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Prime ministerial candidates are a model of good role-play

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The party leaders have been acting up – in the nicest way possible, says Robert Terry
Robert Terry

Publication date: 5 May 2010
Source: PM Online

The political correspondent of the *Leicester Mercury* was among the first to identify one of the strategies that all three political parties were using in preparation for the televised prime ministerial debates: role-play. As David MacLean reported:

"Gordon Brown has Alastair Campbell playing David Cameron and the former Downing Street adviser Theo Bertram as Nick Clegg. The Liberal Democrats are using David Laws, shadow secretary for children, schools and families, as Cameron and shadow home secretary Chris Huhne as Brown. Cameron has asked his shadow culture secretary, Jeremy Hunt, to spar as Clegg, the shadow minister for immigration Damian Green to play Brown, with Michael Gove, shadow secretary for children, schools and families, acting as the moderator."

Whatever we've learnt from the first two debates, one conclusion is that role-play can be a powerful component in developing a leader's capacity to present a persuasive case. Regardless of his subsequent political success, the capacity of the real Nick Clegg seems to have taken the other parties as much by surprise as it has the country.

How different from a rash of press stories last September, triggered by the TaxPayers' Alliance, that highlighted "wasteful" ways in which money is spent on training in the public sector. With public-sector spending cuts heading our way regardless of the outcome of 6 May, I hope at least some HR practitioners are cheered by the knowledge that role-play – a tried and trusted delivery technique – is getting approval at what we can only call the very highest level.

As a way of building confidence in handling difficult conversations in a safe environment, role-play is a powerful technique, and a live TV debate during an election campaign is a bigger challenge than most of us will ever face. Let us all hope that, whoever the winner, the practice prepares them properly for the challenging conversation they will be having – at length – with the country.

Further Info

Robert Terry is founder and MD of behavioural consultancy ASK

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