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Interactive Theater, an Engaging Knowledge Management Tool for IFC Training!

When seeking to engage a community and disseminate critical knowledge and skills, experience points to one of the most innovative, engaging, and effective learning tools available. Interactive Theater has been successfully applied to raise awareness, challenge attitudes, and influence behaviors around a wide variety of issues in diverse settings. Examples include public health and conflict resolution issues in international communities, faculty development issues on university campuses, social justice issues in colleges and high schools, and physician-patient communication in hospitals and medical schools. The question at hand this past spring was: could Interactive Theater be adapted and applied to engage and train stakeholders who work to foster public-private dialogue and private sector development in developing nations? The answer was a resounding “Yes.” This SmartLesson describes how Interactive Theater was successfully used as a learning tool by the Investment Climate Department during two sessions of the 6th Annual International Workshop on Public-Private Dialogue (PPD) in Vienna, Austria in June 2011.

Background

IFC practitioners have struggled over the years when addressing one critical aspect of capacity building—behavior change, which is often a significant challenge, given how deep-rooted behavior can be. Historically, IFC practitioners have conducted numerous trainings primarily in two ways: delivering information-dense content, and providing situational role-playing. The former often comes in the form of case studies and theoretical frameworks for best practices, and presenters often employ PowerPoint or similar didactic methods. The latter endeavors to place people in simulations of real-life situations so they can apply content in practice, and the most common medium used is that of role-playing.

Both forms have had impact and success in educating and training, but it is important to acknowledge the challenges and limitations of each. The didactic methods are often abstract, and audience members sometimes struggle to connect the technical information to actual practice. And, while role-playing can

be helpful, if it is not realistic and applicable to the situation at hand, it can seem contrived. In both cases, the forms fall short of addressing stakeholder behavior change.

Seeing an opportunity to address this deficiency, the Investment Climate Department hired an Interactive Theater expert to carry out a workshop for PPD practitioners and stakeholders during the conference in Vienna. The tools of Interactive Theater were adapted and used as knowledge management techniques designed to influence behavior change for 100 participating practitioners and stakeholders from over 20 countries.

Project Description

The Objective

The objective of the workshop was to improve knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage in public-private dialogue in order to

improve the investment climate, build capacity, strengthen advocacy, and foster governance in communities. Desired learning outcomes included developing strategies to: build mutual trust among the parties through communication of shared vision; include all parties in the dialogue and prevent one person from capturing the agenda; increase empathy and perspective; and increase the transparency of the process.

At the workshops in the five previous years, interactive case studies were used, but they were limited in their ability to address the challenging PPD issues of communication, inclusion, transparency, and identity—issues that are directly linked to behavior change. Interactive Theater proved to be an ideal pedagogical method to address these issues, because the techniques operate via a progressive, multilevel structure. The result is engagement and investment of the participants, who maximize their own abilities to increase understanding of PPD and to encourage the implementation of best practices.

The Structure

This Interactive Theater exercise was constructed according to a reliable and comprehensive protocol consisting of in-depth research, key informant interviews, observation of PPD videos, brainstorming, outlining, role-playing, writing, revision, and rehearsal. This thorough process ensured the realism of the scenes and motivation for the participants to interact with the scenes. After extensive prep work, and the securing of volunteer local actors in Vienna, rehearsals were conducted for a couple of days before the actual workshop. The Interactive Theater exercise for participants then took place over two days. On Day 1, the focus was on designing and managing PPDs, including those in post-crisis environments; on Day 2, it turned to improving inclusion and governance in PPD platforms.

Each exercise followed this basic structure:

- A brief introduction to the Interactive Theater exercise
- A 10-12 minute scripted scene presented by the actors
- An opportunity for participants to react to and process the scene in four randomly predetermined groups, each focusing on one of the four characters in the scene.



A scene from *Times Are Changing*, an Interactive Theater exercise conducted with practitioners and stakeholders attending the 6th Annual International Workshop on Public-Private Dialogue. (Photo by Shihab Ansari Azhar)

They were charged to facilitate their own discussion and seek answers to these questions:

- » Why did your character make the choices he/she did? What motivates them?
 - » What are the three guiding principles of PPD that your characters should have used to achieve a positive result to promote private sector development?
 - » Based on those principles, can you identify three concrete strategies your character should use if he/she were to continue the dialogue?
- An opportunity for participants, at their own tables, to portray one of the four characters and continue the scene/dialogue from where it left off.
 - Another public performance of the continuation of the scene, but this time with four willing and energetic participants serving as the actors.
 - Another post-performance conversation: After a round of applause for the participant-actors, a PPD expert, along with a discussant from one of the country delegations, facilitated a conversation with all participants exploring the lessons learned from the exercise.

