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## *Using Practice Fields as Tools for Organizational Transformation*

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Like all who work in health care, leaders are being called upon to assume new responsibilities and take on new roles. They must assess their organization's current culture and ensure that it supports new strategic initiatives, forecast potential business scenarios and envision new and better futures, and build trust and strategic alliances among disparate stakeholders. In an ideal world, leaders would grow proficient at meeting these responsibilities and roles gradually, through practice and experience. But today's competitive and rapidly changing environment leaves organizations with little time for learning and little margin for error. To speed up the learning curve and help leaders quickly build the new skills they need, many organizations are turning to a form of experiential learning known as practice fields.

This chapter describes what practice fields are and how they can be used to build various types of skills. The chapter explains ways to create an organizational climate that is conducive to practice fields and provides case examples demonstrating why this dynamic form of experiential learning has become a powerful way to help health care professionals achieve and maintain a competitive edge in an industry that requires rapid, substantial, and continuous learning.



## INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICE FIELDS

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A practice field is a training environment in which individuals and groups can practice new tasks, roles, and behaviors without risk. At the core of this type of practice is learning from challenging, yet low-risk experiences. Typically, top organizational players evaluate situations, make decisions, and interact with colleagues without having time to reflect—certainly without much advance practice. Practice field learning dramatically changes this customary way of managing by providing a time and a place to explore options outside the fray of what can often look and feel like organizational chaos. Thus, practice fields can help leaders improve their skills and transform their organizations.

### *Uses of Practice Fields*

Practice fields can be used to develop individual, group, and organizational competence. Ranging in sophistication from low-tech one-on-one role-playing to high-tech computerized simulations, they provide a dynamic way to learn. By creating “virtual reality” types of scenarios, leaders and managers can come to better understand their current behaviors; test out new ones; develop skills; experiment with new assumptions, approaches, and ways of thinking; and envision different avenues of action to test decisions and actions—all without jeopardizing real-life positions, roles, or budgets. By providing a safe forum for modeling new and potentially challenging situations, practice fields help to free up thinking and therefore provide an opportunity to generate better understanding and insight into possible courses of “real-world” action.

Practice fields can be used to develop three kinds of capabilities:

1. *Individual and team skills:* Learning and practicing individual skills and methods of collaboration until people are ready to use them on-line. Examples include role plays, games, and thought experiments.
2. *Organizational capacity for problem exploration:* Exploring the sources of complex problems, often with multiple stakeholders. Dialogue is a good example of this.
3. *Organizational ability to test alternative futures:* Exploring how different decisions might affect or be affected by a range of possible futures. Examples include thought experiments, computer-simulation models, and scenario building.

### *Types of Practice Fields*

Practice fields include “low-tech” verbally based encounters, such as dialogue and role-playing; physically based learning experiences, such as the



blind trust walk; and highly sophisticated computer-simulation models that support strategy creation and management development. The sections that follow describe some common practice fields and their uses in developing skills in individuals, groups, and organizations.

## VERBALLY BASED STRUCTURED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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As their name implies, verbally based structured learning experiences involve one-on-one or group discussions in which people learn to work collaboratively on analyzing problems, generating potential solutions, and envisioning new ways of doing business. Through techniques such as thought experiments, debriefings, role plays, and dialogue, leaders and staff can practice the skills they need to build a change-friendly culture.

### *Thought Experiments*

The most simple and straightforward practice field is a thought experiment in which an idea is tested by sharing it and imagining how it might develop. Asking the question "What if we did it this way?" is a simple way of framing a thought experiment.

It is surprising how rarely thought experiments are used in a playful or nonjudgmental way to explore different avenues of action. Most organizational cultures place greater emphasis on *knowing* answers than *exploring* questions. To flourish in times of change, the ability to envision different futures is indispensable. Thought experiments can help shift a static culture to a proactive culture by providing a nonjudgmental, creative forum for visioning. In addition, thought experiments support a team-based culture because they enable people to elicit and exchange information, develop shared perspectives, and build trust. Thought experiments can be used effectively in virtually any situation in which people want to generate and explore options and surface opportunities before committing to a particular course of action.

### *Debriefs or "After-Action Reviews"*

A more sophisticated version of thought experiments is the review or "debrief" of an experience, which presents an opportunity for learning. The debrief is designed to produce better decisions, actions, and results in the future. It is best used as a regular practice, employed at key points in any process that is intended to produce a desired and measurable outcome.



