

500 WORDS ON LEADERSHIP & DEVELOPMENT



Play time—learn time

or, how to use simulation games in leadership development programmes

This 500 words on Leadership Development is for all leaders and managers who want to learn more about how to use simulation games to teach agile leadership behaviours in leadership development programmes



Nearly ten years ago, when I was designing my first learning game for a client, I was told to avoid using the word ‘game’ as it signified fun and was contrary to what the company stood for. Thankfully, much has changed in recent years in how games are being perceived as integral parts of development programmes at all hierarchical levels.

Particularly for leaders, experience is still the primary source for learning leadership skills¹ and, although research is still limited, the benefits of using (virtual or face-to-face) simulation games as an experiential approach to teaching leadership skills are clear.

Focus on agile behaviours

Simulation games represent a clear break from “learning through listening”: instead, leaders are provided with environments in which they can experience complex situations that require decision-making, delegation, conflict resolution, communication and problem solving.² Or, in the words of one manager recently commenting on a culture simulation we used, simulations provide a good “mirror of the real world for leaders”.



In an ever-changing world where constant change is our reality, it is imperative that leaders can experiment such agile behaviours in risk-free environments that integrate cognition, emotion and action in social settings³. Importantly, they can test behaviours and solutions without adverse consequences and receive feedback from peers and facilitators in real-time.

Foster a feedback culture

Being able to learn by trying new strategies and making mistakes also supports the growth of a feedback culture, something that many (particularly engineering) companies find difficult to combine with their strive for high-precision, quality products. For many of our clients, this is good news.

Benefits of simulation games for leadership development programmes:

- Provide authentic environments for learning
- Foster complex problem solving and decision-making
- Integrate cognition, emotion and action in one learning environment
- Generate unpredictable situations in which what is learned and how it is learned is unique for each individual
- Encourage experimentation of behaviours in safe environments
- Create socialisation opportunities for players

The very fact that simulation games often produce unintended situations in which what is learned is unique to each learner also demands flexibility from those L&D professionals who engage facilitators like CLP – in particular, it demands flexibility in the evaluation of such interactive learning environments.



Example

CLP uses a change simulation that puts participants in the driver's seat in analysing, planning and executing organisational change. In a combined virtual and face-to-face learning environment, real-life change cases are discussed and experimented with, providing the learner with immediate AI and peer feedback.

Newer assessment methods (such as [CLP's Litmus Test](#)) are required, as conventional grading systems do not capture the quality of the interactive learning experience. Unfortunately, it should also not be presumed that virtual simulation games automatically save on time or cost investment compared to onsite learning sessions, as, at the end of the day, they can be equally resource-intensive to prepare, schedule and technically implement.

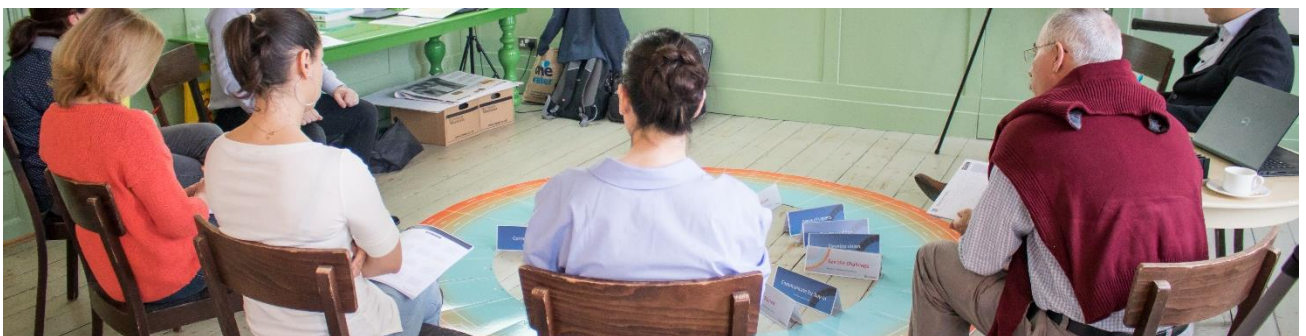
Maximise the learning experience

In our experience as designers of face-to-face simulations and users of virtual learning environments, simulation games are best used to support or complement traditional learning environments with facilitator involvement and peer exchange.

Indeed, for leadership training, we recommend using small, interchangeable learning groups where participants experience a variety of leadership styles with different combinations of team members. For usable learning to be constructed, the learners need to reflect on what they did and (verbally or visually) articulate what those actions meant. This means that these game sessions need to be interspersed with debriefing sessions in which the learners analyse their game experiences to externalise this tacit knowledge into conscious learning.

It is exactly this interaction of gaming and facilitated peer sessions combined with simulated real-life situations that characterises the richness of the learning experiences made possible by using simulation games for leadership training.

Yours,
Fiona Higginson
Programme Director at CLP



1. McCall MW (2004). *Leadership development through experience*. *Academy of Management Executive* 18(3)
2. Bass BM (1990). *Bass and Stogdill's handbook of leadership: Theory, research and managerial applications*. New York Free Press.
3. Hofstede GJ, de Caluwé L, Peters V (2010). *Why simulation games work – in search of the active substance*. *Simulation & Gaming*, 41(6).

CLP is constantly evolving Leadership Development and publishes 500 words periodically that reflect CLP's experiences, research and thought leadership. 500words@clp.world