roles here and any instructions to the rest of the group.		
	Reflec-tions	Put the questions for the reflection here.		
Conclusion		Put the closing here.		

Role (s)

Put the name and the description of the role here. If both roles are included on one sheet so everyone sees them they can go here. If only the person playing the role should see it copy this sheet twice and put each role on a separate sheet.





Tips for Developing and Using

Section Seven: Tips for Developing and Using

- 1** There are a great many effective role plays that can be found in training manuals and other resources. You should explore these, especially if you are blocked in creating your own idea for a role play situation.
- 2** Be sure to check that role playing is an “acceptable” learning activity in the culture of the participants.
- 3** If possible, talking a potential role play event through with a fellow facilitator will help gain clarity on the objectives of the event and to find a suitable role play situation.
- 4** Remember that the most effective training role play events are relatively simple and require a minimum amount of preparation (you are not staging a three act play).
- 5** If there is a lot of tension in the group about the topic or focus of the role play then it is important to either defuse that tension beforehand or to use an indirect approach to the issue under consideration (like using a “make believe” situation which indirectly deals with the crucial issue).
- 6** Humor can also be an effective way to break the tension and to help create the necessary environment.
- 7** It is important to get the right balance between too much and too little detail. Too much and you limit the freedom of the actors. Too little and you risk having an event which does not deal with the objectives of the event.

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References

Section Eight: **References**

Training for Trainers, (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung), Bonn, Germany, 1989.

An Introductory Course in Teaching and Training Methods for Management Development (International Labour Office), Geneva.

Models for Teaching, Bruce Joyce & Marsha Weil, (Allyn and Bacon), 1992.

Notes