



Role Playing

How it should be administered in sales training

by: Troy Harrison, Troy Harrison & Associates

I have a confession to make. I enjoy role playing in sales training meetings. I know, I know — that puts me in a very small minority. Most salespeople would rather have a root canal than participate in role-playing exercises. And honestly? I do not blame them.

Here is the thing most sales managers miss: Salespeople do not hate role playing because it does not work. They hate it because managers typically do it incorrectly. When I bring up role playing in a training session, I can practically see the energy drain from the room. Top performers suddenly become reluctant participants, dreading what feels like an artificial performance in front of their peers.

But role playing, when done correctly, is one of the most powerful tools in your training arsenal. When done incorrectly it can be absolutely devastating — not just to performance, but to relationships and careers.

Let me tell you about someone I used to know. She was a national training manager for a company I worked for years ago and she had a particular approach to role playing that I will never forget. This woman took genuine pleasure in making role plays as tough as she possibly could, regardless of how well the participant executed the lessons she had just taught. If he (or she) nailed the technique perfectly, she would still find ways to grind him down. She seemed to enjoy watching people squirm, stumble and, ultimately, fail in front of their colleagues.

I watched her reduce seasoned sales professionals to nervous wrecks. People who could handle the toughest customers with ease would move to the back of the room when she announced role-playing time. She would keep pushing and pushing until even the most confident salesperson looked incompetent. And she would do it with a smile, as if the public humiliation was just part of the learning process. She was making the role play about her, not about learning.

Here is the thing about role playing that this training manager never understood: It is an intensely personal experience. When you force someone to perform in front of his peers and then systematically tear him apart, you are not just critiquing his sales technique, you are attacking his professional competence, confidence and, ultimately, sense of self-worth. People do not just walk away thinking, “Well, that was tough but educational.” They walk away thinking, “I was just humiliated in front of my colleagues.”

The story does not end there. A few years later, this training manager was reassigned to a different position within the



company — one where she needed the cooperation and support of the very people she used to grind into dust during those role-playing sessions. And guess what happened? They chose not to help her. In fact, some of them even went out of their way to make her job more difficult. She eventually failed in that role and left the company.

You see, this was not just about professional differences. She had made people look bad enough in front of their peers that they severely disliked her. A few even hated her. That is the power of poorly executed role playing — it does not just fail as a training tool, but actively damages relationships and creates lasting resentment.

Think of role playing as resistance training for your sales team members. You know how a baseball player in the on-deck circle swings a bat with a weighted donut on it? When he steps up to the plate and removes that weight, the bat feels as light as a toothpick. That is exactly what effective role playing should do — make the real sales call feel easier because your people have practiced under more challenging conditions.

The key insight is this: Role playing is inherently more difficult than actual customer interactions. In real sales calls, your salespeople are confident, comfortable and building genuine rapport. During role plays, they are performing in front of colleagues, dealing with contrived scenarios and too often facing unnecessarily brutal feedback. The last thing they need is a manager who makes it even more difficult than it needs to be.

So how do we fix this? There are three fundamental principles that will transform role playing from a dreaded interruption into something your team values.

(1) Set the stage properly. Before diving into any scenario, I always tell my team that perfection is not the objective. This is a safe space for learning and reinforcing important techniques. When salespeople know they will not be judged harshly for missteps, they engage authentically and absorb lessons more effectively. It is a simple concept, but most managers skip this step entirely. They jump straight into the exercise without establishing psychological safety.

(2) Keep it focused. Here is where a lot of managers go wrong — they try to role play entire sales calls. Do not do that. Instead, isolate specific components. Maybe it is two strategic questions, a brief product demonstration or a particular objection-handling technique. This targeted approach allows for deeper practice and clearer feedback without overwhelming participants or eating up your entire meeting. It also reduces the opportunities for public failure.

(3) Run the role play correctly when you are playing the “customer.” This is critical. As the sales manager, your job is not to be the toughest prospect your salespeople will ever encounter. My philosophy is simple: Make it easy for them to succeed when they are executing the technique correctly. Only become a challenging customer when they veer off course — and even then, stop quickly before you grind them into powder.

When salespeople nail the technique, reward them with a cooperative “customer” response. When they struggle, provide

Remember, the person participating in your role play is not just learning a sales technique — he is exposing himself to potential embarrassment in front of his peers.

just enough resistance to highlight the learning opportunity, then course-correct before frustration sets in. The goal is to build confidence and competence, not break spirits or demonstrate your own superiority.

Remember, the person participating in your role play is not just learning a sales technique — he is exposing himself to potential embarrassment in front of his peers. That takes courage. Respect that courage. Honor it. Use it to build him up, not tear him down.

Master these three elements and you will see your team members’ attitudes toward role playing completely transform. Instead of groaning when you announce practice time, they will start seeing it as valuable preparation that makes their real sales calls feel effortless. More importantly, they will see you as someone who invests in their success rather than someone who enjoys their failure. That is when role play becomes what it was always meant to be: a competitive advantage disguised as training, not a weapon disguised as development. ■

Troy Harrison is the author of “Sell Like You Mean It” and “The Pocket Sales Manager.”

He helps companies navigate the elements of sales on their journeys to success.

To schedule a free 45-minute Sales Strategy Review, call (913) 645-3603 or email troy@troyharrison.com.

Visit www.troyharrison.com.

