

CHALLENGE ARENA VS. PRACTICE FIELD

THOUGHTS FOR A DIALOGUE

INTEREL, INC.

BY

TIM RUMSEY AND BOYD WATKINS

AN INTRODUCTORY EXAMPLE

As an introduction to our dialogue concerning the merits of Challenge Arenas vs. Practice Fields, consider the following somewhat amplified situation:

Carolyn is an internal consultant for an internationally known entertainment/theme park company. She has been called in to work with a team of nine Guest Service Representatives whose team leader has characterized them as "dysfunctional" and given a few concrete indicators:

- They don't listen to each other
- They get defensive when one member attempts to give another any kind of feedback
- They rush into action without planning or conferring with each other
- They fail to provide support to other team members

Carolyn begins the consultation with an experiential activity called "The River To Success". To "win" at this activity, people must:

- plan collaboratively
- communicate clearly
- support each other at critical times
- work cooperatively

The team has 30 minutes to achieve the desired outcome of the activity, moving all nine members from one "river bank" to the "far bank".

Carolyn's particular group goes to work on "The River To Success" and the results are somewhat predictable:

- They don't plan
- They don't listen to each other
- They rush into action without conferring with others
- They don't support each other at critical times

In short, they behave just as they do in real world situations.

At the end of 30 minutes, the team has clearly not achieved the desired outcome and has managed to create an unpleasant, uncomfortable, and inefficient dynamic. This dynamic is comparable to the one they create on the job.

Carolyn pulls the team together for a debrief and essentially asks them, "What happened?"

The response is, "We acted just like we do every day, and we failed."

Carolyn is a skilled facilitator, and manages to extract some critical information by posing the following questions to the team:

- What behaviors did you exhibit here that caused problems?
- How are those behaviors like the behaviors that cause you problems every day?
- How can you go about changing these behaviors so that you can make your work more positive and successful and move more efficiently across "The River To Success"?

What bothers Carolyn, though, as the team leaves the training site, is that despite coming to a cognitive and verbal recognition of what went wrong and what needs to change in the future, the team "practiced wrong". Though they solved the metaphorical problem, they did not "practice" useful planning, communication, and problem solving procedures.

This situation might be compared to a basketball player practicing foul shots using a "dysfunctional" method, evidenced by consistent misses, for 30 minutes. At the end of that time, he and his coach sit down and talk about what he'd done, agreed it was not useful, and talked about what he should have done. The player then goes home vowing to "do it right" in the future. Instinctively we know that what the basketball player really needed to do was to go back to the foul line and "practice right".

The essential premise of these situations and this dialogue, therefore, is: What gets practiced is what gets learned.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

With that premise in mind, imagine what might have happened had Carolyn:

- Stopped the action as she observed "dysfunctional behaviors" occurring
- Called the team to a huddle and either asked, "What seems to be causing problems here?" or given direct feedback such as, "Laurie, you cut Courtney off as she started to speak," or "Nikos, I noticed that you started laying out boards without telling anyone what you were doing or why."
- Written comments from team members about their perceived causes for the problem behaviors and their suggestions for possible, functional alternatives on a flip chart.
- Sent participants back to the activity, encouraging them to use the information and behaviors they had just discussed in the debrief.

What differentiates this sort of facilitator intervention from Carolyn's initial approach is:

- The debriefing and feedback are immediate. There is no lag time between dysfunctional patterns and reflection on those patterns.
- Participants get a chance to practice what they've learned and immediately attempt to integrate more desirable behavior patterns.

Any time learners observe, understand and practice desired behaviors, their chances of internalizing and incorporating those behaviors into future thinking and acting are greatly increased.

A consultant, like a basketball coach intent on ensuring that her team acquires proficiency in foul shooting (or some other area), can turn her program into what we will call a "Practice Field" —a place where she and learners can stop in the midst of action, focus on either positive or negative behavior patterns, then have the learners return to the activity and practice what they've learned to see if the information has been incorporated. She might, in fact, freeze the action a number of times, debriefing then moving back to practice until the participants demonstrate that they have "gotten it".

Although the "Practice Field" approach is not unusual in sports, the performing arts, technical skills training etc., it is rarely used in the field of Experiential Education or Action Learning. In these situations it is more typical that facilitators use what we'll call "Challenge Arenas", wherein they gather a team in front of a set of props/resources and give them a challenge to solve. (Challenge being defined as a difference between a present state – where they are now – and a desired state where they want or need to be.) While both these methods are effective, it is important to understand their differences.

CHALLENGE ARENAS

In a Challenge Arena, the primary goal is the achievement of the physical outcome. In this arena, much like in business when a manager declares that "it is only the results that count", the process of observation is unconsciously devalued and "winning" and "losing" acquire a narrow (albeit clear) meaning.

The facilitator in a Challenge Arena might:

- Specify the resources the team can use to move from Present State to Desired State (to achieve the result)
- Clarify the constraints (obstacles) that must be managed along the way
- Specify a time frame in which participants must think, plan, decide, and succeed (or not)

This format does tend to galvanize people in that two key components for pulling people together quickly and powerfully are present: a clearly defined goal and a clearly defined time constraint.

The typical outcome of the Challenge Arena format goes something like this:

- Learners take action to achieve their goal, generally using the same processes for thinking, planning, deciding etc. that they use on the job
- After the activity is "completed" the facilitator and learners debrief what happened, and generally agree that:
 - * what happened was typical of their usual workplace behavior
 - * they should have done things differently
 - * they vow to do better in the future

Though the Challenge Arena model is clearly an effective assessment format that seems to be predictably successful in eliciting characteristic patterns and processes, it is less clear that it leads to changing dysfunctional behaviors or acquiring more functional behaviors for the future. In fact, an argument could be made that the Challenge Arena model actually reinforces existing patterns of behavior if you are literal to the premise that "what gets practiced is what gets learned".

