RSVP Design
"Shaping the Future"

What is it?

What is 'Shaping the Future'?

This is an extended process of teamwork that follows the principles of what RSVP Design know as a 'behavioural simulation'. Over eight hours of working, ideally over the afternoon and following morning of a two-day residential programme, it takes teams through a process of organisational and behavioural change.

The simulation works best with an organisational team of approximately 16-24. It requires a level of awareness of organisational management and is suitable for managers with either task or people management responsibility.

Participants experience the transition from individual and small team working towards the creation of a complex, flexible, integrated organisation. During the simulation teams manage a range of issues that have parallels in real organisational situations: working to tight deadlines, managing changing demands, building and maintaining a relationship with a client, controlling production and quality, ensuring compliance with legal and organisational directives.

How does 'Shaping the Future' work?

Over a series of rounds, teams must meet the needs of a demanding customer by building and supplying increasingly complex 3D geometric structures, within time and budgetary constraints. As they tackle the problems this produces they must create effective and efficient management processes, communicate and manage information accurately and be innovative in the design of new products.

In addition, teams have decisions to make around resource allocation to ensure that they achieve the challenging financial target they have been set. They must also ensure compliance: completing regular, routine tasks that demonstrate the efficiency of their internal controls and compliance processes.

A significant emphasis during this simulation is upon 'continuing professional development'. A requirement of the activity is that individual team members rotate through an observation and coaching role (known as the CPD task) in which they observe and review progress and then plan and manage regular learning reviews. In this way, the extended exercise offers significant opportunities for the teams to learn from experience, changing strategy and behaviour as appropriate.

What are the key learning outcomes from 'Shaping the Future'?

The simulation can be used to highlight significant individual, team and organisational learning. Key organisational learning areas include:

- The inter-dependence of task functions and the need to build relationships across working teams
- The need to structure your organisation, or change your operating culture, to meet the changing demands of your internal and external environment
- The importance of the customer/client relationship and the value of customer feedback in organisational decision-making
- The need to maintain 'delivery capability' and stability even through times of change
- The importance of ensuring on-going organisational learning from experience

What are the key learning outcomes from 'Shaping the Future'? (continued)

Key management learning areas include:

- The allocation of task responsibility and the need for individual accountability
- The importance of managed processes for sharing information, knowledge and expertise to optimise efficiency
- The need for monitoring and control processes for quality, time and resources
- The importance of maintaining a clear focus on final goals: balancing individual and small team goals against the larger organisational target
- The importance of motivating and supporting individuals, especially those in 'routine' tasks

Key individual learning areas include:

- The recognition of the diversity of individual styles and how to work with others who think and behave in different ways
- The opportunities to exhibit personal leadership and have an impact on the process and outcomes of the task, by playing to personal strengths
- The importance of observation and feedback as part of a learning process
- The recognition of personal patterns of behaviour and the results that these achieve
- The importance of building skills of influence, in order to be effective in large teams and organisational settings

What are the important design features in 'Shaping the Future'?

Any well conceived learning intervention results from a considerable investment in design so that the data that drives the simulation is grounded in the realities of the organisational situation it is meant to address. We believe that learning is more easily transferred from the learning environment back into the learner's 'real-life' or 'real work' if the learner can see an immediate relevance and, to do this, we aim to simulate many of the processes that are familiar to the learner but present them in an unfamiliar context.

