

TEACHING TARGET

ROLE-PLAYING IS AN EXCELLENT WAY FOR TEAM MEMBERS TO PRACTICE COMMUNICATION SKILLS, WITH A NONJUDGMENTAL MANNER AND IN A SAFE ENVIRONMENT.



Role-Playing: Learn Skills by Acting Out

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Role-playing is an irreplaceable method for cultivating skills to tackle tough conversations, explore difficult situations, and rework past experiences that did not go as planned.¹ Role-playing fosters development of communication skills for team member–client interactions, which builds competence and confidence,² the building blocks of professionalism and teamwork.³ The exercise takes place in a low-risk environment,⁴ enabling players to move from feeling awkward toward true authenticity in relating to others, fostering client and professional satisfaction.³

Role-playing is a simulation in which team members act out a scenario¹ and learn how to handle an actual situation when it occurs or learn a better way to manage a previously mishandled situation.⁵ To acquire the necessary communication skills, use a real situation as the backdrop with 1 team member playing the client role (eg, a veterinary nurse plays the role of a client angry with grief after his dog unexpectedly died during a procedure) and another plays him- or herself in his or her practice role (ie, veterinarian, practice manager, veterinary nurse). (See **Implementing Role-Play**.)

Safety First

Experimenting through role-play requires crafting a safe, supportive learning environment. Confidentiality and mutual respect are crucial for team members to assimilate knowledge⁶ as they explore new approaches to previously experienced situations.⁷ Delivering feedback in a constructive, descriptive, and nonjudgmental manner encourages team members to take risks. Emphasize the philosophy *there is no right or wrong* to promote curiosity and ensure alternative techniques are attempted without fear of failure.

Role-Play in Action

Creating a safe, nonjudgmental environment involves several steps.

Relevant role-plays are reenactments of actual conversations and situations.

■ **Opening Act**

Take a few minutes to establish rapport among team members to stimulate spontaneity, involvement, and connection,⁸ and reduce team members' anxiety about acting out in front of others.⁹

■ **Setting the Scene**

Determine the clinical scenario for the role-play and identify each team member's role—coach, veterinary team member, client, or observer. Small groups of 6 or fewer are conducive to productive learning.

■ **Reenacting the Scenario**

Relevant role-plays are reenactments of actual conversations and situations.⁷ The team member who saw the incident may act as the client and play out the interaction seen firsthand. Role reversal permits another team member to step into the client's shoes and experience the communication strategies directly.

■ **Intermission**

Pause during the role-play to allow team members time to reflect on their communication goals, distill what the client said, brainstorm alternative approaches, and develop a plan for the next steps. Invite team members to switch places to broaden their perspective of the situation and open up new ideas.¹⁰

■ **Final Act**

Processing the scenario afterward and highlighting lessons learned are critical steps for a successful role-play.

Conclusion

Role-playing is an invaluable and inexpensive tool for building a team's confidence and honing communication skills. Used in a safe, nonjudgmental environment, role-playing develops professionalism and competence, which translate into effective interactions with clients and teammates. ■

Implementing Role-Play

Role-playing is an opportunity to experiment and practice. It is a dress rehearsal, so we can ready ourselves to serve our clients during challenging conversations.

1. SETTING THE STAGE

- Create a safe environment by implementing the following small-group guidelines:
 - **Allow for different approaches:** There are multiple right ways.
 - **Confidentiality:** What happens here stays here.
 - **Ask vs tell:** Ask questions to generate thoughts.
- Use the following tips to provide constructive feedback:
 - **Offer suggestions vs directives:** *I am wondering if..., He may have responded to..., Perhaps we could try..., or Would it have worked to...?*
 - **Be courageous and give it a try:** Role-play your ideas.
 - **Be specific:** What would you say? Find the words.

2. OPENING ACT

- Establish rapport by asking questions:
 - *What are you most looking forward to on your next day off?*
 - *Think about the upcoming role-play. On a scale of 1–5, how are you feeling going into this exercise?*

3. SETTING THE SCENE

- Determine who will play the client, who will be in the learning seat, and who will coach the role-play. The other team members focus on the learner's objectives, record examples, and provide constructive feedback.
 - **Set clear communication goals:** *What specific communication skills are you working on?*
 - **Ascertain the feedback that would be most helpful to the individual team member:** *What would you like our help with?*
 - **Contract with the learner for breaks:** *We will take a break partway through and you can call a break at any time.*

4. REENACTING THE SCENARIO

- Start by requesting a 1-sentence summary of the case: *Mr. Thompson's dog, Bruno, died unexpectedly during a routine dental procedure, leaving Mr. Thompson angry, grieving, and yelling at anyone who crossed his path.*
- Then, brief the case to prepare for the role-play.
 - **What is your mission?** *To calmly present the bad news of Bruno's death to Mr. Thompson, deescalate the situation, and partner with Mr. Thompson to determine body care options for Bruno and how to proceed.*

- **What obstacles might you face?** *Mr. Thompson may not respond to attempts to calmly discuss Bruno. I might not know how to respond if Mr. Thompson threatens violence or continues yelling and upsetting the other clients and team members in the practice.*
- **If you were in the client's shoes, what would you want in the situation?** *I would want someone to be open and honest about Bruno's death. I would want an apology and answers to my questions. I would want someone to listen and not make excuses. Ask for some example phrases that could be used to attain these goals.*

- **Begin acting out the role-play:** 1 team member plays Mr. Thompson and the learner plays his or her practice role in the scenario.

5. INTERMISSION

- Pause and ask the team how things are going:
 - *What have you discussed, learned, and achieved so far?*
 - *Where would you like to go next with Mr. Thompson?*
 - *How would you like things to end with Mr. Thompson?*
 - *How are you going to get Mr. Thompson on board?*

6. ACT 2

- Switch roles and have a new learner jump into the client's shoes, then ask the following questions:
 - *What new information did you learn from being in Mr. Thompson's shoes?*
 - *How did Mr. Thompson respond to this approach?*
 - *What worked?*

7. FINAL ACT

- Ask the learner to self-reflect:
 - *What was that like for you?*
 - *What did you learn?*
- Ask the other team members for detailed, specific feedback:
 - *What skills did you see?*
 - *What worked well?*
 - *What might you do differently?*
- Invite team members to try out suggestions by rewinding with the client:
 - *Let's replay the opening scene with Mr. Thompson, this time issuing an apology first and then asking him if he would like to sit down.*
- End with the client response:
 - *Would you share your impressions?*
 - *How did it feel to portray Mr. Thompson?*

References

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TEAM TAKEAWAYS:

Veterinarians: Role-playing exercises are an excellent tool for veterinarians to hone skills to handle challenging situations with clients. Practice putting yourself in the clients' shoes to add valuable perspective to your communication.

Management Team: To make certain role-playing is a good learning experience for all team members, provide them with a safe, quiet environment and allow uninterrupted time during their regular hours.

Nursing Team: Reenact a situation in which communication with a client did not go well and ensure a similar situation will be handled well in the future.

Client Care Team: Role-play different ways to address upset clients to learn the best way to calm them and make sure the team can provide their pet the best care.

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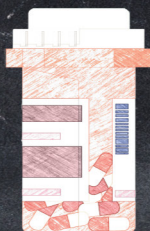
The Smith's dog just ate _____ and she's _____.



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Hyperactive



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Panting



Drooling



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