The Challenge Arena model also creates several problems for facilitators and participants:

- If a team "loses" they are naturally disappointed, sometimes deeply discouraged. What then happens is that participants associate these feelings of disappointment with each other and the facilitator. Team cohesion then begins to break down, and the facilitator becomes the source of bad feelings and problems. Many facilitators sense this intuitively, even if they don't state so explicitly.
- If the team "wins", there is a tendency to downplay two important issues:
 - (1) How they won and the specific thinking and behavior patterns they used to produce a successful result. There is a tendency to think that when you achieve the desired

result you are "finished" and that stopping to look at the structure of the "win" is irrelevant.

(2) Examining what didn't work. Participants are typically even more resistant to this, the psychological rationale being, "Why dwell on such negative things – we won!" If a facilitator knows that some real learning is imbedded in examining what didn't work and pushes people to talk about the problems he becomes a source of irritation. Many facilitators sense this intuitively and simply join with the group in celebrating their "win".

- Because the emphasis is on the physical completion (or not) of the activity , a subtle devaluation of the facilitator's usefulness occurs. The facilitator is seen as the person who establishes and explains the parameters of the task, but the success of a group does not appear to depend on his participation. The role of the facilitator as a person invaluable in examining process behaviors and learning for future reference is therefore downplayed.
- The Challenge Arena puts an unreasonable responsibility on facilitators to know beforehand how "easy" or "hard" the activity should be for a given group. Facilitators are pressed to present an activity that is neither "too easy" nor "too hard". If it is "too easy", the group finishes in a short period of time and may feel bored or insulted. If it is "too hard", they "lose" and associate bad feelings with each other and the facilitator. This can be a constant source of tension for facilitators. For inexperienced facilitators this is especially problematic in that activities that are "too easy" or "too hard" leave them with tough debriefing challenges. Either way, groups may lose energy for experiential learning and / or respect for the facilitator.

PRACTICE FIELDS

A Practice Field does not exclude all the characteristics of a Challenge Arena. Some common characteristics are:

- It provides learners with a Present State/Desired State gap, thus preserving the excitement of competitive challenge.
- It provides learners with resources to utilize and constraints to manage along the way.
- It elicits the phenomena of participants exhibiting and noting characteristic behavior patterns .

Action Learning facilitators using the Challenge Arena model typically operate within a paradigm (unconsciously held) that says:

- Learning occurs after the action exercise, and
 - Post-action reflection and development of insight will create change
- The Practice Field model challenges both these premises.

What differentiates a Practice Field from a Challenge Arena is that the consultant is not constrained to wait until the action is over to stop an activity, debrief for learning, then resume the activity. The consultant is, in fact, more directive and prescriptive. After debriefing and developing alternative or more successful strategies, he requests that learners re-enter the Action phase and "practice right" using the newly suggested behaviors. This allows participants to develop awareness of current behavior patterns and to practice new choices based on that awareness. Whereas the Challenge Arena model simply has people talk about new behavior possibilities, Practice Fields have them practice those new possibilities.

Several important things can happen within the Practice Field paradigm, where facilitators are free to freeze and unfreeze action as often as they want:

- Since the primary goal is making process observations and learning, participants are not trapped in the narrowness of the "results only" mind set. Recognizing patterns of behavior, looking for causes for certain actions, paying attention to the quality of dialogue etc. are valued in these settings, and "winning" is no longer confined to simply achieving a physical result.
- Whether the goal is achieved is not the important issue. People are, instead, focused on how the result was achieved or missed. Participants can gain as much or more from a so-called "loss".
- Participants can be asked to examine the thinking or "mental models" that underlie the exhibited behaviors.
- Participants can be confronted with disparities between "espoused values" and "values in use" .
- Participants can be asked to reflect on the structure of their success.
- The facilitator can "teach" a concept, principle or skill, then have people practice incorporating it immediately.

The Practice Field also opens things up for facilitators in a number of interesting ways:

- The facilitator can propose something brand new for participants to try, then have them try it. In the Challenge Arena model there may be discussion of behaviors that might have worked, but rarely an opportunity to prove or disprove a theory
- Facilitators may change complexity levels and rules at any time, and can adjust the complexity of activities to maximize learning. Facilitators don't have to worry about choosing activities below or above the abilities of a particular group. In fact, they can purposely set up activities more challenging than the average group can handle. Since the point is to notice how a team reacts to the present environment, learners' reactions to a high level challenge are simply something to learn from.

- The only "failure" in a Practice Field is an unwillingness to explore and learn, so the facilitator doesn't run the risk of becoming an "anchor" for feelings of disappointment or failure.
- The facilitator's skills at asking questions and focusing learner perceptions are now not only acceptable but an integral part of the practice field experience. Surely this is what proponents of "learning communities" or "learning organizations" are promoting.

Moving to a Practice Field paradigm, therefore, dramatically reduces unnecessary pressure on both the facilitator and the team and dramatically increases the range of options for learning and changing behaviors.

In assessing these two models, the conclusion we reach is not that Practice Fields should replace Challenge Arenas. Rather, we suggest that Practice Fields are an additional resource that can expand the creativity and behavioral options of consultants, facilitators and trainers who use action learning devices and increase the likelihood of achieving the goals of action based learning programs.