The debrief is designed to answer the following questions:

- What results did we seek to accomplish?
- What actions did we take to accomplish the desired results?
- What results did we actually get?
- What might we do differently to accomplish these results?

Supporting questions include:

- What went well?
- What could have gone better?
- Did we communicate effectively?
- Did we involve all the right stakeholders?
- Did we gather sufficient information and interpret it clearly?
- What are we learning about how to create the results we want?

Not every debrief fulfills its intended purpose. A debrief can, for example, become a scapegoating session to find someone to blame for whatever didn't go according to plan. Any debriefing meeting can, however, become a valuable opportunity for people to learn more about what they are doing, what they are thinking, how they interact with each other, and what actions they choose.

### ***Role Plays***

Role-playing gives people an opportunity to practice a scene based on actual or hypothetical circumstances, with no negative consequences for "mistakes." Once engaged in role-playing, participants usually see a situation with new eyes and experience it differently. As a result, their range of responses to real-life situations is broadened.

***Uses of Role Plays*** Role-playing is especially suitable for improving human relations skills, trying out new situations, and heightening self-awareness. Role plays can be used to practice sales and negotiation situations, performance management reviews, and potentially difficult presentations and conversations.

The case study that follows illustrates how role plays helped a group of health care leaders overcome their anxiety about assuming a new role—that of coach. As the case study shows, role plays can lead to a variety of positive outcomes for the "players" as well those who work with them.

***Role Play: Case Example*** Recently, a large health care organization that reorganized its senior management structure into a web of teams and net-



works successfully used role plays to help change its management style and culture. A major objective was to shift the leadership approach from traditional "command and control" to "coach and educate."

*The planning process:* The senior team first engaged in a sweeping assessment and succession planning process for the top 100 managers. Each manager was assigned to a coach whose role it was to communicate feedback from the assessment, formulate a development plan for the manager, and provide periodic coaching sessions over the next two years.

As they thought about their first meetings with the managers, the coaches, anxious about how to deliver some of the feedback, asked for help in preparing for the meetings. In response, the "Coaching Tutorial" was designed to (1) develop each coach's ability to carry on productive conversations and (2) reveal and assess each coach's mental models and skills with regard to the new role of coach. The confidential sessions, which were four hours long, were preceded by some written planning and analysis that was specifically related to an anticipated difficult situation (for example, a situation in which feedback would reveal serious weaknesses that would prevent the manager's further progress in the organization).

Each tutorial session began with a short "getting acquainted" period, followed by a clarification of what the coach wanted to learn and a "contracting" conversation in which mutual expectations were shared and agreed upon. The coach then described the background of the particular difficult case he or she had chosen. Having been briefed, a consultant played the role of the manager.

*The taping and analysis of the role play:* The meeting was role-played and videotaped for approximately 10 minutes, after which the role play was stopped and the tape played. Consultants paused frequently to ask the coach, "What do you notice about your performance?" After a short conversation, the players returned to the role play. Sometimes the role-play meeting would pick up where it had left off; however, the coach usually went back to the beginning and repeated the performance. During each session, the coach would have a minimum of three, and often as many as five or six, opportunities to try out and refine the conversation with specific videotape and feedback.

*Outcomes of the role play:* As a result of the tutorials, coaches reported greater confidence going into the session, very productive actual sessions, insight into the role of a coach, and the ability to transfer what was learned to everyday leadership responsibilities. More specifically, the coaches realized

- They had been taking on too much responsibility for the development of the managers and therefore not inviting and inquiring into their thoughts and ideas.



- They had often felt before that if they did not have negative feedback to communicate, the meeting was pointless. But they discovered that if they could engage their manager in a conversation about development in an open and trusting way, the manager would specify areas in need of development that had not surfaced in the formal assessment process.
- They had had a very prescriptive view of the coach's role, instead of helping the manager take responsibility for development and take the initiative to schedule follow-up sessions.
- They had not thought of a much broader role for the coach beyond giving feedback.
- They became aware of a desire to "prove and defend" the assessment in response to questions from the manager. They practiced seeing defensiveness as a natural response and shifted to drawing the manager out through open-ended questions.
- They discovered they could speak candidly and "be themselves," rather than play the role of coach. This shift allowed them to relax and engage the manager in a supportive yet honest way.

