

## **SIMULATIONS: THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEARNING**

*(OBSERVATIONS EXTRACTED FROM SIMULATIONS: THE NEXT GENERATION OF E-LEARNING BY SARAH BOEHLE AN ARTICLE IN TRAINING JANUARY 2005 WITH INTERPRETATION & COMMENTS BY CHARLES KREMPA)*

### **WHY SIMULATIONS? (Value Propositions)**

Simulations put professionals in a virtual business environment where they can experiment, execute, make decisions, explore the cause-and-effect relationship between operating decisions and business outcomes without facing real-world consequences.

Professional participants, immersed in a simulation experience that draws on their individual expertise as well as teamwork skills, learn by doing. Simulations allow participants to practice newly acquired skills or discover the lack of utilization of existing skills and knowledge in a realistic, yet risk-free environment.

Simulations can encourage collaboration. Other types of learning do not get at the real issues of how people work together and influence each other. Simulations are a way to get people out of their academic understanding of a subject, to see who they really are and what happens to them under stress when they are challenged or exposed to change or ambiguity.

Simulation proponents ... not to mention academic research and anecdotal evidence ... suggest that simulations are one of the most effective ways to learn.

Experts generally agree that simulations dramatically boost learning retention rates. An often-cited study conducted by the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Sciences in Alexandria, VA, found that on average, “students” retain 5% of what they hear in lectures, 10% of what they read, and 20% of what they see and hear in audiovisual presentations. But add “practice by doing” and “teach others/immediate use” to the mix ... two learning techniques simulations possess in spades ... and retention rates shoot up to 75 and 80%.

Additional anecdotal evidence of the impact of simulation learning on sales professionals includes increased sales revenue production on average by 10 to 20%, accelerated learning curves that enable new hires to achieve full competency/productive contribution in 30% less time on average due to more rapid skills proficiency. And retention rates have even increased by as much as 5% from participating in simulation experiences.

## **WHEN SHOULD YOU USE SIMULATIONS?**

Given that there are types or categories of simulations, selecting the right simulation for your needs is key. Clark Aldrich, author of *Simulations and the Future of Learning* suggests, “If the learning actually matters, use simulations.”

Some simulations are better equipped to handle certain types of learning than others do. For example, if what needs to be conveyed to learners is to set up a step-by-step instruction on how to fill out paperwork, you don’t need a full-blown experiential learning simulation. But if the learning goals entail teaching professionals to deal with conceptual content like business ethics, business acumen, strategy, balancing long-term growth strategies with short-term contributions, teamwork, leadership, or major change initiatives ...like a significant shift in an organization’s strategic direction (e.g. transitioning from product selling to customer focused solution selling), then it’s time to consider large-scale simulation. If you want to change employees’ mind-set and behavior patterns, you have to let them experience, in a visceral sense, the outcomes of their actions.

## **DESIGNING A SIMULATION**

### **DECIDE WHAT YOUR GOALS ARE AND BE SPECIFIC**

Determine what the real problems are that you want to solve and what the real goals are. Remember ... willingness vs. ability. To achieve substantive results, specific objectives need to be set. For examples ... “given a magic wand” ... assume you use a simulation and it’s very successful, when people walk out the door, what will they be doing or saying differently? What will their behavior look like?

Also consider the relevance of a given simulation to the target audience. A simulation that’s more strategic in nature works well with a target audience familiar with the nuances and perspective of “strategic thinking.”

### **REALISTIC BUT NOT REAL**

Simulate the real world, but not too closely. The more specific the behaviors you are trying to teach, the more like reality your simulation should be. On the other hand, the more abstract the learning concepts ... like large account strategic sales, teamwork, change management ... the more abstract your simulation should be. This may seem counterintuitive. But if you make a simulation too realistic or too like the real industry that the professionals are in, they will have a tendency to get bogged down in the details instead of focusing on the bigger issues that the simulation is trying to convey. If you wish to convey highly conceptual content, use a simulation that is a metaphor for what they do, but not identical to it.

## COLLABORATION AND FEEDBACK

Look for the right mix of collaboration and feedback. A sophisticated large-scale simulation where the stakes are high, participant interaction, thinking and collaboration are focal points. Participants must have time and a place to interact, exchange ideas and synthesize their experience.

*“Learning occurs when people engage in a complicated undertaking and then reflect on how they are doing” ... Peter Senge*

## EVALUATION

Rethink your evaluation methods. Simulations are not just a different version of a straightforward training program. Develop a formalized process for evaluating the simulation that focuses on behavior change. For example, you might take a small subset of your target audience ... say 6 to 8 people ... and ask them to participate in a simulation **without telling** them that they will be asked to evaluate it. Instead, have them participate in the simulation and tell them that the results will go on their record. If the participants care about their results and act accordingly during the simulation, their actions will give you a much clearer understanding of a simulation’s value to your organization.

## WARNING!

Please heed the following warning ... When people are in a simulation, they tend to get frustrated and anxious. Frustration and subsequent resolution is where you want to take people in a simulation. That is where the “real” self-discovery and therefore profound learning occurs. Most professionals (particularly sales professionals) walk into training expecting to be bored as opposed to getting motivated to handle an interesting challenge. Because of this, participants will complain about two parts: either a simulation is not real enough, and/or its too hard ... too exaggerated.