The simulation activity sits at the centre of a six-stage process which takes a group of learners from first formal contact with the need to change to the controlled application in their living and working environment of the strategies and tactics rehearsed within the simulation.
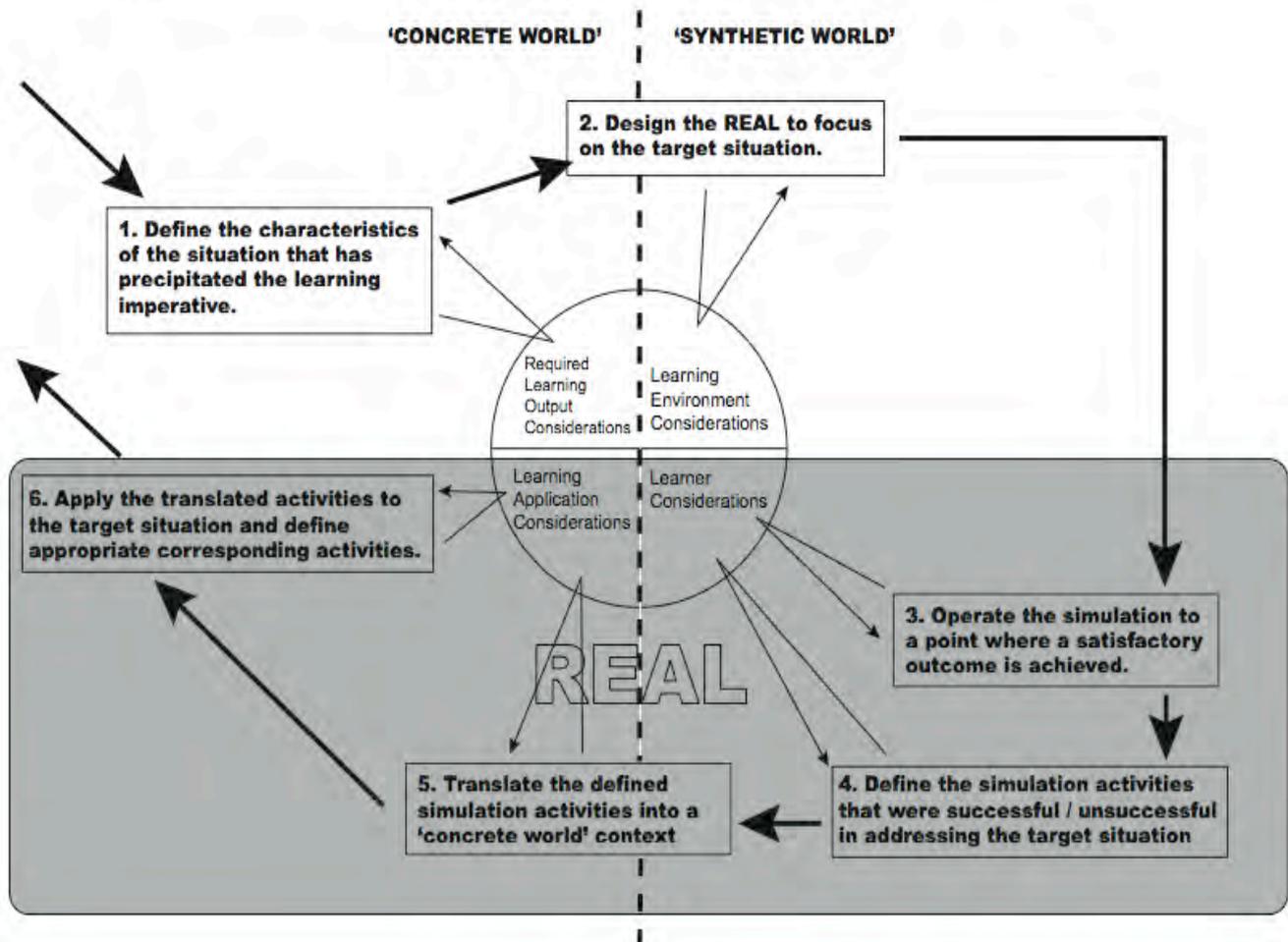
1. Sensitisation to the need for change – a recognition of the existing patterns and the reasons behind the need to alter them
2. Participation in the core behavioural simulation
3. Comprehensive task and process review
4. Definition of the learning and strategies employed in the simulation: did the choices and behaviours achieve what was intended?
5. Selection of appropriate change-oriented actions for future use (the identification of the new patterns appropriate for use in the real-world)
6. Application in the 'real world' as opposed to the simulation

The diagram on the following page, created by Geoff Cox in his work on behavioural simulations, suggests the need to help learners transfer the learning between the 'synthetic' or simulated world and the 'concrete' world in which they will be applying the learning: their family, social group, business department or organisation. He describes the simulation as a 'REAL': a Rich Environment for Active Learning.

This requires learners to:

1. Recognise a pattern that suggests a need for change
2. Create a learning experience in which that pattern is apparent
3. Experiment with ways of changing the pattern
4. Identify the new patterns that achieve success
5. Translate these into patterns appropriate for the real world
6. Apply them consistently until they become instinctive and replace the old, ineffective patterns.

Diagram 1. Design and delivery sequence for a Rich Environment for Active Learning (REAL) to include a simulation activity.   Geoff Cox 2006

'CONCRETE WORLD' | **'SYNTHETIC WORLD'**

2. Design the REAL to focus on the target situation.

1. Define the characteristics of the situation that has precipitated the learning imperative.

Required Learning Output Considerations

Learning Environment Considerations

6. Apply the translated activities to the target situation and define appropriate corresponding activities.

Learning Application Considerations

Learner Considerations

REAL

3. Operate the simulation to a point where a satisfactory outcome is achieved.

5. Translate the defined simulation activities into a 'concrete world' context

4. Define the simulation activities that were successful / unsuccessful in addressing the target situation

Vital to the success of a simulation such as this are features that make the simulation realistic and relevant to the participants.

