

ROLE PLAYING AS A DIAGNOSTIC PROCEDURE IN THE SELECTION OF LEADERS

PERCIVAL M. SYMONDS

Teachers College, Columbia University

In the assessment program of the Office of Strategic Services a role playing test with the title "Improvisations" was used for diagnostic purposes.¹ This test was derived from Moreno's "Psychodrama"² which, although originally a therapeutic procedure, has more recently been shown to have excellent diagnostic value in sizing up a man's tendencies to take a dominant or subordinate role in a social situation, as well as his tact, resourcefulness, forcefulness, ability to take criticism and other important personal and social characteristics. In taking the test a man was asked to play a role with another man in a dramatic situation, usually involving conflict between the two men. The group was instructed somewhat as follows:

"Everyone at times finds himself in new and unfamiliar situations in which he has to exercise his ingenuity and resourcefulness. This evening we are going to place each of you in problem situations involving another man in order to discover how you can manage yourself. Two of you will be placed together to take these roles and you will be given certain facts. I want you to work out these situations in the most effective way you can. However, we do not want you to 'act' in the ordinary sense of the word, but we want you to be yourself and to behave as you yourself would behave in a similar situation in actual life. Do not act a stereotype. It is not necessary to do something unusual or to find some tricky way out of a situation. Do not invent 'wooden leg excuses' such as replying 'See, I have a wooden leg' to the question 'Why are you not in the Army?' These situations do not necessarily have to have happy endings. You do not need to make them humorous, as there will be plenty of fun incidentally as we

¹A description of the work of the Office of Strategic Services assessment school may be found in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (Anon.) *Fortune* 33:3, pp. 92-95, 217, 218, 220, 223, March 1946.

²J. L. Moreno. *Who Shall Survive? A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations*. Beacon House, New York, 1934.

J. L. Moreno. "Interpersonal Therapy and the Psychopathology of Inter-personal Relations." *Sociometry* 1: 9-26, 1937.

J. L. and F. B. Moreno. "Spontaneity Theory in its Relation to Problems of Interpretation and Measurement." *Sociometry* 7: 339-355, 1944.

go through the evening. We want to find out how you yourself as you are now tend to meet certain situations. You will have about five minutes for one of these situations."

Then the examiner slid into the test itself by addressing himself to the first member of the first team of two: "Sam, you said that after the war you intended to set yourself up in the grocery business. Well, as a matter of fact you are now the owner of a string of groceries located in several adjoining towns." Then a role was assigned to the man whom he was to play opposite, a situation was posed for them, and they were invited to commence the little drama. Occasionally it seemed desirable to send one man from the room in order to convey to the man who remained behind certain information which the first man was not expected to know. This helped to make the problem more realistic. When this information had been given, the man who had been sent out was recalled. In some situations both characters were sent out one at a time. It was customary to place one man in his home or office to receive the second man as his guest. Sometimes a man came in on his own initiative because there was something that he wanted to get from the man that he visited. On other occasions the man who came in had been sent for. In every case each man was given a motive for the meeting, and occasionally the situation was complicated by giving each man several motives. In addition, one man might have been told something derogatory about the other man—his motives or his morals.

In the use of this procedure in O.S.S. a special period was set aside for the preparation of the skits which were "hand-tailored" to fit the individuals who were asked to participate in them. The committee which planned these skits consisted of the persons who interviewed the several candidates in any one group and those who were best acquainted with them through observing them in various situation tests. The role playing episodes were planned in order to test out the reaction of candidates along lines about which the interviewer of a candidate felt some uncertainty. One wanted to know, for instance, how aggressive and objectionable a man might be in some situations, whether he could be forceful and assertive, how well he could take rejection, or how much tact he would show in a difficult social situation. Available during this planning period, which was given the descriptive name "Brainstorm," was a statement of the man's future plans following the war. It was necessary, therefore, to devise a situation that would be appropriate for two men in which both could participate and from which the assessment staff could make judgments concerning the candidates' tendencies to reaction.

An analysis has been made of 111 improvisation situations which were used in O.S.S. This analysis may prove of some help in formulating new roles in other situations. In every case the situations must be worked out afresh for each pair in the light of their background, future aspirations, and the special type of situation in which it is desired to see them act.

ANALYSIS OF IMPROVISATION SITUATIONS

Type A—*Personal Criticism*—one man is criticized for some fault or misdemeanor by the other

Work unsatisfactory—possibility of firing, reducing salary, etc.

Boss criticizes worker

Head of board of education criticizes teacher

Work unsatisfactory—cannot be fired

In these situations the person being criticized may have come in to request a raise in salary, etc.

Poor advice

On sales possibilities

Recommendation of unsuccessful mine

Failure to deliver goods

Failure to send liquor to cocktail party

Errors, slips, negligence

Magazine article full of errors

Yacht capsizes

Mistake in copy for ads on the radio

Messing up drawings for architectural firm

Poor work for fellowship in music

Failure to service radio before election night

Selling same time on radio to two persons

Slowness in turning in reports

Lawyer losing a case

Making poorly protected bank loan

Failure to change wording of contract so that goods fail to meet specifications

Architect late with plans

Nonpayment of bill

Criticism of the activities of another

Business executive criticizes man who runs dine-dance place

Radio broadcasts antilabor propaganda

Permitting bellboys to buy liquor in drugstore after hours
 Movie script writer—rival company ahead with same plot
 Man criticized for criticizing company for which he works
 Business executive criticizes survey of market possibilities on basis of
 independent study

As was stated above, in briefing the men for the skit one or both men might be asked to leave the room. In situations in which one person was open to criticism the person being criticized might be sent out and his critic told the nature of the charges against him and possibly how the interests of the critic were being adversely affected. The critic might be sent out and the person being criticized told of some counter-charge he might make, some request he might make, some explanation for his error or delinquency, or he was told to come in to get a report on the work he had done.

