Note on Learning From Role-Plays *

1. Why We Use Role-Plays in Leadership Labs

Leadership Labs provides a range of activities in which you can try out different leadership behaviors, see how it feels to engage in those behaviors, and learn about the impact of those behaviors on others. These activities include class exercises, working with your squad on the SEED Strategy Project, and role-plays. Role-plays are included for several reasons:

- Role-plays simulate some of the typical workplace factors and constraints that aren’t always present in a classroom or study group of peers, such as: hierarchy, defined roles, specific business goals and constraints, and conflicting agendas. How do your reactions and behaviors change in the presence of these factors?
- Related to the above, role-plays give you an opportunity to explore how you exercise authority and how you react to the exercise of authority by others.
- Role-plays present “critical moments” when the stakes for the characters are quite high. In a role-play you can try out different approaches with much lower risk than you would face in a real situation. This provides greater freedom to try on new behaviors, such as engaging in conflict.

While it may feel awkward at first, most students find that if they fully commit to their role and to the situation, the role-playing can be fun. Full commitment also tends to lead to more meaningful learning from the role-play.

A successful role-play will give you a sense for what it feels like to be in that situation and some hypotheses about the costs and benefits of different approaches (as opposed to a script or algorithm for “getting it right”). You may find yourself focusing on whether or not your character “won”. We encourage you to also pay attention to how the interaction impacts the character’s relationships, since working relationships are rarely zero-sum games or one-time interactions. You might also find it useful to explore the different outcomes you get by experimenting with both competitive and collaborative approaches.

2. Conducting the Role-Plays

There is a trap in the concept of “playing a role” in that it implies acting and not being oneself. In the role-plays, **you should always be yourself**. But there are many ways that you could “be yourself.” The case describes a situation (what occurred) as well as **how you feel** about that situation (and about some of the other roles in the situation). But in almost all cases, it doesn’t tell you **how you should act**. Also, the case may list your goals – but how would **you** go about achieving those goals? This means that different people are likely to respond differently, and those variations can be an important source of learning.

Each of us can show a range of behaviors all of which are “still us.” One of the choices is whether to handle that role as you typically might (to test out the consequences of your normal style) or to

* Written by David Bradford. Adapted for Leadership Labs by Andrea Corney
try an approach that is less typical (but is still you) in order to stretch yourself and develop your skills. The latter can still be in a way that is internally congruent. For example, if you have difficulty expressing anger, you could work on that (given it is compatible with the written role), but still within the range of your personal style.

In trying new behavior, don’t carry it to such an extreme that the role-play becomes a charade. Remember the goal is not to defeat the other, but instead to provide a learning experience for you and for the other. Responding in a difficult, but not impossible way, where you are still willing to be influenced if the other is effective, is the best recourse. Likewise, giving way too easily might produce a successful resolution, but does it produce any learning? While you need to push yourself, don’t go so far that you can’t keep a straight face (as this tends to lower commitment and cheats everyone out of available learning).

The case gives you all the facts you need to conduct the role-play. Stick with the facts of the case; don’t make up new factual data.

The description of your role describes that person’s perception of the situation (reactions, what his/her goals and concerns are, etc.). Since each person is likely to respond differently to the same situations, this is information that is not held in common. However, the description is not telling you how you should or would react. That is where you put yourself into the role.

For example, if the case describes a past meeting that was contentious between two parties, and your version of the case indicates that you were upset about what went on, how would you handle that annoyance?

3. Learning from the Role-plays

Role-plays offer multiple forms of learning:

- Using your typical approach and learning about the impact.
- Using an approach that stretches into new behaviors and learning about not only the impact, but what it feels like to engage in those behaviors.
- Watching how others handle the situation and considering how to adapt those behaviors to match your own style.
- Noticing how you react to the emotions of a situation. How does your emotional response drive your behavior? What other options do you have when those feelings get evoked?
- By playing someone in a new situation or with goals that are different from your own, you can learn to take the perspective of someone very different from you.

While the short time frame of most of the cases is unrealistic, everything else about the scenarios is based on real situations. Even if you can’t work through the entire process that you might in real life, what can you learn from this snippet of a critical moment? Can you quickly recognize the emotional or interpersonal issues at play? Can you find the right balance of assertiveness and cooperation? Can you diffuse tension in a way that allows real issues to be addressed (as opposed to sweeping them under the rug)?

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4. Role-playing Beyond the Weekly Leadership Labs

Role-playing in weekly Labs is practice for the Executive Challenge at the end of the quarter, where you will role-play longer and more complex cases with a partner from your squad and several alumni judges.

Learning how to role-play is a valuable skill not just for this course, but also for you in the future. You will find spontaneous role-plays a useful coaching tool with your direct reports, peers and even your boss. When somebody comes into your office and says “I am concerned about how to raise this issue with Chris” our tendency is to give advice by saying how we would do it. But that’s often of limited value because what we suggest fits our style and not necessarily the other person’s approach.

Instead, think of saying “assume that I’m Chris; what would you say?” Even though you aren’t Chris, your reaction is likely to be somewhat similar to how Chris might respond. It also gives the other the chance to put into words what they have been thinking as well as to discover approaches they might not have already thought of.

So your experience with role-plays in this course has two beneficial outcomes: a) what you learn from the specific role-play; and b) learning how to use role-plays to practice and explore new approaches to challenging situations.

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