- The 'organisational structure' in the simulation must replicate real organisations. In this example, the activity begins in 4 small teams that became increasingly inter-dependent as the exercise develops and are finally required to merge in order to be able to deliver to their customers' specifications.

- Targets must be challenging but ultimately achievable. Many business goals may seem unrealistic at first but, with work and planning, become merely challenging! It is essential that in the design of the exercise the designers know that the goals can be achieved within the time-frames and constraints set – otherwise participants become de-motivated and the potential for learning diminishes.

- Relationships should be 'real' and not perceived as role-plays. In this simulation, customers are represented by senior members of the management team, in their role as internal clients.

- There is a 'layering' of expectation and complexity throughout the simulation. In 'Shaping the Future', in order to simulate urgent process improvement, the demands and expectations of the customer change as the activity develops. Simple product orders, with full design specifications and an ample supply of resources gradually become more difficult to fulfil. Information is presented in more difficult formats and resources became harder to source. Early agreements need to be reached with other working teams and the negotiation process became more vital. Problems are identified that have no obvious solution and flexible and creative solutions have to be developed, whilst all the time maintaining customer contact and confidence.

- There should be an in-built process/progress review and opportunities for the application of learning. Run over 8 x 30-minute rounds, in this simulation there is a compulsory learning review after each hour of the activity. This review is led by members of the team, with coaching from the facilitators as required, and completion of a high quality learning review is one of the success factors by which the exercise is measured. Described as the 'Continuing Professional Development' task, this builds awareness 'in the moment' of problems, successes and the need for change. This creates the opportunity for application of new learning into the next phase of the activity. The final, extended review of the simulation, once it has been completed, takes the learning and explores how it can be applied back in the workplace.

Below:

Participants in the 'Shaping the Future' simulation prepare to present their final integrated product to their customer.

What does a simulation like 'Shaping the Future' help learners to plan for the future?

No one can plan for the future. The future is unknown and so no planning, however good, can guarantee outcomes. However, some likely future events can be anticipated and trends can be monitored. Being prepared for what is likely to happen can reduce the stress and complexity of having to deal with issues that are probabilities, rather than mere possibilities. This is the basis of good strategic planning: assessing risk and opportunity and preparing for both.

If the design of an experiential learning simulation is good, it will reflect the issues that are likely to arise in a future change process. This allows learners to anticipate and prepare for those situations, so that they deal well with problems and do not allow opportunities to slip away.

In the 'Shaping the Future' simulation, some of the issues that the participants face include:

- The movement from separate teams, each with their own specific culture and working processes, into larger, integrated teams and the potential conflict this causes
- The need to recognise opportunities and threats as they arise and respond to them appropriately
- The recognition of the type of management (style and structure) required as the exercise develops from a simple task to more complex ones
- The need to establish and communicate a clear strategy to everyone involved in the process, even when the situation is uncertain or ambiguous
- The need for flexible and agile leadership to cope with change
- The need to establish and maintain a relationship with the customer that will build confidence and trust in the organisation
- The need to respond creatively when problems arise, finding alternative solutions when existing ones no longer apply

How many of these are unlikely to happen in a major organisational re-structure, a corporate takeover or a business merger? Most of them would be almost guaranteed. Therefore, as the exercise develops, the participants experience (albeit in a very different context) realistic issues of task and people management. The success or otherwise of the strategies they use, the behaviours that prove to be effective or ineffective and the decision-making processes that they develop all provide models for future application.

By gathering the awareness, knowledge and recommendations that emerge from the CPD process, participants go into the Reflect/ Understand stages of the learning process already armed with observations, information and hypotheses. In a final, extended review they can build on this information and identify the principles, strategies and behaviours that they will need to apply in the real-life change process. Using scenario and project planning skills they can build a change plan that will apply the learning from the exercise in new contexts.

For example: In the simulation, what were the key 'people problems' in merging existing teams? What resistance did they experience? What were the issues around position, status, influence? What were the problems around adapting to new systems, different management styles or changing quality standards?

How are these issues likely to manifest in the real organisational change?
What helped to overcome them in the exercise and how might that strategy be adopted in the workplace?

The value of any experiential activity is closely related to the quality of the facilitation. By understanding the learning methodologies integrated into the design, and by placing the design in the context of organisational and stakeholder need, the facilitator can add enormous value to the learning that comes from this simulation.