A follow-up analysis revealed factors that enhanced the value of the tutorial, such as timing and need, the voluntary nature of the session, and the specificity of the learning. The fact that the tutorial was grounded in leaders' own experiences, rather than an experience created by an instructional designer, made a real difference. Videotaping kept the session focused on the coach's specific actions and allowed for direct feedback without interpretation by an observer or so-called "expert."

## Dialogue

Dialogue, as described by Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, is a way to practice team learning skills and the quintessential way to practice suspending assumptions.<sup>1</sup> As discussed in chapter 5, when engaging in dialogue, people employ active listening skills to interact in a manner that combines advocacy and inquiry to explore the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others in a nonjudgmental manner. Engaging in dialogue enables people to observe both their individual thoughts and the way thought operates in groups.

Much time in meetings is wasted on arguments and people's attempts to influence each other. When people are advocating for their solution to a problem, the emphasis is on persuasion rather than on inquiry into the causes of a problem. Because little real listening takes place, people are often unable to build on each other's thinking. In this



advocacy mind-set, they make persistent attempts to solve problems in a way that frequently leads back to familiar clashes and unimaginative approaches. Dialogue is helpful in overcoming this stale rehashing.

**The Dialogue Process** Dialogue occurs in a setting of dedicated inquiry. The process is not about problem solving; it is about problem understanding. In dialogues, groups pose a question or topic and learn how to *think together* about this topic. This means probing assumptions, looking for contradictions, and building on each other's ideas. As team members learn to stop persuading each other and to listen for patterns, obstacles, surprises, and incongruities, they can pool their intelligence to develop a much deeper understanding of their situation. Often, this understanding can lead to an unexpected solution or approach.

**Dialogue and Change** The practice of dialogue can be particularly useful during times of change. Change upsets people and threatens current ways of thinking. Dialogue creates a context in which they can explore familiar and unfamiliar ways of thinking about problems and issues. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for them to explore their feelings in an empathetic setting. In dialogue, people can create a strong "container," or holding environment; that is, they can create a setting in which they explicitly agree to address difficulties with their full attention. They agree to stay with the process until they understand the "difficulty" well enough to see it in a new way. This commitment to understanding the situation provides a powerful release valve for pressures, confusions, and misunderstandings in times of change.

**Dialogue: Case Examples** Dialogue requires patience and persistence. The benefits of this practice don't necessarily show up right away. But with time and discipline, the results can be impressive. For example, a group of health care leaders in a midwestern town were very successful in applying this technique to rethink their entire health network. Leaders of local hospitals and public health services met monthly for a year to consider the competitive pressures that they were experiencing. By participating in noncompetitive dialogue and making a commitment to stay with the profound challenges that emerged, they were able to develop a community-wide strategy for health care that was innovative and effective in allocating limited resources.

In another case, a group of department managers were completely split over the right way to proceed with resource allocation. The group seemed entrenched in their positions until they spent some time in dialogue examining the underpinnings of some of their assumptions. Through dialogue, they were able to perceive a new way of handling an intractable situation.



Managerial teams who become adept at dialogue find that their ability to track discrepancies in their thinking improves. Their ability to make sense out of conflict improves as well. As teams learn how to learn together, they become more adept at moving rapidly through managerial challenges. Culture change presents some of the most difficult managerial challenges. Using dialogue can be a critical factor in addressing those challenges.

## **PHYSICALLY BASED STRUCTURED LEARNING EXPERIENCES**

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Physically based learning experiences involve activities through which teams can quickly surface core issues and develop new sensibilities, mind-sets, and behaviors around a particular situation. They can be used by a team, for example, to identify and assess its interpersonal dynamics and behaviors. The team can then consciously change them and practice new, more effective ways of relating.

### ***The Acid River***

Many physically based structured learning experiences are used in leader development. One popular activity is the "Acid River," in which a team must cross a "contaminated" area. Success depends on the ability of team members to see things in a new way, to work closely together, to share limited resources, and to be collectively intelligent. Failure to act in these ways leads to contamination and extinction.

### ***Blind Trust Walk***

Another popular activity is the "Blind Trust Walk," in which partners take turns as leaders with sight and blindfolded followers, who must go on a cross-country walk together without the aid of verbal communication. The key to success is clear and concise (albeit nonverbal) communication between the sighted and blindfolded partners. Through the course of this experience, participants often develop profound insights into the essential nature of leadership, trust, and following another's lead.