*“Intelligent professionals tend to espouse theories of action that have little to do with actual behavior” ... HBR*

## **SENIOR MANAGEMENT INVOLVEMENT**

Involve senior management where possible in every step of the process. Spend time connecting with senior leaders in the design of the simulation. Attempt to gather perspectives from various representatives across the enterprise to identify and subsequently simulate the driving forces and behaviors essential to the business. Invite senior management to go through a simulation performing as if they were the target audience. My experience has been that if the circumstances are set-up appropriately, senior management will immerse themselves, compete with intensity, have fun and also immediately see the benefits of the experience. This involvement can help to alter the perspective of senior management who may feel that simulations are just “pricey games” rather than a serious form of learning that is suitable for a serious business environment.

## **MARKETING THE SIMULATION**

And finally, one of the biggest challenges is trying to articulate what happens in a really good simulation experience. Often it helps to emphasize the fact that we have seen teams accomplish things in three to four days in a simulation that would have taken at least six months to work through and learn if they were left to the trial and error of their day-to-day activities. And it helps to emphasize that trial and error in sales can add up very quickly to large dollars in lost sales opportunities and non-recoverable competitive account position.

No two simulations are ever the same because we are dealing with people and behavior. Experiencing the simulation including all of its challenges and frustrations are key to the learning experience. Therefore, an alumnus communicating what went on during the simulation in detail is discouraged. Thus minimizing the potential for reference marketing.

However, showing newcomers and naysayers for example video clips of people who have just spent three to four days in a simulation experience can be a quite powerful while not destroying the integrity of the simulation experience. Typically, at the conclusion of a simulation, we ask participants to comment on the learning experience. Participants will express how exhausted they are. However, they then go on to explain what they did with incredible amounts of nuance describing behavior and awareness change that otherwise might have take years to achieve. And finally, capturing the impressions of those who have experienced a simulation, and allowing others to see the excitement in their eyes and hear the excitement in their voice, may be the most effective way to demonstrate the incredibly sophisticated mastery of concepts that can be achieved through a worthy simulation.

## **THOUGHTS ABOUT INSTRUCTORS/FACILITATORS**

### **TRAINERS ... NOT SO FAST!**

Are you a knockout stand-up trainer? Sorry, that doesn't necessarily mean you'll be a smashing success as a simulation facilitator. The skill set for facilitating a simulation is very different.

Facilitating a simulation requires that you move out of your usual content delivery mode and into a facilitation mode that focus on "self-discovery" i.e. pulling learning out of each individual and the group and attempting to do that in a limited amount of time.

## **THE 3-DIMENSIONAL FACILITATOR**

A simulation facilitator must be three-dimensional. He or she must be an excellent actor; a facilitator/coach and a business experienced professional. Among the qualifications are:

- An experts knowledge of (in this case) sales competencies;
- A solid foundation in business acumen;
- A strong capability in observation of sales skills performance
- A strong capability to facilitate a dialogue for self-discovery including recreating events;
- As well as being an effective actor/role-player.

### **CRITICAL SKILLS**

Among the most critical skills are listening, articulate communication and asking good questions. Classroom trainers accustomed to lecturing have a natural tendency to tell people things. With experiential learning, however, knowing how to ask good questions is key. The idea behind simulation is for individuals to self-discover things. In a simulation, the facilitator's job is to set up an environment that is conducive for professionals to challenge each other, to challenge the facilitator, to ask and answer questions, and to reflect.

### **ATTRIBUTES CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **AVOID THE "GOTCHA" APPROACH**

Attributably there are several considerations. Avoid the "gotcha" approach. The 'gotcha' approach is all about throwing people into a situation with minimal information and then catching them doing something wrong. A more effective approach to facilitating a successful behavioral simulation is to define what you want the professionals to get out of the experience up front, and then to reflect on whether they achieved those goals once a specific task or collection of simulation activities are completed.

#### **KEEP AN OPEN MIND**

Also, it is essential to keep an open mind. Every simulation is different and every group you work with will be different. If a facilitator goes into an experience with the mindset that he/she knows what will happen, he or she will often miss the most significant things that take place. Try to keep an open mind when observing what is happening and don't jump to conclusions too quickly about what you think the group will learn.

## **KNOW WHEN TO SAY WHEN**

Know when to say when. You must be proficient at reading people. When facilitators start asking questions during a simulation debrief, they often try to probe for answers and end up running into resistance. When that happens, it's important to know that it's okay to push people some, but that there is a point beyond which you don't want to push. People in simulations become anxious and frustrated and that's when they start looking for someone to aim those feeling at. As a facilitator you are a good person to serve as a lightning rod for that frustration, and if you push too far, they will turn on you and you will become the enemy.

## **DON'T LET PARTICIPANTS OFF THE HOOK**

And last but not least don't let the participants off the hook. You are not there to be liked or popular. The simulation experience is not about you. You are there to facilitate learning.

*Restlessness and discontent are the first signs of progress.*