In these situations of personal criticism the first person or the critic was tested for the following points: tact, tolerance, ability to discipline a subordinate, forcefulness, resourcefulness, tendency to be severe, sympathy. The person being criticized was tested for reaction to failure, reaction to attack, resourcefulness, tendency to give excuses, persuasiveness, diplomacy, ability to counter-attack.

Type B—*Interpersonal conflict of aims, goals, ideals*

Partnership dissolution

Insurance claims

Differences in point of view

Loans to factories or schools

For or against reciprocal trade agreement

Merits of Chinese art

Location of hospital

Location of factory—competition between commercialism and idealism

Socialized medicine

Competition

Competition in running dance halls

Building church rapidly with money collected, or waiting until the amount is larger

In briefing men for these situations one or both might be sent out. Each man might be told the point of view and motives which he was to

hold (to retain or break up the partnership) and the reasons for holding it (criticism of the other person, for his own advantage, or disadvantage of the other). For instance, in the partnership situation one man might be told that he wishes to retain the partnership because it is lucrative; the other wishes to dissolve it because he is dissatisfied with the work of his partner, the way he keeps the books, his ineffectiveness in the field, etc. In these situations of conflict both persons were tested for tact, social relations, forcefulness, resourcefulness, integrity, and ability to control the temper.

Type C—*Situations involving moral issues*—the dividing line between these situations and personal criticism is sometimes hard to distinguish

Plagiarism

Special privilege

Using club rooms for private clients

Permitting outsiders to enter factory classes

Discrepancy in accounts

Ration points don't add up

Violation of laws

Violation of pure food and drug laws

Druggist dispensing inferior drugs

Coaching failing students to pass

Selling wrong cattle

Telephone line to bookie joint

In briefing it was customary to send out the man who was at fault and to tell the other man the nature of the fault. In some cases the man who was the critic might be sent out and the person committing the fault might be provided with rationalizations for what he had done.

In these situations involving moral issues, the person making the accusation was tested for his tact, forcefulness, and tendency to be severe. The person against whom the charge was made was tested for his reaction to attack, resourcefulness, tendency to give excuses.

Type D—*Interview*

Prospective employee

Prospective bank manager, business manager, music teacher, etc.

Deciding whether to take a questionable job

With regard to a man's drinking habits

- With regard to the drinking habits of a third person
- To determine how something operates
- How to run a summer camp
- How to run a business
- Factors to be decided in establishing a factory
- Father of girl with suitor

In briefing, the interviewee was always sent out and the interviewer told what he was to find out—that he was to determine the fitness of the prospective employee, or was suspicious concerning his lack of qualifications. Occasionally the interviewer was sent out and the interviewee was told that he wants the job and is to sell himself, or he is to try to decide whether or not he wants it.

In the interview situation the interviewer was tested for resourcefulness in questioning, reporting ability, ability to judge and make a decision. The person being questioned was tested for his social relations, resourcefulness, and ability to sell himself.

Type E—Rejection

- Blackball for club membership
- Position which goes to another man
- Failure to get invitation to party
- Elimination of radio broadcast
- Discontinuance of garage patronage by business man

In briefing, the rejected man was sent out and the other man was told the nature and basis of the rejection.

In rejection situations the person doing the rejecting was tested for his tact, diplomacy, social relations, and forcefulness. The person being rejected was tested for his ability to accept rejection, his persuasive powers, assertiveness, and resourcefulness.

Type F—Intrapersonal conflict and decision

- Conflict of loyalties
 - Whether to give story to writer or be loyal to employer, miners, Army, etc.
 - Whether to refuse free advertising or lose good-will
 - Whether to use some service (such as public opinion analyst) or not

In these situations the man who was not in conflict was sent out and the man with the conflict was kept in and was told the nature of the conflict.

In situations involving a personal conflict and decision the person whose decision it was tested for his resourcefulness, ability to make a decision, and assertiveness. The other person was tested for his persuasiveness and resourcefulness.

Type G—Authority—subordination

Sergeant reporting a bread riot to a major

Sergeant criticising an officer for not sharing food

Motion picture producer securing permission from a consul to show a picture

The man in the authoritarian role was sent out and the man in the subordinate role was told the nature of the situation. Occasionally the man in the subordinate role was sent out and the man in the authoritarian role told about the attitude of the subordinate.

In these authoritarian-subordination situations the person in authority was tested for his resourcefulness, firmness and social relations. The person in the subordinate role was tested for his ability to take orders, to play the subordinate role, and to report.

Five minutes was allowed for each skit. After the skit was over a discussion followed in which those who watched the skit as well as those who participated were urged to describe the behavior of the two participants, and also tell how this behavior was like or differed from the behavior of the two participants as would be expected from their ordinary behavior. A discussion of the moral and practical issues involved was not encouraged.

Summary

This paper reports the use of role playing as a diagnostic procedure in the selection of leaders. Directions for administering the test are given. One hundred eleven actual situations as used in the assessment program of the Office of Strategic Services have been analyzed and classified under the following heads:

Type A—Personal criticism

Type B—Interpersonal conflict of aims, goals, ideals

Type C—Situations involving moral issues

Type D—Interview

Type E—Rejection

Type F—Intrapersonal conflict and decision

Type G—Authority-subordination

Each of these seven types is useful in evaluating certain personality qualities in the participants. A valuable part of the procedure is the discussion which follows a skit in which observers are asked to describe the personalities of those who performed.

It should be possible to combine role playing so that it may serve both diagnostic and therapeutic purposes at the same time.