



PLAY4 REAL

**Working in Partnership**  
**a tailor-made programme for**  
**The Medical Research Council ([www.mrc.ac.uk](http://www.mrc.ac.uk))**

**CASE STUDY**

**Why this might be relevant to you:**

The techniques and approaches used by Play4Real in this project may be of interest to organisations facing one or more of these needs:

- ✎ for two internal teams or departments to work in closer partnership
- ✎ to challenge stereotypes or 'us and them' attitudes and evolve a cohesive corporate culture (e.g. in the wake of mergers and acquisitions or other major change)
- ✎ to be proactive about establishing and maintaining internal networks and relationships
- ✎ to encourage individuals to take more ownership of employee problems themselves and enable them to disseminate a sense of ownership among others
- ✎ to resolve employee problems as cost-effectively as possible
- ✎ to overcome 'virtual working' difficulties by bringing people together from geographically spread functions
- ✎ to explore legislation, theories or principles concerning Working in Partnership in terms of actual human behaviour through a 'safe' but realistic case study.

## The Context

The MRC has been moving fast to respond to changing times, recent legislation and the consequent need to adjust internal relationships and processes.

A new emphasis on 'Inform-Consult–Negotiate', as a vital framework for solving employee problems at an early stage, brings particular challenges to Human Resources Business Partners and Trades Union representatives, both in terms of their self-perception and in the way they relate to each other.

## The Client Brief

The MRC asked Play4Real to design and deliver a 1-day 'Working in Partnership' course for nationwide rollout to an equal mix of HR/TU participants.

The course needed to bring the two entities together in order for them jointly to move beyond mere procedures into a deeper understanding of their own and each other's roles and responsibilities in practice – particularly in the context of finding early resolutions to employee problems.

Course participants were already good at what they do: our brief was to find a way of boosting their ability to leap from merely 'good'... to outstanding.

## The Play4Real Response

### Some Tools of the Trade

Consultation with the client made it apparent that the course was presenting a special opportunity to bring together people from geographically spread functions and a range of skillsets. It was essential to underpin the ease with which individuals could introduce themselves and relate to any colleagues they had never previously met by replicating the real experience of 'Working in Partnership' throughout our design for the day.

We therefore spent the morning teaming HR with TU people in pairs and groups to learn some tricks of the actor's trade - and as a by-product, to develop their own working relationships. Participants explored behaviours and attitudes that help or hinder their own ability to Inform, Consult or Negotiate – and had a lot of fun in the process.

They rehearsed simple ways of improving their Working in Partnership by applying:

- 👋 the right choice of listening styles...
- 👋 small but effective changes in physical demeanour...
- 👋 techniques for keeping your cool in the face of an intimidating challenger....
- 👋 awareness of the way sub-conscious perceptions of others can mislead us into all sorts of wrong assumptions!



*Old lady, young lady – or both?*

### 👋 **Roleplay for People who Hate Roleplay!**

The MRC wanted to devote a large part of the day to a sample case study. Play4Real advised that the best way to get participants really engaged with the learning that this would offer was to bring it to life as customised drama.

But with the emphasis so firmly on a day that needed to establish trust and lay foundations for strong professional relationships in the future, it was vital to avoid traditional roleplay and the fears it can generate. So in the afternoon, Play4Real's team of professional actors performed a short play which – like all our plays for business - had been specially researched and scripted.

Set in the 'NCE' (a fictitious organisation - but one not too dissimilar from the MRC!) the action showed problems brewing between a tough new manager and a longstanding employee. When the NCE'S HR Business Partner and TU Rep arrived on the scene, their handling of the Inform-Consult-Negotiate process highlighted feelings and experiences shared by many in the MRC.

Knowing that nothing more daunting than being 'armchair directors' would be demanded of them, participants were then free to leave the acting to the professionals. Under the guidance of the Facilitator, they instructed the actors-in-character to try out different behaviours in order to move the fiction towards the best possible resolution.

This 'roleplaying by proxy' (known in the trade as 'Forum Theatre') gave delegates an opportunity to apply the morning's work to a 'what if?' situation with no risk of losing face – yet a very real experience: one that delivered new insights and new inspiration about the actualities of their own perceptions, behaviour, and relationships.

### **What People Said about the Course...**

What a pleasure it has been working with both yourself and your colleagues. The course offered an alternative and valuable training opportunity that exposed some misconceptions about HR and TU roles. The morning focused on the skills needed to empathise more effectively with one another and truly understand the benefits of informing, consulting and negotiating to reach agreed resolutions to problems. The afternoon offered the chance to explore ways of enabling a more positive way of working and of building effective problem solving partnerships.

**Michelle Daykin, TU Learning & Development and  
joint co-ordinator of the 'Working in Partnership' programme**

A great opportunity to look at communications training in a fresh way.

**Patti Biggs, Deputy Librarian & TU Rep**

This was helpful not just in the TU role, but also re other working relationships. Thank you! To all of you for making way I thought was going to be a long, drawn out day – into a fun, useful learning experience that was over all too quickly. Interactive, genuinely fun learning run by genuine people! (It's Friday, 5pm, wish I could think of more positive things to say!)

**Christina McGuire, Web Manager & TU Rep**

The theatre was a very useful, practical experience; I'm now able to take specific techniques back to the workplace and to communicate more effectively with people of all grades; also able to tackle workplace issues.

**K. Guberg, Laboratory Analyst & TU Rep**

I would encourage staff outside of HR and TU to take part in this course as there were many areas covered that would be beneficial to staff MRC-wide.

**Angela Cameron, Leases & Contracts Manager & TU Rep**

The play was a great method of encouraging participation, without the 'baggage' of having to do role-play ourselves, therefore I felt better able to take on board the learning and focus on how it might apply at work.

**Clare Wickings, HR Business Partner**

The day was very challenging but also great fun. Time went by in a flash. Good choices of different approaches, ie pairs, individual reflection and group.

**Sean Maher, Senior HR Business Partner**

Novel and innovative, relatively, a breath of fresh air in training. Whole new approach for me.

**Paul Tait, HR Business Partner**

## **Back in the Real MRC World...**



### **What's been going on for delegates since the course?**

The fresh approach to training has started colleagues on a fresh approach to their working relationships. The course has given a "push-start" into a more trusting, supporting and practical way of working together. Within the MRC we have already seen a few units actively working with their HR/TU counterparts informally and as equal partners in the joint aim of resolving employee's problems at work. The course has stopped colleagues immediately grabbing for the policy book and instead are now learning a more individual by individual approach to finding positive outcomes for often difficult issues.

**Michelle Daykin, TU Learning & Development and joint co-ordinator of the 'Working in Partnership' programme**

