Using Improvisation to Teach Communication in an Academic Medical Center

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Using improvisation to teach communication in an academic medical center

The need for direct communication

"Direct communication is the moment of mutual perceiving"1

A walk through any medical center will reveal that teamwork and communication are essential not only for health care delivery, but also to avoid, and resolve, employment disputes. This “walk-through” also will reveal a mix of factors that contribute to conflict and disagreement.2 Every medical center is a confluence of diversity, hierarchy, competing groups, and finite resources. Added to the structural limitations of a large health care facility are operational processes that are time-dependent and cost-sensitive. Educational and cultural diversity within the workforce add to the challenges of team-building and skill development.

Communication is imperative for ensuring the safe and effective delivery of patient care. Breakdowns in communication can result in errors in treatment, patient dissatisfaction, and increased costs associated with employee stress and operational inefficiencies. Providing high-tech health care involves a systematic and synergistic exchange of information between individuals in health care provider-patient, coworker, and management-employee relationships.

Direct communication must occur between patients and health care providers, between professional and technical staff, between patient care units and support service, and between administrative staff and clinical staff. Academic medical centers committed to training health care providers have an even greater need for clear and consistent communication to ensure proper supervision of interns, residents and other professionals in the first phases of their professional development. As the second part of this article will explain, improvisational skills are easy to teach and surprisingly effective in facilitating essential communication. If improvisation can improve communication in medical centers, which have uniquely difficult barriers, then improvisation can improve communication anywhere.

By Debra S. Gerardi, RN, MPH, JD. Debra Gerardi is the unit director for the Wilson Pavilion and the Medical Intensive Care Unit at UCLA medical center. She is a registered nurse, a licensed attorney, trained mediator and professional comedian. A national speaker, she has facilitated training in communication and conflict management for the past eight years.
Barriers to direct communication

“Interpretation and assumption keep the player from direct communication”^{3}

Organizational design. Improving communication in a complex health care environment, as in most workplaces, can be daunting. Many medical centers have evolved around the model of specialization leading to isolated and duplicative decision-making and inefficient, bureaucratic lines of communication. Communication between departments may be sporadic and meeting structures are often designed to include only members of a single department or job class rather than functionally designed around the issues that need addressing. Such isolated decision-making leads to inefficiencies in providing patient care and increases the frustration level of staff and managers.

Management and staff often do not have sufficient direct contact. Many managers do not have the same amount of contact with each of the employees they are directly supervising, and process or policy changes often must be presented in multiple formats to ensure that all staff becomes aware of the changes. Consistent and simultaneous communication between managers and staff is difficult because there always must be clinical staff at the bedside. Staff meetings never can include all personnel, so meetings may have to be repeated or minutes posted for staff to review. Additionally, managers may be responsible for supervising over 100 staff members. This large number of subordinates makes it impossible for the manager to meet with each individual to ensure that there is disseminated information is properly understood.

Although e-mail can be great for reaching a large number of people, it does not allow for immediate discussion or clarification of complex issues. Variability in reading comprehension skills due to diversity of educational preparation or language skills can further complicate electronic and written communication efforts. Improper interpretation or false assumptions surrounding information that is passed from co-worker to co-worker can cause misperceptions that lead to variability in practice and deviation from standards of care.

Conflicting work schedules. The prevalence of variable day/night shift assignments and of large numbers of part-time or per diem employees creates an environment where staff does not consistently work together. Relationship building between co-workers or between staff and managers can be lacking, leading to mistaken assumptions, mistrust and increased conflict situations. The frantic pace at which all staff and managers work further contributes to breakdowns in conflict management, as smaller disagreements may not be dealt with promptly, resulting in larger conflicts later on.

Arranging mediated sessions for co-workers can be cumbersome when one employee works the day shift and the other works the night shift. Additionally, breakdowns in communication between hospital employees and physicians can be difficult to address due to the busy work schedules of the physicians and the different reporting structures. Frequently hospital staff feel that they are held accountable when conflicts arise but that physicians are not held equally accountable.

Complaint and grievance processes. Ironically, the grievance processes designed to resolve conflicts in a health care organization may in fact create barriers to communication. Formalized grievance processes vary from organization to organization, often involving a complex integration of personnel policies, union contract pro-
Using improvisation procedures, and governmental regulatory requirements. This complexity contributes to an atmosphere where managers are reluctant to be proactive in the early stages of conflict or employee dissatisfaction. Fear of either litigation or formal union grievances can further paralyze managers, preventing them from intervening when communication breaks down.

