

# THE RISE OF THE ROLE PLAY ACTOR

BY JANINE DE MUINCK

Experiential learning is hot and trainers and facilitators are looking for ways to make the theory of workshop sessions come to life. The use of skilled role-play actors is rapidly becoming the preferred way to do this.

Very few people would get on a plane knowing the pilot has learned the skill of flying solely by listening to a lecture and information sharing. However, we do often send learners into the world without having had the opportunity to practice new behaviours in a safe-to-fail environment. Role play actors close this gap by functioning as the flight simulator in training workshops and seminars. By letting participants engage in face-to-face simulations of real workplace interactions they can try different approaches, rehearse new strategies and put theory into practice.

Using professional role play actors, also known as corporate actors, has several benefits over using unskilled participants. When untrained fellow learners are asked to serve as role-players, the resulting learning experience tends to be ineffective due to embarrassment, intimidation, or unrealistic performances. Skilled role-play actors help ensure the conditions for an effective simulation are intact. These conditions include maintaining a safe environment, and dynamically adjusting difficulty, complexity, and intensity to the capabilities and experience level of the learner.

## Early adapters

An example of the involvement of actors in learning comes from the Western Australia Police Academy in Joondalup. In the late 1990s the West Australian Police was the first organisation in Australia to exclusively use role play actors in their training programs, as they realised that theory alone wasn't enough to fully prepare their police recruits for the job. In 2002 they opened a state of the art 'Scenario Village', located within the Academy complex, where actors play out a wide variety of events that will confront police officers once they are on the beat. Principal and Superintendent Tony Flack explains: "The reason we work with professional role play actors serves a dual purpose: our recruits get to experience scenarios that are incredibly close to the often unpleasant, confronting reality and the actors provide us with an independent assessment. Their objective feedback is always spot on." T Flack (personal communication, 2017).

The theory of experiential learning popularised by Prof. David A Kolb underpins this type of training. Kolb states that learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. This knowledge results from the combination of grasping the experience and transforming it. "Actors are indispensable to our Academy. They are crucial in the

development of competencies such as Communication, Conflict Management and Decision making" according to Tony Flack (personal communication, 2017).

## Forum Theatre

In addition to being utilised in training sessions, actors are also used to influence large groups of employees through what is commonly known as forum theatre. This method, invented by Brazilian actor Augustus Boal, was originally developed to help local communities stand up for their political rights. It involves role play actors acting out a scenario that is relevant to the spectators. The idea is that the actors give verbal and non-verbal responses that aren't helpful for the situation.

Weaknesses, inadequate approaches and hindrances are portrayed in such a way that the audience can identify and recognise them. The audience is then given the opportunity to come up with responses they think would be more beneficial for this particular situation. Based on this feedback the scenario is then played out again so the effects of the changed behaviour are immediately self evident.

For organisations, this creates a safe way to experiment with desired behaviour within large groups. Subjects such as customer service, effective leadership and soft skills can be visualised in a non-judgemental manner so that employees gain awareness of the importance and effects of different types of behaviour in the workplace.

## Quality Control

There are two types of role play actors in the world: Those who come into the training room and say, "Here I am!" and those who come into the room and say to the learners, "Ah, there you are!" The true meaning of a role play actor is to be an all round facilitator of the learning process more than a presenter or an entertainer. Many role play actors tend to fall into the second category. This is partly because, even though the industry for corporate acting is growing

fast, most Performing Arts Academies have yet to include role play acting in their curriculum.

This can make it challenging for trainers, facilitators and learning and development professionals to judge the quality of the actors. Someone being a great actor does not necessarily make them a great corporate actor. Considering that the mere prospect alone of participating in a role play still drives fear into the psyches of many, it is imperative that you undertake this endeavour with a professional.

The following criteria can help organisations find the right role play actor:

- Finished degree in Performing Arts
- Realistic and conducive play
- Ability to improvise
- Positive attitude in the group
- Being able to give feedback related to the participants' learning goals
- Confronting in a caring way

- Being able to adapt the level of challenge to match participants skill level
- Be able to work together with the trainer as well as independently
- Knowledge of behaviour models, emotional intelligence, personality styles, communication and coaching tools.
- Being able to offer a safe, non-judgmental, learning environment.

It is anticipated that the industry of corporate role play actors will keep evolving. Insight in limitations and how to deal with those is becoming more and more important in today's fast changing work environment. Actors are schooled in acting methods that ask essential questions such as: Who am I? What do I communicate? What do I want? How do I interact with others?

For today's professionals these are the key questions that are of incredible importance.

## References

Kolb, D A 2014, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of Learning and development* FT Press

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