

## **The drama of leadership**

*David Lever, director of Bi Jingo, talks about the use of live actors in organisational training and development.*

As organisations demand a higher and more immediate return on learning and development, HR professionals are exploring new and different training options to engage their audiences. Experiential learning, podcasts and webinars as well as the use of live actors in workshops and training programmes are some of the options being used to address training fatigue, reduced budgets and demands from managers, at all levels, for more relevant and accelerated learning.

Drama is one of the most effective ways to lift theory off the page and turn competency frameworks into observable, tangible behaviours that people can relate to. Live actors can provide a solution to the knowing-doing gap that many organisations identify. This is when people intellectually and theoretically know what to do but don't do it because they don't see the impact or the benefits.

We have seen people go through the change curve from denial and resistance right through to commitment through this type of training option. They have started the day quite cynically, believing that they won't learn anything, and ended it, engaged and enthusiastic about the subject.

## **From role-play to forum theatre**

Role play is something that you typically see in training and development courses. These elements of stand-up delivery offer delegates an opportunity to apply management models to business and people management issues. They are designed to help with the transition from theory to practice.

In many instances the scenarios can be almost predictable, two-dimensional. There is employee A and employee B and a common management experience is presented. Delegates will role-play with one another putting into practice a particular management approach or theory. These approaches risk disconnecting people from the learning experience as the situations described are often very simplified and substantially different from people's experience of the workplace and managing others. The quality of this experience can also be varied as it is dependent on the acting and commitment of the two - three people participating in the exercise.

In contrast, forum theatre offers delegates an opportunity to explore people management from many perspectives, bringing a psychological depth to scenarios being explored. Each actor takes on a character and provides feedback to the group. In a typical workshop, delegates will be taken through three stages of learning:

- Stage one: Delegates surround the actors and a workplace scenario begins. Here the delegates observe behaviours in action.
- Stage two: At a certain point, the scene will stop. Each actor will be given coaching by the group or an element of the group. Suggestions will be made about what they could be doing differently. The scenario is then resumed and those techniques are applied. At the end of the scene, the actors give feedback to the delegates, reflecting on the impact of those suggestions.
- Stage three: In this final stage, delegates participate in the forum theatre with the actors.

The scenarios played out simulate real management issues with all the complexity of conflicting business priorities, time constraints, people's different styles, motivations and drivers. Different management styles are tested to find the most appropriate response. This approach offers a real flexibility as the course can be tailored to the needs of the delegates present.

Importantly, the actors are trained in management theory and are able to provide informed feedback and offer coaching. A consultant facilitator is used to lead discussion, encouraging delegates to explore each scenario from different perspectives to achieve a greater learning experience for all involved.

Forum theatre enables us to move from scenarios on the page to the live performance of these issues through drama and as such introduces a new element to learning and development. 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 encourage delegates to examine, reflect and ultimately change their own behaviour. As a result, we can achieve greater engagement, greater empowerment, and greater results.

We recommended that a leadership or competencies framework is used as the basis for this approach. Without this, organisations will really struggle to focus on what is important. A framework will include descriptions of what a behaviour should look like but it is still on paper. With actors, you can see the behaviour. When actors give feedback they can refer to those competencies and behaviours. They will talk about what could have been done differently and demonstrate it. You are getting a much richer experience in terms of the behavioral framework.

The result is a training and development approach that is fully integrated with role descriptions and objectives, a performance management system, and an organisation's policies and procedures.

### **The drama of leadership**

In a recent collaboration with CHPD, we used drama, specifically soap opera, to help a global banking client address issues of staff engagement in the performance management process. The client had little confidence that feedback and coaching conversations were happening on a regular basis. Stand-up training courses had been delivered but there was little evidence of behaviour change. A series of forum theatre workshops had proved very successful and there was a desire within the business to roll-out this approach more widely.