Frequently, employees bring "harassment" or "discrimination" charges to their manager when there is no factual basis for the charge. An employee's generic use of these terms can cause managers unfamiliar with the legal definitions to feel inadequately prepared to address the conflict. Avoidance by the manager then can result in situations where communication between the employees either ceases or becomes volatile and involves other staff. Both situations can create a dangerous environment where a communication breakdown between team members can harm the patient. Additionally, escalating conflicts can lead to threats of harm, further damaging relationships and creating tension for other staff members.

Benefits of improving direct communication

"HOW a problem is solved must grow out of the stage relationship. It must happen at the actual moment of stage life—right now, and not through pre-planning. HOW kills spontaneity. Direct communication prevents HOW."*

Proactive conflict management in human service organizations results in decreased personnel costs, improved productivity, decreased litigation costs, enhanced collaboration, enhanced personal growth and leadership development, and timesaving for both managers and employees. The ability to communicate effectively is the first skill necessary for conflict management. Improving employees' ability to communicate directly with each other is a prerequisite for all other training in teamwork, trust, and conflict management.

Additionally, direct communication stimulates creative expression and problem solving, which effectively improve outcomes within any organization. Direct communication allows everyone to contribute ideas and discuss options. Pre-planning
often can lead to inflexibility and can be based on false assumptions due to a lack of information regarding the substance or politics of the problem. Working together allows the group to collaboratively develop workable solutions and develop better relationships in the process.

Improved communication within a health care organization can directly affect the quality of patient care. In many instances, timely diagnosis and treatment will make a difference in clinical outcomes. Less dramatic, but equally important, are the benefits of skilled communication for routine patient care. Clear communication between members of the multi-disciplinary team for coordination of discharge planning, for example, can mean the difference between a patient who is able to successfully continue recovery at home and the patient who requires readmission due to complications.

The amount of information provided to patients clearly affects their satisfaction level. Patients and families rely upon updates from the health care providers to alleviate their stress and add an element of control to an uncontrolled situation. Additionally, patients depend upon the nursing staff to teach them about medications and techniques so that the patients can take care of themselves once they are discharged. Direct communication between the providers and the patient provides the basis for a trusting relationship.

Miscommunication between team members leads to inconsistent information for patients and their families and can result in a mistrust of the health care team and the medical center. Incongruent plans of care can cause the patient to wonder which plan is correct and who is in charge. A lack of regular direct communication with the doctor or the nurse can cause conflict if the patient or family feels neglected. In more contentious situations, the patient's dissatisfaction can lead to anger manifested in threats to sue the organization or the provider.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of good communication is that it promotes collaborative practice and improves morale. Belonging to a team noted for its excellence generates satisfaction, pride, collegiality, and a contagious spirit of fun. The essence of a great team is its ability to work together and overcome differences of opinion or barriers to success. The ability to confront each other regarding decisions or actions is essential for collaborative processes to be effective. To give honest feedback without offending the other person, or destroying the relationship, is an art. Although it takes practice, it can be learned through role-playing and observation of scenarios.

If team members are going to act creatively and take risks, they must be able to communicate and trust each other. When teams trust one another and communicate directly, the result is almost magical. And it is that dynamic sense of magic that encourages employees to remain in their job, to respond better to stress, and to be more productive. That feeling of magic helps individuals develop to their fullest potential, rewards them with strong relationships, and makes them proud of their achievements.

Methods for improving communication

"The lecture will never accomplish what experience will."55

Individual employee skill development and strategic operational design are both necessary for effective communication. Commitment by the entire organization to improve in both areas must be present and cannot merely be part of the mission statement or a paragraph in the employee hand-
Using improvisation

book. There must be a plan that assesses employee and customer needs and strategically reorganizes operational structures.

To be effective, the highest level administrators must make a commitment which then must be filtered through all those affiliated with the organization. Staff development should be progressive and should not be presented as a one-time, “flavor-of-the-month” training session. Individual development methods and techniques should be designed so that they incorporate daily work duties and responsibilities. Staff should be encouraged to copy effective communication techniques and then rewarded by managers. Systems should be analyzed to determine the appropriateness of meeting structures, organizational reporting structures and information technology.

Benefits of enhancing direct communication

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits of enhancing direct communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotes creativity and problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreases conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improves morale and team spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improves trust among co-workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve quality of patient care</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase patient satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevent treatment errors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improve response time in emergency situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotes collaborative practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreases stress and employee turnover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generates pride and a spirit of fun</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Performing a needs assessment

The first step for enhancing communications is to perform a needs assessment involving all staff. Assess the perceptions of employees regarding the following:

- adequacy of information flow,
- frequency and accuracy of information,
- access to information systems,
- trust within work-groups and the organization as a whole,
- conflict management, follow-up on reports of performance problems,
- manager accessibility and responsiveness,
- quality of feedback and coaching from managers, and
- operational effectiveness.

