

TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS: AN EXERCISE USING CLICKERS TO ILLUSTRATE AND TEACH A KEY CONCEPT IN NEGOTIATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “Tragedy of the Commons” is crucial to understanding one of the key dilemmas central to many negotiations. This exercise is a simple but powerful way to experience the concept. The efficacy of using clickers for such an exercise is a new area of exploration. This paper looks at using clickers to play this game which illustrates why it is difficult to be an integrative (or win-win) negotiator and why there is much pressure to “cheat” or become a freeloader.

DESCRIPTION OF THE GAME

In a course on Negotiation the concept of “Tragedy of the Commons” is crucial to understanding one of the key dilemmas central to many negotiations-whether to compete or cooperate, or whether to consider the negotiation a distributive or integrative negotiation. This exercise is a simple but powerful way to experience the concept.

Disclosure: Exercises focusing on “tragedy of the commons” are typically variations of the same basic exercise as this one is. To this degree, this exercise is not particularly original. However exploring the efficacy of clickers for such an exercise is a new area of exploration.

For this exercise to work, behaviors have to be “private;” people will often behave differently if they feel others are observing their behavior. The use of “clickers” provides an effective way for people to react privately.

In the exercise, people are asked to choose (using clickers) either “1” or “2”. For each “1” chosen, everyone in the room will receive \$1 (or some other reward). In addition, if the individual chooses “2” this person will receive an additional “5”. In other words, everyone will receive a “public” benefit of all the cooperators. Cooperators are ones that choose a “1.” In addition, those who choose “2” can be considered “freeloaders,” since they receive the public good and then claim the private benefit by choosing “2”. If there are 20 people in the room and 16 choose “1” and 4 choose “2”, everyone will receive \$16 (the public good) and in addition, four people will receive an extra \$5. If everyone cooperated, everyone would receive \$20.

The participants are not told there will be a second round, but there will be. Typically the number of

“freeloaders” increases as many cooperators feel they are suckers.

This game illustrates why it is difficult to be an integrative (or win-win) negotiator and why there is much pressure to “cheat” or become a freeloader.

MEASURING LEARNING

On a simple level Clickers can be used to test whether participants understand the concept of “tragedy of the commons.” More critically, this exercise is followed up by a negotiation role-play in which the cooperation/competition dilemma is a major issue. The discussion following the role play highlights and reinforces the relationship between a typical negotiation which they just engaged in and the concept of “tragedy of the commons.”

Finally, I often start a class with a short exercise such as this “tragedy” exercise. Many of these exercises are variations of this one (or a prisoner’s dilemma exercise) although students don’t always recognize the connection. Doing other exercises in subsequent weeks allows an assessment of whether students not only understand the concept but can act on it.

TIMING

Either 30 or 60 minutes

PARTICIPANTS

Any number can play although I only have 50 clickers

LESSONS

- The concept “Tragedy of the Commons”
- Distributive vs. Integrative Negotiations....cooperative vs. competitive negotiations
- The challenges of being an Integrative or win-win negotiator
- The pressures to be a freeloader or cheater
- Use of clickers for a class exercise
- Shows that on strictly personal gain, the optimal is for an individual to be the only cheater in the room, or that everyone cooperates except you. However, this strategy totally backfires if everyone chooses it.

- This has implications not only for personal negotiations but national and international issues (e.g. paying income taxes, climate control, nuclear disarmament, etc.)

The problem of “freeloading” is a problem in countless situations including nations trying to cooperate in such areas as nuclear disarmament and countering global warming. There is always pressure to pursue private gain at public cost.

I have tried this exercise in a number of international settings, the latest being in Vietnam in January 2011. The proportion of “cheaters” or “freeloaders” was about the same as in American settings. The discussion among Vietnamese business men and women, convinced me how powerful this topic is and how well this simple exercise brings out this issue that is central to most negotiations.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

When used in a course, the exercise itself takes 15-20 minutes including a discussion.