DRAFT EXCERPT

A Facilitator’s Guide to Play as Practice at Work

A research-informed method for designing and evaluating a D&D-style workplace learning session

From the draft of Rules of Cool: The Heart of D&D Optimizing for Fun at Your Table

A workplace game is a training session with dice. The facilitator’s job is to give people a shared problem, meaningful choices, room to try a response, and a debrief that connects what happened to a behavior the team wants to practice.

The reliable promise is concrete: participants will work through a facilitated scenario, make decisions together, and leave with specific moments to discuss. Whether the session changes what they do at work is a separate question. Design for that transfer, measure it, and follow up.

What the research gives a facilitator

The most direct adult TTRPG evidence is now more than analogy. A scoping review maps 16 empirical studies in adult learning and reports role adoption, collaborative narrative, and shared decisions as ways learners practice communication, collaboration, empathy, and leadership. The review also finds small samples, heavy reliance on self-report, and few validated measures (Manganello & Capobianco, 2026). A workplace pilot used 80 hours of role-playing across 10 teams, primarily in ICT. It found significant changes in task, production, and adaptability, and in two items measuring entrepreneurial leadership and self-efficacy; empathy did not change significantly (García-Soriano et al., 2026). The authors conclude that tabletop role-playing offers a viable, engaging method for developing workplace soft skills. These findings support deliberate trials and careful evaluation. They do not establish that a single session will produce the same outcomes.

The ADVENTURE framework gives facilitators a way to build a testable program: multiple sessions, planned facilitation, observation, participant diaries, and pre/post measures (Capobianco & Manganello, 2025). It is a framework, not an effectiveness trial. Research on cybersecurity tabletop exercises adds practical design principles: set objectives, build a plausible scenario, guide discussion, and capture lessons afterward (Vykopal et al., 2024). Those exercises are not D&D, but the planning and after-action habits carry over.

Workplace play research makes the conditions matter. Reviews of play at work and workplace improvisation describe possible benefits for creativity, collaboration, and well-being while emphasizing how context, voluntary participation, and credible facilitation shape the experience (Firoz et al., 2026; Petelczyc et al., 2018; Ratten & Hodge, 2016; Proyer & Sendatzki, 2026). In a controlled intervention across nine organizations, participants in playful improvisation reported increased workplace playfulness and higher post-test individual and group creativity; psychological safety did not differ from the control group (West et al., 2017). A workplace meeting study found that simple play cues improved reported playfulness and creative climate without reducing

productivity (Hoff et al., 2016). An ethnography of one high-tech firm describes a reciprocal relationship between psychological safety and playful work practices (Mukerjee & Metiu, 2022). These sources point to a practical rule: make play an invitation with a purpose, not a demand or a disguise for poor working conditions.

Applied-improvisation research offers useful models for practice. A mini-review of 54 university studies identifies communication, empathy, and collaboration as common aims, while noting that few studies used control groups or standardized measures (Jouin et al., 2026). A randomized study with 188 medical students found higher observed empathetic communication after a 45-minute improv exercise (Grossman et al., 2021). An earlier theatre-based pilot improved five of six clinical-empathy subscales after six hours of instruction (Dow et al., 2007). A separate three-hour workshop with 15 premedical students did not change measured empathy, though participants later described gains in communication and peer support (Phelps et al., 2021). Together, these studies show why a facilitator should name the behavior being practiced and choose an outcome measure that can detect it.

Games and scenarios can support rehearsal. A pilot of two co-designed videogames found gains in college students' bystander efficacy and attitudes, with some attitude gains still present at four weeks (Potter et al., 2019). A randomized improvisational-theatre study with 162 students preparing for internships found short-term gains in confidence to respond to harassment; at two months, participants also reported greater willingness to intervene and lower hostile-sexist attitudes, while some measures did not change (Jmili et al., 2026). A comparison of video and virtual-reality harassment scenarios found stronger intentions for some indirect bystander responses in VR, but no improvement in knowledge and fewer response options practiced (Rawski et al., 2022). Forum-play research in police education describes how participatory scenarios can frame harassment as a collegial concern (Wieslander & Lundgren, 2026). A systematic review of prosocial digital games for youth describes varied interventions and outcome measures, a reminder that "game-based" is not one standardized treatment (Saleme et al., 2020). A 2026 workplace ethics role-play paper is a current research direction; the available report does not establish results that a facilitator can claim (Zvereva et al., 2026). These studies support giving learners a chance to rehearse choices. They do not make a game a substitute for workplace policy or show that every intention becomes action.

