How to lead Roleplays
by Peter Woodrow

Purpose of Roleplays
Roleplays are used to help examine real problems on the level of philosophy, emotional response, and physical response. Participants get a chance to analyze situations and try out different theories and tactics in a relatively safe setting. Roleplays also enable trainees to understand different people and their roles and to develop insights into the thoughts and feelings of "opponents." Through roleplays, participants can identify and anticipate possible problems and reveal fears and anxieties people have about an event or action. Roleplays develop group and individual confidence and competence.

Steps in a Roleplay

1. Select a situation. Either (a) use a scenario developed by the trainers, or (b) ask the participants to identify the problems they expect might occur or they fear will occur. If drawing scenarios from the group, one possible process is to ask participants to meet together in groups of three people for about five minutes to talk about the kinds of problem situations they think will come up.

   "We are preparing for a rally next Sunday, so let’s identify the difficulties we think might arise. Please group yourself in threes and talk about what might happen."

2. Call the participants back to the large group and ask someone from each group to call out situations "headline" style while you or a colleague write them up on newsprint. People might list (among other things):
   - A drunk starts disturbing women
   - A fight breaks out between two people
   - The police tell us the rally has to break up
   - Someone starts shouting/disrupting a speaker

   Once you have a list of situations, you as trainer pick a situation to start with, usually a fairly simple scenario to get people warmed up and engaged. Save more complex or difficult problems until later in the session. Be sure to leave time to cover situations that were mentioned by several small groups.

3. Explain the situation: what groups/individuals are involved, what their roles are, what is the physical setting. If the scenario was drawn from the group, ask for the help of a participant who raised the situation to set the scene and players. Explain enough of background to make the situation clear, so roles will not be played solely from stereotypes.

4. Cast roles. Ask for volunteers among participants. If no one comes forward, ask specific people to play roles. If possible, cast people in roles with which they do not identify strongly. Ask roleplayers to take fictitious names, whether they will be used or not.

   "Amy, you are going to play the role of Jack, a peacekeeper. Tom, what name do you want to use for the heckler? OK, Joe it is."

5. Prepare the roleplayers. Allow a few minutes for people to get into their roles and to plan their strategy in the roleplay. Ask people to think about other aspects of the character they are playing (job, family, motivation...) to make the roles realistic. If the role is unfamiliar, the trainer can help. Limit the time for this, however, in order to keep things moving and make sure the roleplay is spontaneous. If the trainer wants to give special or secret instructions to a roleplayer, they can be given at this time:

   (Quietly, to one person): "Malkia, you are supposedly an innocent bystander in this roleplay. However, when Jose starts yelling, I want you to go over and yell back at him and even begin to start a fight."
If groups of people must act together in the roleplay, give them time to develop their approach. In some cases it may be helpful to put one group in a separate room briefly.

6. Prepare the observers. Observation is as important as playing a role. Prepare observers by suggesting specific things they should watch for, such as the effects of different physical actions, words, gestures, tone, etc. Ask them not to say or do anything which might distract the roleplayers. If the roleplay causes emotional reactions in participants, ask them to share their feelings early in the debriefing.

   "For those of you who are observing, pay particular attention to what happens as a result of any physical contact. Are words effective? Which words and how they are said?"

7. Set the scene. You establish the scene, the physical layout and any other relevant details.

   "OK, this is the street running this way. The speaker’s platform is over here. The crowd is on this side. The speaker is already addressing the crowd.”

8. Run the roleplay. Give a clear signal to begin the roleplay once the players are ready. Tell them from the start what signal you will use to stop the roleplay.

9. Cut the roleplay. Stop the roleplay when enough issues have been uncovered, or the action seems to come to an end, or when people want to stop. Keep the learning goals in mind when deciding. Stop the action if someone is about to get hurt, or the roleplay dissolves into laughter. If roleplayers didn’t get "into" their roles, start again. If someone over-identifies with a role (indicated by showing great tension), stop and assist the person to step out of role.

10. Debrief. Debriefing allows people to examine what took place; it is essential for learning. Set a tone of exploration rather than judgment; draw the learnings from the participants rather than provide answers yourself.

   Some trainers divide the evaluation into three sections: a) feelings, reactions, tensions; b) tactics, approaches, motivations/goals; c) general lessons or theoretical connections. We recommend starting by asking the players how they felt in their roles. If practical, give each person a chance to speak.

   "Malkia, how did it feel to be Barbara the heckler? What was going on in Barbara’s mind? . . . Now Jose, how did you feel as Miguel the demonstrator who lost his cool?"

   Emphasize non-judgmental examination of specific actions, not deciding what is the "right way." Always use the names of the characters, not the names of the participants during the debriefing.

   "Let’s look at what happened when Jack grabbed Joe’s arm. What did you notice? How did Joe react?"

   Ask observers for their impressions after the players, then allow open discussion. Discourage negative evaluation of participants which tells them what they "should have done." Frame such suggestions as additional options (which can be used in a re-run of the roleplay, to explore how they might work). Emphasize that "mistakes" provide an excellent source for learning. Compliment people for acting boldly in difficult situations.

   "Jack gave us a wonderful chance to look at the effects of different ways to intervene. How did he try to get Joe under control? "Right, first he took his arm by the elbow. How did Joe react? ... Then what did Jack try? He asked Joe how to get to the train station? What effect did that have? . . . Now let’s think together what we might do in Jack’s position. What are some options?"

   As the discussion continues, draw out the learnings and summarize them. Be as specific as possible about potential alternative actions. Don’t drag out the debriefing, but go on to a new roleplay or re-run the original scenario with different players trying some of the new options generated.