The Scenes

Two scenes were composed: *Times Are Changing Part I* and *Times are Changing Part II* (Snippets from the Bob Dylan song for which they are named opened and closed each scene). In the first scene, the civil war in Literavia (a fictional place not related to any real delegation) has recently ended and pending elections have been postponed yet again. Maximillian, the port operator, initiates a meeting in his offices to jump-start a dialogue process on private sector development. He invites Karen, a permanent secretary in the Ministry of Commerce, Albert, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, and Amelia, the donor from the International Aid Society. The three main issues are: How should the PPD be organized? Where should it be situated? Who should lead?

The second scene takes place a year later. A secretariat has been formed and a Literavian diaspora returnee named Solomon has been appointed as the PPD coordinator. The first business forum is around the corner. It will be the first time that such an event is televised. The office is bustling with activity. Miss Mona, the young competent administrative assistant, is dealing with a barrage of phone calls and logistical tasks. Solomon has called a meeting with Maximillian and Karen (carryovers from the last scene who are leading the working groups on Infrastructure and Finance, respectively) to deal with an issue that has come up. Each group has submitted eight to ten reform proposals instead of the required five, and none is willing to cut down. The main issues are: Whose voices are being heard? And how transparent are the decisions when dealing with the reform agenda through a PPD?

Lessons Learned

1) Extensive preparation and consistent communication between Interactive Theater practitioners and project managers are critical. Both need to ensure that the theater exercises used are best suited to the stated objectives and learning outcomes, and that the scenes are realistic.

Project managers know their field the best and must serve as topical experts at key stages of the research and creative process. For this workshop, project managers provided the Interactive Theater practitioner with the PPD Handbook and ten short videos describing PPDs or exemplifying actual PPD activity. During the research phase, project managers and the interactive theater practitioner developed learning outcomes and themes/issues to be covered in each of the scenes. During the brainstorming sessions, project managers described in depth their experiences in the field, and the Interactive Theater practitioner explained what he learned from the handbook and videos. From that conversation, scenes were outlined. Once the drafts were written, project managers provided valuable feedback to ensure accuracy and realism. Finally, after the Interactive Theater practitioner cast and directed the scenes, project managers watched a rehearsal and offered additional feedback.

The two parties also put their heads together to design a quality set of interactive theater exercises, based on the scene, which would best address the communication, inclusion, transparency, and identity issues. The Interactive Theater practitioner explained a variety of techniques from his theatrical toolbox, and the team worked together to choose what they thought would work best.

2) When creating characters, strike a balance between caricature antagonists and bland, viceless people.

One dramaturgical challenge was how to depict realistic characters with stereotypical attributes to aid the narrative, but without portraying pejorative stereotypes. On the one hand, one should not create caricature antagonists, because the scene will seem cartoon-like. The audience will shut off and not recognize the possibility to influence the characters and affect change. On the other hand, one must not draw squeaky-clean characters or there will be no conflict in the scene. The creative team imbued each character with stereotypical characteristics typical to PPDs around the world but made them extremely well intentioned. Each character earnestly wanted to help the private sector of Literavia, but made certain choices rooted in self-interest that inhibited that process. As a result, these characters remained accessible to the audience members, who then sought to change the characters' behaviors as the exercise proceeded.

3) The Interactive Theater exercises, facilitated in conjunction with the theatrical scenario, must include audience dialogue and action, as well as be progressive—each step of the process building upon the previous one.

The Interactive Theater medium functions best because it provides participants with a progressive, multilevel structure. Each step builds upon the one preceding it. Firstly, participants



Practitioners and stakeholders participating in the 6th Annual International Workshop on Public-Private Dialogue delve into the character of Maximillian the Port Operator, breaking down the character in a self-facilitated dialogue.