### ***The Maze***

At Innovation Associates, we use an experience called "The Maze" in our Leading Learning Organizations program. The maze is an eight-by-



ten-foot checkerboard representing a terrain that must be traversed by a team of people as quickly and with the fewest number of missteps as possible. Some of the squares can be occupied and used to cross the terrain. Danger is represented by squares that "beep," signifying territory that cannot be occupied. The game was designed to represent the challenges of meeting a shared goal through teamwork. Like real-life projects, there is a beginning and an end. Certain rules must be followed, individuals have particular responsibilities, and the entire team shares responsibility for getting itself across the maze.

Teams typically move through the maze in many of the same ways they do in real life. Some teams make plans, assign responsibilities, and execute the plans quickly and effectively. Other teams are disorganized and lacking in trust. They find the process difficult and dispiriting. Debriefing the experience provides learning that is easily transferred to work.

### ***Outward Bound***

Outward Bound is another example of a physically based structured learning experience. In this program, a team typically exhibits the same habits and patterns of behavior that it exhibits at work. Often, this behavior is dysfunctional and affects performance. The Outward Bound program gives team members an opportunity to recognize their behavior and to change it. Success in the experience depends on their ability to work together as a team.

***Outward Bound: Case Example*** Take the case of a chief executive officer of an HMO who was an ex-marine colonel hired from outside the organization. He was charged with leading his "troops" into a new era but did not understand the culture of the organization. Increasingly frustrated with the passivity of his top team in relation to his command and control style, he decided to take them on an outdoor exercise to help change the group dynamics. Team members were assigned a task that was structurally similar to projects they faced at work—they were required to retrieve the cure for cancer from a small island in the middle of a lake by suspending someone out on a bridge.

The CEO tried to promote the right solution several times, only to have it regularly rejected by his staff. The team ended up dropping a person into the lake three times. As a result of this experience, the CEO and his team became reflective enough to review what was happening. People were finally able to say, "Half of us don't understand what you want, and the other half are afraid that they don't. And we can never talk about it." Humor and frustration greased the wheels for a new approach. The dynamics did change, and a more consultative approach emerged that produced better results for the organization.



***Outward Bound and Team Start-Ups*** Physically based structured learning experiences are also useful for new team start-ups. Putting a new team of people in a structured learning situation helps them to quickly discover how they work well together and where their process breaks down. For example, a new team spent its first two weeks together in different types of training, including three days in an outdoor exercise. They reported, "We have learned more about each other in three days than we normally would have in three months."

## COMPUTER-SIMULATION MODELS

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Perhaps the most sophisticated practice field is a computer-simulation model that incorporates a "microworld." Often called "management flight simulators," these computer models enable users to explore "real-life" situations without "crashing and burning" their organizations. Within the context of a particular microworld, users can develop different environmental scenarios, identify specific results they want to achieve, and then develop and test different strategies to achieve those results. Users get to see the results of their strategies and actions almost immediately on the computer screen. Therefore, they can make immediate changes in their strategies and actions to improve their results.

Computer-simulation models are also valuable tools for developing individual and team competencies that go beyond the specific content of a given model. In particular, team members can learn and practice the skills of dialogue, share their mental models about any and all variables and decisions, and think more systemically about key strategic and operational issues.

### ***Advantages of Computer-Simulation Models***

Computer-simulation models offer several advantages as practice fields. They enable participants to

- Engage in shared reflection and experimentation about a particular situation, such as how to make money in a market moving to managed care.
- View and understand a complex system and the key variables within it, such as an integrated delivery system.
- Identify and understand interdependencies among key variables and forces at play, such as the relationship between primary care physicians, specialists, and insurers.



- Identify and track causal factors throughout the system to determine why a particular action may (or may not) produce a particular result, such as the impact on cost and quality of care of introducing better clinical information systems.
- Understand that not all variables and actions have equal impact; for example, understanding that redesigning clinical processes may produce greater economic benefit than large reductions in staff.
- Reveal, explore, and modify mental models, such as the importance of quality to purchasers of care.
- Focus attention on short-term and long-term results; for example, understand that investments made in the near term, which will reduce net income, are essential to strengthen an organization's financial position in the long term.
- Understand the intended and unintended consequences of actions; for example, staff reductions will lower operating costs but may also hurt morale and reduce productivity of the staff members who remain.
- Recognize the influence of structures within the system; for example, the compensation system on performance.