The wider learning literature is useful when kept in its lane. A meta-analysis of 65 simulation-game studies found average gains in knowledge, procedural knowledge, retention, and self-efficacy; learners did less well when the comparison instruction was itself actively engaging (Sitzmann, 2011). A gamification meta-analysis found small positive average effects across cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes, with variation by design and study quality (Sailer & Homner, 2020). Gamification, digital games, live improv, tabletop exercises, and open-ended TTRPGs are different formats. Do not use evidence for one as proof for another.

Transfer is the harder measure. A meta-analysis of training transfer identifies the conditions that affect whether learning is used at work (Blume et al., 2010). A meta-analysis of sexual-harassment training found stronger gains in proximal learning outcomes than in transfer to the job (Roehling et al., 2022). Diary studies link employees' playful work design with flow and creativity (Liu et al., 2023), playful work design with engagement and psychological need satisfaction (Scharp et al., 2022), and playfulness with coping strategies (Tandler et al., 2024). These field studies describe workday patterns; they do not test a facilitator-led D&D session. We can build a follow-up into the design instead of treating enjoyment as proof of incorporating the learning.

D&D research helps explain what makes the table matter. A qualitative survey of 1,120 players connects satisfying play with agency, fair rulings, character engagement, and social cohesion

(McLaren et al., 2026). A survey of 305 people in online D&D communities links group belonging with well-being and self-esteem (Matthews et al., 2026). Youth reports and school-based analyses describe social and emotional learning through TTRPGs (Pitt et al., 2023; Stubbs & Sorensen, 2025). These sources help explain why shared authorship and meaningful roles matter; they do not test corporate training. A workplace overview of belonging supplies context for why connection matters at work, not evidence that a game creates it (Weir, 2024).

The relational and ethical research gives the facilitator a way to treat people well. Relationship scholarship describes responsiveness as feeling understood, validated, and cared for, and identifies listening as a way to convey it (Arican-Dinc & Gable, 2023). Research on adult playfulness and couples finds associations between some forms of playfulness and relationship satisfaction, but it does not establish workplace effects (Brauer et al., 2021; Proyer et al., 2019). Consent practice for TTRPGs emphasizes communication, boundaries, pause mechanisms, and de-roling (Page, 2024). Patton's improv work supplies this book's ethical frame: receive an offer with attention, respond honestly, share authorship, leave room to disagree, and repair a miss. The underlying theatre and ethics traditions - including Spolin's theatre games and Wells's account of improvisation in ethics - inform practice and interpretation; they are conceptual and practitioner foundations, not trials of workplace training (Spolin, 1999; Wells, 2004; Williams, 1968; Patton, 2005, 2007). "Yes, and" applies within the agreed activity; it never requires someone to surrender a boundary. These are design principles, not outcome measures.

Start with one observable work behavior

"Build leadership" is too broad to design or evaluate. Choose one action a participant can demonstrate:

- invite a quieter colleague to contribute;
- state an assumption and ask what information is missing;
- summarize another person's proposal before challenging it;
- identify a trade-off and explain the choice;
- change a plan when new information arrives;
- disagree with an idea while preserving the relationship;
- notice a missed cue, name it, and repair the exchange.

Write the objective as: "After the session, participants can [observable action] when [work situation]." Keep the objective visible to the sponsor, facilitator, and participants. Use more than one objective only when the scenario and available time can support each one.