(Photo by Shihab Ansari Azhar)

witness a scenario researched and written in order to portray the stakeholders' reality with accuracy. They experience it the way it happens to them. Secondly, participants are allowed to react and respond to the drama not only from their individual point of view but also from that of one of the characters. This step encourages "perspective-taking" and empathy. Thirdly, participants are gently thrust into the conflict that occurred on stage and given the opportunity to enact solutions that they have devised, as well as to witness others doing the same. Finally, participants are again afforded an opportunity to react and take part in a post-performance conversation, and then they hear from experts who tie it all together and add applicable information in context. In short, Interactive Theater succeeds because it is not just a simple one-dimensional role-play; rather, it is a complex progressive process. Great lengths are taken to ensure that the participants invest—organically and fully—in the simulation.

4) When devising an Interactive Theater module, allow adequate time to complete all of the necessary tasks included in the research and creative process.

Fifteen days over three months was not quite adequate to complete the myriad tasks involved — especially due to the fact that two scenes/exercises were created instead of one. An additional 3-5 days of time would be better, depending on the scope and objectives of the project. This project required the Interactive Theater practitioner to locate and recruit local volunteer actors in Vienna, which was very time-consuming. Two days and two mornings provided only the bare minimum for a competent performance. An additional day of rehearsal would have increased the quality of the acting.

5) When utilizing Interactive Theater, work in conjunction with a knowledge management coordinator for support.

While Interactive Theater is an innovative and effective tool, it is more effective when it is adapted in consultation with the Knowledge Management professional working with the particular unit. This will ensure that the objectives and learning outcomes are properly met. The success of this Interactive Theater workshop was greatly aided by the contribution of the Knowledge Management professional,



Two participants in the 6th Annual International Workshop on Public-Private Dialogue volunteer to continue the theatrical scene for the entire group, after everyone had a chance to try it at their respective tables. One plays the role of Albert, the head of the Chamber of Commerce, and another plays Karen, the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Commerce. (Photo by Shihab Ansari Azhar)

who provided input from the project proposal phase through to the identification of the relevant deliverables. The entire project was steered in the right direction from its inception.

6) Evaluate Interactive Theater-based interventions.

A short evaluation form was distributed and collected after the second Interactive Theater exercise on Day 2. The data reveal an extremely positive response from audience members to the realism of the scenario and characters, as well as to the interactive format. In addition, the data indicate significant learning, and an intention to apply the knowledge and skills to their PPD practice.

- 94 percent agreed that “The two scenes and the characters were realistic,” with 53 percent strongly agreeing (Average: 3.5/4)
- 97 percent agreed that “The opportunity to analyze and perform the roles of the characters was an engaging way to address the issues raised during the sessions,” with 50 percent strongly agreeing (Average: 3.5/4)
- 94 percent agreed that “After experiencing this Interactive Theater exercise, I have a better understanding of guiding principles for effective PPDs,” with 32 percent strongly agreeing (Average: 3.3/4)
- 97 percent agreed that “I intend to apply what I have learned to my PPD work,” with 38 percent strongly agreeing (Average: 3.4/4)

Anecdotal evidence reports that participants would use the theater exercise as a point of reference during subsequent sessions at the conference. For example, one person said, “We have a clear Karen situation in our country – a lot of talk and governmental inertia.” Another said, “Albert acts exactly like the head of our Chamber of Commerce.” These two examples show the Interactive Theater exercise not only rings true but also stays with the participants.

Conclusion

There is tremendous potential for adapting and applying Interactive Theater to address pressing issues in teams and communities around the globe, including those in public health, social justice, and conflict resolution. Replicating this process for Interactive Theater projects to influence learning and change in other communities is absolutely feasible. It is important to note that the above set of interactive theater exercises offers just one example of many possible combinations. There is a wide variety of theatrical tools. Custom design is both possible and desirable.

In point of fact, Interactive Theater tends to have a poor reputation among professionals. Initial resistance is common among physicians, university faculty, and even students at the high school and college level. Sometimes that reputation is merited, since Interactive Theater, if not done well, comes off as cheesy, contrived, and a waste of precious time. It is likely that the stakeholders of PPD were skeptical at first.

However, when implemented correctly, Interactive Theater is a powerful and effective tool to achieve knowledge management goals, especially those that are strongly tied to human behavior. When audience members engage issues through theater – characters and conflict in a public performance space – they are likely to explore and change their own attitudes and behaviors. Ultimately, this engaging medium allows participants to practice solutions for change – on their feet and in real time.



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