

The Use of Drama in Training

We are not confident that feedback and coaching conversations are happening in our organisation on a regular basis. We want to shift our people's understanding of performance management. I have heard about using drama and actors in role play in training sessions. Do you think that might work for us?

David Lever, Director Bi-Jingo

The use of live actors has become an increasingly popular form of learning and development as people have become more sophisticated and their expectations of training have changed. It's certainly worth considering this type of training and our experience has been particularly positive when it comes to using drama in performance management training.

Drama is born of conflict and this allows us to explore workplace issues in a very real and immediate way. We can create debate and use it to stimulate delegates to examine, reflect and ultimately change their own behaviour. As a result, we can achieve greater engagement, greater empowerment, and greater results.

In training, we often use right and wrong scenarios to inform and change workplace behaviour. The danger with such approaches is that we risk disconnecting people from the learning experience. Too often the scenarios described are simplified or generalised to the point that they bear little relation to the trainees' own experience. This is where drama can really help.

The other advantage of using drama in performance management training is that we can quickly get to the heart of contentious issues much quicker. You often find that conflict and debate are avoided in training programmes. Take forced ranking, for example, arguably one of the most contentious issues in performance management. It normally takes half a day to get to this issue. Organisations will follow the unwritten rule (really presumption) that delegates need to be eased into this issue, despite the fact that it is one they are very familiar with. Through the use of drama, we can address this issue very quickly, explore and at times expose any misperceptions about it. This can be a very powerful experience for delegates.

Performance management is a constant cycle and dilemma of how to manage different types of people in different situations. As a manager, how do you set challenges and keep pushing and developing people to maintain the motivation?

For example, a manager may have an employee who's a 'safe pair of hands'. He's an average performer meets his objectives but that's all he is doing. I probably hear more stories about this employee in my research than anyone else. Through drama, you can present the challenges for both the manager and the person. We can explore their emotions of frustration, confusion and anxiety. These aren't uncommon experiences; it's just that we don't see them presented in training very often. Drama allows us to do this.

When considering the use of live actors, it is important to:

- Develop characters and scenarios that resonate with your audience. Conduct focus groups to identify the common challenges that people face.

- Think of how your characters can evolve and change across the performance management cycle, so that rather than presenting right and wrong, focus on the dilemmas that people face and how they evolve and how they do this.
- Clearly identify the behaviours that you want to see rather than focus on the information you want to give.

Drama is an opportunity to look at the subtleties of how people manage and to promote the practices and behaviours you want to promote as an organisation. Training courses will predominantly instruct; drama will allow you to engage your audience.