Build the scenario around the behavior

Give the team a shared goal, a few constraints, incomplete information, and consequences that make choices matter. Let different roles hold different useful information or capabilities so that listening and coordination change the plan. Offer more than one workable path. The game should create pressure to practice the target behavior, not a puzzle with one secret answer.

Use decision density as a design check: how often can each person notice something, choose a response, and change what happens? This applies the book's design lens to training scenarios. (Sylvester, 2005, 2007; Chaotic Neutral Dungeon Mastery, 2020). A scenario with many props and

rules can still offer thin choices. A simple scene can produce strong practice if a participant's question changes the group's next move.

Choose fictional distance with care. A fantasy crisis can make strategic trade-offs discussable without putting a participant's real job or identity on trial. Do not turn a current conflict, harassment complaint, layoff, or identifiable employee into the plot. For consent or bystander practice, use fictional characters and agreed boundaries; do not ask anyone to disclose or reenact personal harm. The game must not conceal an assessment, and participants should know what will be observed and how notes will be used.

Make participation voluntary and legible

Before play, tell participants why the exercise is being used, what will happen, how long it will take, what will be observed, and what is optional. Give people a real way to pass, pause, step out, change roles, or observe without penalty. Offer the same dignity and debrief access to observers. Provide the rules in small doses, explain each mechanic before it matters, and let people ask for clarification without being made the joke.

Do not use "Yes, and" to demand agreement. A person can accept the fictional premise and still refuse a particular action, topic, or form of participation. The facilitator may pause, rewind, summarize, or redirect. Establish this before the scenario begins. For a session involving consent, harassment, conflict, or power, provide support contacts and the employer's real reporting routes in advance.

Facilitate the room, not the personalities

Explain the situation and the stakes, then let the group work. Keep turns moving without solving the problem for them. Invite each role to contribute, make space for silence, and ask a participant what they want their character to try before calling for a roll. Use the rules to make a choice consequential, not to punish a learner for missing the facilitator's preferred answer.

Record observable actions, not judgments such as "confident," "difficult," or "a natural leader." Useful notes sound like: "asked for the operations lead's information before deciding," "summarized the disagreement," or "changed the plan after the new clue." Do not rank employees or score personalities. If individual assessment is part of the employer's formal program, separate it clearly from the game and explain the process before anyone agrees to participate.

Debrief from the scene to the work

The debrief is where participants name what they noticed and decide what they want to try next. Start with the shared event, then move toward application:

1. What happened in the scenario?
2. Which piece of information changed the group's plan?
3. Who made space for another perspective? What did that make possible?
4. Where did the team disagree, and how did it handle the disagreement?
5. What would you keep or change if you replayed the scene?
6. Where does this behavior show up in your work?
7. What is one action you want to try in a real meeting?

Ask about choices and conditions, not hidden motives or personality types. Let participants pass on a question. If the scene exposed a problem the game cannot solve - unclear authority, unsafe reporting, retaliation, or a broken process - name the proper channel and return responsibility to the organization.

Evaluate learning and transfer

Use a small set of measures matched to the objective. Before the session, ask participants to rate or demonstrate the target behavior in a short work scenario. During play, use a simple observation sheet to record whether the behavior occurred and what changed after it. After play, repeat the scenario or ask participants to explain the choice they would make. A short satisfaction question can tell you whether the session was engaging; it cannot tell you whether the skill improved.

With the sponsor, set a follow-up date - 30 days is a practical starting point, not a research-established standard. Ask whether participants used the behavior in a real meeting or work task, what helped, and what got in the way. A short diary or manager-supported reflection can capture examples. Report the number of participants, what was measured, when it was measured, and what changed. Separate enjoyment, knowledge, scenario performance, and workplace use.

The ADVENTURE framework’s observation, diary, and pre/post approach gives a starting structure for repeated sessions (Capobianco & Manganello, 2025). Transfer research says to pay attention to practice, reinforcement, and the work environment, not just the training room (Blume et al., 2010; Roehling et al., 2022). Use validated measures when a suitable one exists and the license permits it. If the program is a pilot, call it a pilot and use what you learn to revise the next session.