

# DRAMA PLAYS LEADING ROLE IN

*Daniel Gregory joins a team-building exercise at an aluminium smelter and finds himself back at school... drama school!*

Life's a stage and the all the world's a play... so reflected the character, Jacques, in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, 350-odd years ago. But what's that got to do with the price of fish or anything else in the pressurised world of business in the 21st century?

Well, rather more than you might think. Because using drama as a tool to improve behaviour in the workplace is big, big bucks. In environments like the North Sea oilfields, using it to make people work more safely, for example, can have a major impact on downtime. And downtime, of course costs money.

I'm a fly on the wall at a training session at Alcan's huge aluminium smelter at Lynemouth, in Northumberland. Facilitating the session are Harry Gallagher and Shaun Curry, from Newcastle-based HR and training specialists, Macnaughton McGregor Ltd – Two Macs, for short.

Between them Harry and Shaun have more than 25 years' experience in drama-based training. They are firm believers in the power of drama to shape people's attitudes in the workplace – and can point to the evidence to support their convictions.



# IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

Harry explains: "We use interactive drama as a learning tool. That covers everything from behavioural health and safety, to appraisals, to managing difficult people. In fact, in all situations where people meet people. Within training this area is widely classed as the 'soft skills', the irony is, however, they are very often the hardest things to get right.

"Besides Alcan, we have worked with BP, Shell, ConocoPhillips, Rolls Royce, Amec, Halliburton, Agyp, Aspire Defence... It's all bespoke and every day is different."

The Alcan session is designed to help people who have recently been promoted learn how to relate to colleagues they've previously worked alongside.

Harry and Shaun immediately start to work out what makes the people in the room tick, using an auction of key skills that the delegates have previously selected as the key attributes of a good leader or manager.

Each team is given an imaginary 1,000 guineas and has to "buy" the skills it thinks are most important. "The auction allows the delegates to explore the core 'values' they hold, set their own agenda for the day and create a reference point to track developing priorities as the day progresses," says Harry.

"It's a very good warm-up exercise, allowing the group to get used to working together and it also introduces them to the concept of using drama early on in the proceedings."

The teams are then introduced to the imaginary company, The Zinc Tank. Harry and Shaun have based the company on their own research into Alcan. And they've created two characters, a shop floor worker called Rob Charlton and his recently promoted friend, Dave Taylor. The two have an issue, as the manager is struggling to speak to his friend about a mistake that was made on the line. The delegates are asked for their input to help Dave take the right actions and become an effective manager.

People are not a "one size fits all" solution. Working with the actors and facilitators to introduce the delegate's advice into the scenario, they are able to see a number of alternative strategies to resolve the situation "in action". This allows them to practise in a "real" situation, using different management techniques from their "tool box".

During the course of the programme the level of challenge for the delegates is increased until eventually they are dealing with very difficult interpersonal situations on a one-to-one basis.

"We never start the delegates off totally exposed in a one-to-one situation," says Shaun. "This can be very intimidating for some people and, in the worst case, counterproductive.

"Delegates' confidence is built during the course of the day. We start working as a whole group and then smaller sub-groups. We build skills and confidence as the day progresses until eventually they are able to deal with situations by themselves. Even then, we provide a supportive and constructive environment for this to take place in."

But this is interaction, not an audition for the next Bond movie: "What we never do is ask delegates to act," stresses Shaun.

## "WHAT WE NEVER DO IS ASK DELEGATES TO ACT"

"We are in the business of developing effective cultures, not developing latent acting talents. Asking delegates to role play often has the effect of alienating the very people who need the practice the most. We do, however, strongly encourage delegates to interact with us and to become an active part in their own learning experience.

"All our work is individually designed to fit the clients' unique working culture. What we do is we meet the clients and see what their learning need is. Then we do research into the working background of the people and the company culture and we invent fictional scenarios for

an imaginary company to mirror that situation."

Harry and Shaun's work has proved very productive: "An extensive range of training programmes designed by Shaun for a major oil and gas company, contributed to a 73 per cent reduction in lost time injuries in the first couple of years within their North Sea business units," says Harry.

Shaun points to research by Heather McKiggan, a psychologist from St Andrew's University, as powerful evidence of the effectiveness of drama as a learning tool.

He adds: "BP paid for her to do some long-term research on the effect that the drama had on people.

"She spoke to people before the course; she studied them, and talked to them while they were on the course. She revisited her subjects three months after they'd been on the course to gauge any effects of the programme.

"What she found was that it had had a positive effect on people's attitudes because it gave them a common behavioural reference point.

"The training programme I am delivering to Alcan is an experiential one based

upon the six competencies of Leadership, Convincing and Influencing, Problem-solving, Communication, Developing People and Fostering Teamwork."

Clare Lowrie, Alcan's UK Learning and Development Officer, said: "The training Harry and Shaun provide hit all my requirements. It is experiential, totally interactive, stretching, and fun. The feedback from the attendees is 100 per cent positive and, most importantly, it adds to the behavioural changes I am implementing."