Conducting Simulated Interactive Exercises

S. Joseph Levine

The following comments relate to the design and conducting of interactive exercises of a simulated nature. This type of exercise is especially useful as a technique for dealing with instructing groups of people.

1. A simulated interactive exercise (SIE) must have a goal or direction. This direction must be meaningful for all the participants. A problem-solving task usually lends itself well to SIE activities.

2. In a role playing situation all participants should have individual definitions of the *behavior* that they are to use during the role play. Designers of role play situations often make a mistake and try and design the role in such specific ways that instead of a role play it turns into a "play" with a script. Behavioral statements such as: "you've had a rough day," "you're very negative about new ideas," "you're supportive of the other members present," or "this is a very boring meeting and you're not interested in what is being discussed." By specifying roles in terms of behaviors the participants can more fully get involved in the simulation.

3. An SIE should have a structure of events or activities that must take place during the interaction. This is easily accomplished with a "worksheet" that specifies certain solutions or answers that must evolve during the role play.

4. A time limit during the role play can often assist in stimulating the group in the fulfillment of the structure presented. A simple kitchen timer with a bell can be utilized by the coordinator to keep the groups on schedule. Using a timer shifts possible frustration from the coordinator to the timer itself. (The timer is forcing the group to stay on schedule and not the leader!)

5. When a series of role plays or SIE's are to be conducted either in a single session or a series of sessions it often helps to switch the composition of each group or team for each individual session. In this way, participants can gain insight into their own and other's behaviors through the interaction with different individuals.

6. A session that utilizes some form of SIE should be divided into two periods: the actual experience itself and then a discussion of the exercise. This discussion period can be the strongest influence on the transfer of new learning to the participants work situation. Often, a session ends with a discussion period that is too brief for participants to transfer or apply the learning to their own situations. A good discussion session will reinforce the learning that went on during the SIE.

7. The SIE should be realistic in the eyes of the participants. It should be a situation in which they have sufficient expertise to operate, yet not a set of prior learning or preconceptions that will stifle new learning. Participants can be thrust into roles similar to their own (this enhances the risk of them balking on new learning) or they can be put into role reversal situations (forcing them to use a behavior quite opposite of their own nature) or new role

situations (having to deal with situations which are entirely new to them and therefore calling on behaviors that they have not yet had a chance to refine.)

8. An SIE should utilize some form of feedback to the members. Feedback can be elicited during the discussion session if time is taken to deal with the actual responses of individual members of the group.

9. The use of video can greatly facilitate feedback. A video camera can be set up and left operating during the entire SIE. During discussion, the video can assist the participants in remembering exactly what occurred during the interaction. If the coordinator notes when strategic or unique behaviors occur during the interaction, and these notes are keyed with the counter numbers of the video, they can be selectively retrieved during the discussion.

10. If there are more participants than can be accommodated in a single group it is often advisable to have multiple groups dealing with the same problem or SIE. By having a parallel set-up you are able to involve *all* participants.