

“In today’s fast-paced business environment, how can leaders and emerging leaders boost competencies in areas that require soft skills not easily acquired on the job or in the classroom?”

Developing Essential Leadership Skills through Simulation

By Bette Gardner

Many essential leadership skills are learned on the job through experience, feedback and practice. Early in my career as a manager, for example, I was counseled that I was perceived by coworkers as aloof. That feedback shifted my mental model - a dose of reality that spurred me to change and resulted in my increased effectiveness as a leader.

That’s a simple example with an easy solution. Yet in complex, dynamic organizations, learning is often interrupted because the results of our actions are unspoken, unseen, or obscured by intervening factors like process delays, change, overlapping initiatives and the fog of abundant-yet-unsorted data. Learning by experience on the job can be slow or impossible.

In today’s fast-paced business environment, how can leaders and emerging leaders boost competencies in areas that require soft skills not easily acquired on the job or in the classroom? How can they learn to apply systems thinking? Critical thinking? Change management?

One solution: the Friday Night at the ER® team-learning simulation

One solution is to engage people in a simulation experience designed as a practice

field for skill building and a catalyst for change. A business simulation is a simplified model of reality that can replicate challenges common in organizations while eliminating extraneous “noise.” In a simulation experience, time and space are compressed so learners can try out ideas and see the consequences of their actions.

Friday Night at the ER®, a team-learning simulation created to build skills around systems thinking, accelerates performance improvement in diverse organizations. It is a scenario-based, tabletop exercise that challenges teams to manage a fictitious hospital during a simulated 24-hour period that takes one actual hour. The hospital setting is familiar to people in all industries and cultures, so it works well as a universal learning tool.

Guided by a trained facilitator, four players per table each play the role of a hospital department manager. Each player handles patient flow and staffing, deals with emergency situations that arise and documents performance as if it’s happening in real time. Patients and staff arrive and depart, workloads are uneven, events pop up unexpectedly, department managers make decisions and communicate, and scores accumulate.

Players perform distinct functions, yet come to realize they also depend on each other. They discover that quality and cost problems can be solved only when they collaborate and share responsibility for performance beyond their own departments, remain open to new ideas and use data for decision-making. These are three essential behaviors for putting systems thinking into practice.

Originally designed to help people apply core concepts of systems thinking, *Friday Night at the ER*® is also used to teach critical thinking, distributed leadership, prioritization, change management, effective communication and other essential leadership competencies.

The learning process

The simulation and debrief create a multi-dimensional learning process in four stages.

1. *Engage learners in a motivating and revealing experience.* The learning starts by immediately engaging participants in a hands-on exercise that replicates challenges on the job. The experience feels “real,” activating both visceral and thinking processes. Participants are motivated to excel by key performance indicators. They exhibit natural behaviors and ideas, with varying degrees of

success, that can later be examined with receptivity to change.

During the experience, pressure to perform leads initially to frustration, then gives rise to breakthrough idea generation among team members, and is followed by testing new behaviors to learn what works. The simulation is designed for the following to occur:

- Silo thinking gives way to systems thinking as players discover they must let go of their own turf and reach across boundaries to solve systemic problems.
 - Mindsets become open to change as pressures build and it becomes evident that unconscious bias is in the way of needed improvements.
 - Data replaces instinct in the face of uncertainty about the best course of action to achieve desired results.
2. *Facilitate reflection and idea-sharing.* The experience is followed by reflection that begins to transition learners from the practice experience to relevance in their real world. What worked well in the simulation? What were the “aha” moments? What felt like their reality on the job? The facilitator guides participants in conversations that lead to shared understanding and idea generation.

Bette Gardner is the creator of *Friday Night at the ER*®. She designed the simulation based on her interest in creating innovative tools that employ principles of systems thinking to manage within complex systems. She can be reached at bette@blearning.com.

3. *Distill lessons to a core, memorable set of guidelines.* From the many reactions and ideas that surface, the facilitator now brings the attention of participants into focus by distilling success factors into a concise set of key learnings. The learning from this exercise usually focuses on the three essential behaviors noted above -- collaboration, innovation, and data-driven decision making – for putting systems thinking and other improvement disciplines into practice.
4. *Integrate and apply to reality.* A final stage moves participants to create concrete ways to put their learning into practice on the job. The facilitator may choose to use gap analysis, or force field work or other techniques to assist the practical challenges of behavior change for individuals and teams.

Impact in the workplace

A challenge with a learning tool for building capacity around soft skills is the difficulty measuring its impact on workplace success. There is no effective way to control the multitude of individual and organizational factors that influence behavioral change to isolate a simulation’s impact. Yet according to participant evaluations, this simulation is effective in helping identify leadership behaviors and skills, and put them into practice by considering alternate perspectives, and logistical coordination.

Conclusion

Simulation is no longer limited to technical skills and can be a dynamic way to develop leadership skills. By providing a practice field for learners to replicate common workplace challenges, test new solutions and receive immediate feedback, organizations can accelerate the learning process for current and future leaders.



Figure 1. Friday Night at the ER®

