

Controlled pace negotiation – a powerful, high-reality skills development technique

The intense reality of genuine interaction in a true and difficult context cannot be simulated.

This straightforward, universally flexible tool can go a long way to deconstruct conversations in any context, and provides a tangible means to review and learn from an interaction.

Method

This is a two party activity with any number of parallel paired groups working at the same time.

Each small group will be paired up with another with whom they will work by swapping contributions to a flipcharted 'conversation' – producing a transcript which is the basis for a tangible debrief of learning.

Group membership can vary in number, although it is best to keep this low, to encourage active participation. For example, 40 people could mean 10 groups of 4 in each paired task, and within that group of 4, two sub groups of 2 swapping flip charted contributions to the conversation.

This activity requires time to develop themes and sufficient content to create a meaningful learning debrief.

A clear and specific context is required, and in order to clarify without misinterpretation this should be given as a typed brief to each group. High impact issues can be highlighted for the groups to address, and the conversation can be started at any point in the process – for instance skipping introductory pleasantries to move on to the heart of the learning issues.

The brief issued to each group will clearly and concisely set the scene, and the two roles each sub group will play – for instance, a supervisor and a contractor.

In a large group of up to 40, multiple briefs on different specific issues can be set, providing considerable breadth of issue coverage, and powerful learning outcomes.

A typical set of instructions for the task, accompanied by the brief, specifying context, roles and any other matters to guide the conversation could be:

Your small group will work with your partners to produce a conversation that you make as real as possible. Read the brief you have all been issued, and decide which small group is to take on which of the two roles specified in the brief.

Agree which small group will start the process, keeping your written contributions to the conversation brief to maintain pace, and at all times as real as you can.

Once the first piece of the transcript is written big enough to read clearly, pass the flip chart to your paired group playing the other party, their response is then written under the first comment in a different colour pen, and the conversation gradually unfolds.

Don't rush, and put yourself into the real situation of the person you are 'playing' when writing your responses, and taking the conversation where you think it would go.

When we are done, we will display the sheets, and we can peruse each other's issues raised and discuss learning we can take back to work.

Issues to consider

This activity requires paired small groups to be working out of earshot, yet in close enough proximity to allow swift passage of the flip charts, and maintenance of momentum.

To avoid potential short periods of inactivity whilst waiting for a developing transcript to be brought to a sub group, each paired group could be working on two distinct issues, and in different roles. This doubles the workload, and the learning outcomes.

The activity will generate a lot of tangible outcomes, which can be displayed and perused by the larger group once all have completed their brief. Thus the learning debrief can take one of many forms, and for whatever length of time is felt appropriate.

Much will depend upon the clarity and the relevance of the specific issues focused upon in each of the many briefs. These can be tuned very finely to steer those taking part to engage in high-reality exchanges, with a rare opportunity for reflection and consideration of contribution to a difficult conversation.

This method avoids the natural discomfort many have for conventional 'role play', and experience has shown without doubt that a far greater depth of exploration of real issues is possible in a relatively short period of time.

This activity suits a large group of people, providing a learning-rich experience in a structured, and managed environment with the right balance or pace and generation of practical learning outcomes, and a debrief that need not be so prolonged or repetitive as to lessen the felt value to the individual learner.

This is a creative, flexible activity that has gleaned very powerful learning that is known to have been applied sometimes the day of a return to work.

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