

# ROLE PLAYING

**Time:** Minimum 20 minutes

**Goal or purpose of the exercise:** Role playing is a simulation exercise in which participants take on roles in a given situation as preparation for encountering a similar situation or evaluating a past one. Role playing is used to develop a sense of tactics, individual competence, and group cohesion. The main advantage of role playing over other tools is that by its nature it involves people's emotions as well as their intellects in the experience. Because participants are more deeply engaged in role playing than they are in discussing a situation, they learn more and probably more quickly. Role plays are a versatile tool that can be used for many different purposes, for example: to analyse situations, theories and tactics; to understand people and their roles; to develop insight into the thoughts and feelings of one's 'opponents'; to anticipate new situations; to reveal fears, anxieties, and other feelings people have about an action; to develop individual and group competence and confidence; and to develop group morale.

## **How it's done/facilitator's notes**

Although role plays can be very complicated and involve many participants, they often are designed to look at a limited situation and not an entire action. Consider what the group needs to practise to prepare for an action. (See 'Roles Before, During, and After an Action', p86, to determine roles that may be needed.)

Set the scene, often with a few very simple items to prepare the scene and characterise the roles, so that all participants understand the physical setting in which the role play will take place. Give the participants a description of their role, especially including the motives and interests of the role, rather than a screen play to act out. Give people a few minutes to get into their role, and, if they are in a group, possibly to map out tactics. Be clear when the role play begins and when it ends. Ask role players to start at the given scene and play their role as they see it.

It is best to end the role play as soon as enough important issues are uncovered. It is important for the trainer(s) to act to prevent physical or emotional injury to the participants, possibly by quickly stopping the role play if situations that endanger the participants develop.

After stopping the role play, give the participants a brief pause to lay down their roles. Then begin an evaluation. This is an essential part of the role play exercise. It is often advantageous to begin with allowing the participants to share the emotions that came up during the role play. If not everyone could see the entire role play, it helps to have a very brief overview of the events. Participants can share what they learned during the exercise. Observers can share their views about what happened, what went well, what needs improvement, what precipitated increased or decreased tension, etc.

Set the tone for the evaluation, helping the group members to share their feelings or tensions and what they learned or observed about tactics, strategy, goals, nonviolence theory, and its application. Discourage evaluating how 'well' the participants played a role. There is no one 'right' answer to a given situation so it is important to help the group to express its ideas and alternative solutions for that situation. For a short role play, usually twenty minutes is enough. It is often helpful to start another role play that can allow the group to try alternatives that came up in the evaluation rather than continue the discussion. One way to do this is to repeat the same basic plot with different people in the roles or change the situation by bringing in new roles, such as police or crowd reactions.

An evaluation should only go on as long as new issues are raised and participants are exploring problems and alternatives.