This assessment will provide a baseline for strategic development of training programs and structural reorganization.

The needs assessment can be in the form of an organization-wide employee opinion survey, a staff survey of managerial effectiveness, or an issue-based survey specific to a particular operation. The assessment should look at both perceptions by the employees and their readiness to progress or change. Surveys should be repeated to monitor improvements and evaluate changes following training programs or restructuring of processes.

Employee survey. Over the past two years, UCLA medical center has made a commitment to enhancing communication across the organization. In 1997, hospital administrators commissioned an outside organization to perform a comprehensive employee opinion survey. 

Results (representing 51 percent of hospital staff and management) indicated that hospital employees wanted enhanced communication between administration and
staff, an increased level of trust throughout the organization, and improved managerial follow-up with poor performers. The medical center scored high in employee perceptions of clinical excellence, commitment to the patients, and job satisfaction.

To assess specific operational issues, UCLA has adopted a method for collecting staff feedback and collaboratively developing administrative recommendation reports. A functional team involving managers and staff from both departments was created to evaluate the recommendations.

**Implementation.** Once assessments are completed, recommendations must be implemented and a follow-up evaluation must be performed. The allocation of resources between operational improvements and staff training depends upon the expressed needs of the staff. Neither area should be neglected to ensure successful outcomes. Resources for staff training should be varied, incorporating as many methods as possible. The training should be applicable to day-to-day interactions and should be creative and fun to encourage optimal interaction and participation.

As a result of the various needs assessments conducted at UCLA, administrators have made it a top priority to address communication and trust across the organization. Action plans were developed by every department and submitted to the CEO. Each plan addresses how trust and communication will be improved within the department. Staff assisted with the creation of the action plans for their unit. Throughout the past year and a half, several skill development programs have been implemented to enhance communication skills and discuss issues of trust and team building.

One of the methods used throughout the medical center has been the incorporation of improvisation training. Techniques used to train comedians and actors have been integrated into the educational programming of nurses, social workers, nursing assistants, managers, housekeepers, medical students, and chaplains. Skills have been taught to over 600 staff and managers and have provided a means for teaching listening, agreement, conflict management and trust. Professional improvisational comedians were hired to facilitate the training during staff retreats and professional development workshops. During several of the retreats, the comedians provided a group performance to demonstrate the effectiveness of the skills they were teaching. A brief description of the training sessions is provided below.

### Teaching direct communication through improvisation

"Improvisation is setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it. It permits everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem."[6]

The techniques for improvisation were developed during the 1930's by sociologist Neva L. Boyd, founder of the Recreational Training School at Chicago's Hull House. Her work in the area of creative group play incorporated story telling, folk dance and dramatics to stimulate creativity in children. Her techniques were studied and adapted by drama instructor Viola Spolin.

Spolin held the belief that if the environment permits, everyone has the capacity for acting and improvisation. She worked from the assumption that everyone can learn if they just permit themselves to experience their environment. By increasing an individual’s involvement intellectually, physically and intuitively, the capacity for experiencing can be developed. Her use of games to teach actors to experience their environment through listening and physicalization were later turned into a
Using improvisation

performance structure used to make theater accessible to all socioeconomic classes. The games provide skill development and allow the players to interact spontaneously to solve problems as a group.

The games focus on the essential elements of communication. Listening, agreement, nonverbal expression, and give and take are developed through simple games designed to allow players to interact spontaneously without scripts or defined roles. To foster spontaneity, scenes and stories are created based on suggestions by the observers. The atmosphere is supportive and encouraging and there are never any wrong answers during play. The games can be played by all individuals and do not require any special skills or wit. The humor comes from the natural and recognizable responses of all humans to unpredictable situations.

Players are taught to make the other person look good by agreeing with their choices and supporting them with additional information. Beginning players often find they have difficulty listening with both their ears and their eyes and frequently are compelled to argue or create conflict. These situations provide the perfect opportunity for teaching conflict management and enhanced listening.

The most beneficial component of the games is that they allow for a natural blending of all cultures, ages, and education levels. Everyone has an equal opportunity for expression and, through participation in the games, individuals feel the freedom of returning to that childhood state of pure imagination. Facilitation of the games can be done by anyone trained to play them. The key to facilitation is fostering a supportive environment where participation is voluntary and inclusive. Players find themselves laughing at “characters” rather than each other and the light-hearted environment allows for learning to occur naturally.

