

Talent Development 5 – Role Plays

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One of the capability areas in the ATD CPTD certification model is “Instructional Design.” I get a lot of mileage out of doing role plays with groups, whether the training is in person or virtual.

I find that the ability to work on a problem situation with another person in an unscripted format is a great mental break, so I insert several of these into my courses. People

really love them and have a great time doing the role plays.

Here is an example of a [brief video](#) I shot in Jamaica when I was doing some leadership training for a group of talent development professionals a few years ago. Notice how the participants are having a rollicking good time while learning a significant point about trust.

The trick in designing role plays is to have a twist in the scene that is known by only one of the people involved and that the person is sworn to not divulge. The other person knows there is an elephant in the room, but that is not being shared for some reason.

In this particular role play I pair up someone playing a middle manager with a quality group leader reporting to that manager. Each person gets a write up of roughly 200 words that explains the situation.

In this case, the manager has just promoted a different group leader to the manager level. The person promoted is inferior to the group leader who was passed over, but she is very attractive. The passed-over group leader is furious and wants to pin down the manager for playing favorites.

What she does not know is that the manager was instructed to promote the other person by the CEO and instructed to not divulge this to the disgruntled group leader who was passed over.

What follows is an exercise in what to say when your actions made no sense, but you must defend it on instructions from your boss. Of course, the debrief reveals that the

real problem is that the CEO is the one who is playing favorites but he wants his role in the selection to remain hidden. That underscores a problem of integrity and accountability.

Role plays seem to work to break up the instructional pattern, so people remain fresh for the major part of the content. I also use body sculptures, stories, magic illusions, physical demonstrations, and visual aids to add more spice.

Another technique is to post a photograph or cartoon and ask each individual to write a funny caption. Then they can read their captions to each other.

My rule of thumb, whether in person or virtual, is to not have more than about 15 minutes of content without giving the group a mental break of some kind. This makes the time fly by and keeps the group fresh, because they never know what is coming up next.

One precaution is that there needs to be a **significant learning or point** in each activity. The activity matters to the entire learning experience. Even though it is fun, it is not just for fun. During the debrief, you point out the main lesson and discuss the significance. For the participants, this allows experiential learning to occur in an atmosphere that is fun and lively.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

*Robert Whipple is also the author of **The TRUST Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals, Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online, and Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change**. Bob consults and speaks on these and other leadership topics. He is CEO of Leadergrow Inc. a company dedicated to growing leaders.*