The client favoured the use of a training video to achieve the roll-out of the forum theatre workshop experience to its management population. We used television drama or soap opera as the basis. Performance management is a constant cycle and a common dilemma for most managers is how to manage different types of people in different situations. So we decided that we wanted to follow three employees and their managers through the performance cycle. Episode one was initial objective setting and the series concluded with end of year ratings.

Each episode offered something new about the characters. They changed, faced challenges and grew from them. For example, through one of the characters, we explored the importance of behaviour competency and emotional intelligence. You would describe this character as a glory hunter. He hits his objectives, brings in the money, but he doesn't pass on leads or cross sell. Ten years ago, he would have been seen as a top-performer. Today, his behaviour is viewed less positively because of the negative impact he has on the team he works with. His manager tries to coach him and give him feedback but he can't see the impact of his own behaviour. It's his blindspot.

We also explored the experience of managing such a person. His manager is the most patient and business-like. He is managing the money man: he can't alienate him and he can't lose him. He is a strong manager, trying to stay calm. He is talking to him about not listening and coaching him. This character frequently talks to camera, speaking his concerns and frustration. He even has a stress toy. The challenge faced by this manager is how to communicate behaviour competency.

One of our other characters was the classic safe pair of hands. He was based on the many stories that we hear when working with organisations. His manager struggles to engage him but finally does so when she uses his interest in kung-fu as an analogy for how he can develop the graduate programme he has been supervising. By understanding what motivates him, she is finally able to encourage him in a way that improves his performance and role satisfaction. The dynamic between these two characters is very common. These are two people who really struggle to understand one another.

Our final character is the most enthusiastic, eager and ambitious. She is a star with a bright future. She is almost too enthusiastic at times, verging on the naïve. Her manager struggles in a different way. She is almost in awe of her, almost intimidated. What we see is the dynamic of that relationship and the role of mentor that her manager takes on highlighting to her how to influence others, to think strategically, to get ahead.

The video is a humorous and poignant representation of the challenges and rewards of managing others. Each character is very human with quirks, identifiable traits and faults.

The video itself was shot within one of the main offices of the client. For staff watching the video, there is a real sense of time and place. Drama allows you to do this. It 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.

The video has been disseminated to managers on a DVD. This medium offers great flexibility in how delegates access training material. This is important as people can follow the characters or the subject matter. They have a choice in how they navigate the information presented to them. This is important as people will need to and want to access information in different ways depending on their job and current work demands and priorities.

### **The use of live actors in training and development**

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. Understand the type of behaviour that often exhibited in problem management areas and develop these into character traits.
- Think of how your characters can evolve and change, 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. It is important to have a leadership or competency framework to inform the behaviours you want to develop in your organisation. This is an area that delegates really struggle with, so seeing these behaviours in action can have a real impact on attitude and mindset.

- This is a simple case of knowing your audience. Not only is it important to know the learning styles of your target population but also the culture of your organisation.
- This is not an inexpensive training solution; however, it is one of the most effective for achieving behaviour change.
- A communication strategy needs to be developed to support the roll out of this type of initiative. In the feedback reports we receive from delegates, they offer comment negatively on the information they received prior to attending courses. Ensuring people are appropriately briefed and that there is appropriate follow-up in the form of professional development plans and objective setting is critical to the success of any programme.

### **Conclusion**

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.

Organisations can be very wary of showing the behaviours and practices that they want to change in training. There is the understandable concern but drama allows us to explore the subtleties and the dilemmas of how we perform at work.

Through drama, we can evolve characters and watch them develop in way that mirrors good people management. We can introduce a complexity that mirrors how we work and the relationships we have with people. We need to avoid overly simplifying issues and present the real challenges people face when they manage others.

Given our knowledge of emotional intelligence and behavioural impact, drama will allow us to engage our audiences.

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Bi-Jingo was established in 1996 by David Lever and Jenny Lynch. They use the techniques of drama and learning and development to training and have worked with a diverse range of companies from global banks to high street consumer brands.