### ***A Computer-Simulation Model for Health Care Leaders***

Throughout the health care industry, trustees, executives, managers, and physicians are faced with the critical challenge of developing effective integrated delivery systems and improving the health of people served by those systems. In 1995-'96, Innovation Associates and the New England Healthcare Assembly, along with representatives of thirteen health care organizations and the American Hospital Association, developed a microworld learning experience entitled *Creating Integrated Care and Healthier Communities*.

The computer-simulation program was designed to enable health care leaders to better understand and address the complex factors involved in creating effective integrated care and improving the health of defined populations and communities. With this "management flight simulator," participants play out real-world strategies in a simulated real-world environment—the small urban community of Oakville. They then engage in dynamic discussions with expert facilitators. The microworld allows participants to do a number of things:

- Configure alternative environments and competitive scenarios
- Examine and adjust operational assumptions
- Develop and test different strategies for integrating health care services and improving community health



*Creating Integrated Care and Healthier Communities* consists of three modules: Module I focuses on the health care delivery system; Module II focuses on improving health; and Module III addresses integrating care and improving health together.

**Module I** In Module I, participants are members of the “Acorn HealthNet.” They can play multiple roles along the continuum of care—representing primary, specialty, acute, long-term, and home health care, as well as an insurer and the network manager, who presides over the entire system. Participants learn to configure an effective health care delivery system and secure desired market share, net income, cost per capita, and quality of care by effectively managing prices, costs, and quality. They decide upon the number and type of physicians, the number of acute care beds and outpatient procedures, relative compensation for providers, process redesign, demand management, care management, clinical information systems, staff development, and insurance premiums.

**Module II** In Module II, participants are members of the “Oakville Health Improvement Authority,” which is responsible for improving the health of the community by spending money to manage a range of chronic conditions and health risks. Using health status data from actual communities, participants craft and test strategies and services for improving health. They can choose to expand the medical management of people with chronic conditions; focus on such public health initiatives as screening, environmental protection, and health education; or seek to reduce behavioral and social health risks in adults and children.

**Module III** In Module III, participants develop approaches that combine their best strategies for integrating care and improving health to simultaneously create a competitively viable health care delivery system and a healthier community.

As participants design and test strategies in each module, they are guided through debriefs to answer questions such as the following:

- What specific results did you seek to accomplish?
- What strategies did you develop, and what actions did you take to achieve the desired results?
- What results did you actually get?
- What might you do differently to accomplish the desired results?

## THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRACTICE FIELDS

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When people are free to take risks with fewer perceived consequences, they seem better able to address issues with substantial consequences.



That is one of the central ironies of practice fields and the reason why their transformational impact is so high. Practice fields provide the freedom to explore new ways of doing things. They also create settings of "safe risk," that is, the simulated risk can be experienced as quite significant, while actual risk is low. Finally, while in "performing" the focus is on success, in "learning" the focus is on improvement. As soon as we say, "This is practice, and we are here just to learn," performance improves.

### ***Development of Organizational Support***

Several factors contribute to developing the requisite organizational support for practice fields. These factors include

- Clearly identifying the relevance of practice fields (and particular types of practice fields) for addressing key organizational issues and producing desired business results.
- Developing leadership support for openness, learning, and the use of practice fields.
- Developing participant support and a willingness to explore and learn.
- Developing ground rules for using practice fields (for example, where, when, how, and with whom to ensure that maximum benefit is realized).
- Creating supportive organizational structures and settings, including sufficient time for learning.

### ***Potential Pitfalls***

Our experience indicates that efforts to use practice fields can fail for the following reasons:

- The essential foundation—a culture that emphasizes and rewards individual and collective learning—is missing.
- The practice field is viewed as "just a game" and therefore as irrelevant.
- There is no follow-up and no time for reflection.
- People are punished for their "mistakes" on the practice field.

## **CONCLUSION**

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We still subscribe to the belief that "practice makes perfect." Executives and managers at all stages of their careers are now in charge of their



own development. These days, few mentors are available to guide even the most promising people to the next level of success. That leaves individuals in organizations responsible for taking charge of their own learning. Competence can be developed by "practicing," and this chapter has shown how highly competent professionals have found ways to practice. In creating their own practice fields, they become better learners. As a result, they not only become more effective at work, but in the rest of their lives as well.

### **Reference**

1. Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1990), p. 10.