Games used for listening and agreement

“Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves.”

Improvisation training begins with warm-up exercises designed to make the players more aware of their environment. Physicalization, guided imagery, and focus exercises invite the players to get “out of their head” and be present in the moment. Improvisation is based on spontaneity. Planning ahead or worrying about saying the right thing destroy spontaneity. Helping the players to let go of control and be open to what is happening around them allows them to utilize their senses and intuition when interacting with other players. Connecting with the “here and now” allows the players to communicate completely and respond naturally.

Reaching agreement: “show, don’t tell.”

Initially players are nervous and may be reticent to use their imagination. Simple two-person games can help focus the group and provide visual examples from which to teach. Observing other players allows the facilitator to teach the principle of “show, don’t tell.” The game “Yes, and...” is a perfect method for showing how difficult it is to reach agreement and how revealing non-verbal communication can be.

Two volunteers are invited to play. They are instructed to agree with whatever the other player says and add information. To foster spontaneity during their play, the observers are asked to suggest a fictional relationship for the two players. Examples include husband and wife, sisters, attorney and client and so on. The facilitator should avoid any real relationship such as co-workers or manager-staff person. Next the group is asked for a location where the two people may be having a conversation. Once they have been given the relationship and the location, the two players converse. The
conversation is allowed to continue without interruption to its natural conclusion.

There is frequently much laughter as the group watches the two "characters" struggle with agreement. Quite naturally, most players will begin to play "Yes, but..." which leads to conflict as they attempt to verbalize agreement without actually agreeing. Alternatively, many times a player will continuously question the other player, thus putting the second player on the spot and forwarding the first player's own agenda. Again, it is a means for avoiding agreement.

At the end of the scene, the facilitator leads a discussion with the group regarding their observations. The discussion includes the level of agreement, the power structure of the characters' relationship, the underlying story behind the conversation, and the barriers to the characters' ability to agree. At certain points, the facilitator may "freeze" the players to discuss body language and the effects of non-verbal cues on the conversation. Such discussion enables the group to identify physical communication cues that they instinctually recognize.

The game is repeated with several different pairings to demonstrate variations in communication style and to point out how difficult it can be to reach agreement. Despite the lack of real life consequences, players will continue to hold on to their character's agenda. Once the game is played correctly, the group becomes aware of the progressive flow of dialogue that becomes possible when the characters agree. The players who agree are perceived by the group to be compatible, trusting, friendly, relaxed and more fun to watch. Participants experience a transformation that carries them from their initial idea to a spontaneously crafted location developed purely through collaboration. At the end of each game, the audience rewards the players with rounds of applause.

"A close working group in improvisational theater often communicates on a non-verbal level with uncanny skill and swiftness."

**Reaching agreement: Listening.** Active listening is the key to communication. Facilitating listening games enables the players to observe the consequences of not listening. The player's natural tendency to craft a response before hearing an initiation leads to a disjointed flow of dialogue. Additionally, listening games teach the peril of making assumptions.

Jumping to conclusions or assuming the intent of another player's actions or words leads to conflict. This is a daily occurrence in most work settings. As any mediator can tell you, many conflicts are resolved once both parties listen to what was meant rather than what each party said.

"Follow the follower." The principle of follow-the-follower is used to teach listening and focus. The principle implies that at all times each player is following the other. Focus is seamlessly transferred from one player to another. The give and take of focus requires the players to watch each other and to listen for clues to the next action. The facilitator assists by pointing out when a player is dominating focus by leading rather than following.

A simple game used to teach the follow-the-follower principle is *Siamese Talk Show.*
Using improvisation

Two volunteers are selected to be "experts" on a talk show. The group gives the players a topic of expertise, the more obscure the better, such as cooking with nuclear power or how to carve a wooden Indian. Acting as a talk show host, the facilitator solicits questions from the "studio audience." The rules for the players are simple—they are Siamese twins who must speak simultaneously when giving answers to all questions. The players receive questions one at a time from the group and then are given an opportunity to answer. Generally, answers are only one or two sentences. The challenge is to determine what each player will say, and then to say it at the same time. The group is able to watch for the transfer of focus, for agreement, and for leading by a dominant player. The content of the answers is not important to the game but yields howls of laughter as the two players attempt to speak simultaneously without a scripted response. Other games such as Hitchhiker and Mirrors allow players to practice follow-the-follower through physical movements rather than verbal responses.

"When response to experience takes place at an intuitive level, when a person functions beyond a constricted intellectual plane, his intelligence is freed."

Reaching agreement: Listening as a team. Listening as a team is a more challenging skill. This ability can be developed through the game Story-Story. Five or six volunteers are invited to come up with a story that has never been told. The audience is asked for a title to the story and the name of one character. The players line up and begin to tell the story one word at a time. By pointing randomly to the players, the facilitator conducts the story, requiring each player to watch the facilitator and listen to what was said before his or her turn.

Once players have mastered speaking one word at a time, the game progresses to one sentence per player. The facilitator continues to randomly select players to prevent them from mentally "writing" the story in advance and to ensure that they listen to all of the team members rather than just the player next to them. Once players master speaking one sentence at a time, the game progresses again. Players now must continue to tell the story for as long as the facilitator is pointing at them. The facilitator will cut them off mid-sentence and rapidly point to the next player requiring that player to finish the previous player's thought or word. If a player was not listening, the disruptive effect on the story line is discernable to the audience. Players are instructed to accommodate any errors made due to lack of listening by justifying, in other words, incorporating as seamlessly as possible, the other player's choices.

This principle of justification creates teamwork and forces players to complete the task and tell the story despite any barriers to progress. Several groups should be selected so that everyone gets an opportunity to both participate and observe. Generally, the audience finds the stories to be hysterically funny and seeing their peers in a different mode enlightens them. Relationships between co-workers are developed and they become very supportive of each other's attempts to improvise.

"Improvise, don't ad lib. Ad-libbing constitutes withdrawal from the problem, the environment and each other."

Reaching agreement: Mutual perceiving. As defined by Spolin, direct communication is the moment of mutual perceiving. Perceptions are formed 10 percent by what is said and 90 percent by what is not said. In order for individuals to similarly perceive a situation, they must use everything in their environment to develop context. This utilization of the environment is improvisation..
On occasion, players will ad-lib rather than improvise. Ad-libbing, or inventing, is a sign that the person is withdrawing from the environment and from the other players. This is common in real-life conflict situations where one party will avoid an uncomfortable moment by reciting policies or consequences that are not relevant to the issue at hand. A good mediator can redirect the parties back to what is happening between them rather than issues outside of their relationship. Ad-libbing also destroys spontaneity. It indicates the player's attempt to invent or plan rather than to work with the other player to solve the problem.

"No one knows the outcome of a game until he plays it. Without the other player there is no game."

Discouraging invention does not mean, however, that the players can not create the tools necessary to further progress their play. Improvisation uses pantomime rather than props, which allows the players to have anything at their disposal at any given time during the game. They can imagine time machines, cars, televisions and any other device that serves their purpose. Experiencing the joy of having the complete freedom to create and to imagine is one of the greatest gifts of improvisation. Employees who are given the chance to interact without the constraints of finite resources, policies and procedures, deadlines and organizational hierarchy are freed to be their true selves and to play! They learn to trust their instincts and each other. They experience what it is like to explore and what is possible, rather than the burden of what is not possible. Not knowing the outcome until the game is played provides the opportunity for discovery and surprise.

Improvisation workshops at UCLA have been hugely successful. Managers who were doubtful that their staff would “play” were surprised to see the level of participation and commitment demonstrated by even the shyest individuals. Typically the quietest people are often the best improv players, as they have developed the ability to listen and observe. The games allow employees who may be overlooked in the workplace to shine on stage. The groups often get loud as they cheer on their co-workers and laugh at their antics.

Improv training can be taken to any location where there is a space to move around and a few chairs. No props, audio-visual equipment, handouts or special lighting are required. The UCLA workshops have been taught at conference centers, classrooms, apartment clubhouses, retreat houses, beachfront homes and local com-

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fundamentals of improvisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>■ Be real</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Listen and react</td>
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<td>■ Commit and take risks</td>
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<td>■ Know your relationship to the other person</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Communicate physically, verbally and emotionally</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Be present in the moment</td>
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<td>■ Heighten and explore</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Show, don’t tell</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Agree and support</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Follow the follower</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Improvise, don’t ad-lib</td>
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<td>■ Have fun!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Using improvisation

Comedy clubs. The only real requirement is that the location be acoustically appropriate so that the players can hear each other. UCLA medical center has incorporated the games into orientation programs, preceptor and charge nurse training programs, annual staff retreats and conflict management seminars. A hospital-wide follow-up survey is planned for Spring of 1999 to evaluate the effectiveness of training programs and changes in communications structures on employee perceptions.

Conclusion

Direct communication skills must be cultivated and developed in every workplace, and especially in the health care setting. Improvisation, which provides employees with the opportunity to practice their skills and observe others, can make the training non-threatening and fun. The games are easy to play and provide a means for understanding human nature while developing listening, agreement and trust.