

“INSIGHTS INTO DEBRIEFING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISES”

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When the learning goal is to provide a lively, interesting, and meaningful learning experience that participants will personally internalize, experiential learning provides an excellent learning tool. The goal, however, is not an easy one to achieve. It takes a very well planned exercise to realize the desired goal. Much of the responsibility for reaching the desired goal rests with how the exercise is debriefed. This paper focuses on the debriefing process and the importance of integrating it into all phases of the exercise.

THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROCESS

A typical experiential learning exercise might include:

A Lecturette On The Learning Subject (For Example Handling Conflicts)

A Statement Of The Objectives Of The Exercise

The Exercise

A Debriefing Of The Exercise

The formal debriefing can be significantly enhanced if in the experiential learning process:

1. The lecturette is organized around the formal debriefing. In other words, the debriefing format should be kept in mind in designing the lecturette.
2. The objectives of the learning experience are discussed and handed out and the debriefing format is carefully planned around the learning objectives. The debriefing is often an unstructured and open-ended experience that does not provide closure on the learning experience. I can recall several exercises in which the debriefing consisted of most of the participants saying what a wonderful experience it was and myself wondering what happened!
3. The exercise is tailored to the objectives. Packaged exercises are sometimes used for convenience even though they do not fit the learning objectives.
4. The formal debriefing is carefully planned. The formal debriefing is often the most important and yet least planned part of the learning experience. Observers (when used) need to be coached ahead of time and given a common format (preferably an observation format) to make and report their observations. Whenever possible, a handout with the key points that should have been learned should be given out at the beginning of the debriefing. Above all, never assume that the participants will automatically learn what you intended for them to learn.

INSIGHTS

In conducting and debriefing many experiential learning exercises, one develops occasional insights from successes and failures. Here are a few of mine:

1. Don't use any gimmicks such as planting a disruptive person in a group to generate the desired results for debriefing. Gimmicks create distrust and will sensitize the participants to look for gimmicks in future exercises.
2. Avoid exercises that may cause intergroup divisions that cannot be repaired (for example some power exercises).
3. Always tell the participants what you are doing regardless of the rich debriefing data that can be acquired by clandestine methods (for example observing through one way glass).
4. Learn from your failures as well as your successes. Exercises do not always work out as planned but a good debriefer will explore the reasons.
5. Use video taping to provide an excellent debriefing method if the exercise produces the desired behavior. However, it is important to select a well tested exercise or watching the video replay can prolong the demise of a bad exercise. By the way, it is best to video through one way glass so the equipment will be out of the exercise room.

CONCLUSIONS

The keys to successful debriefing are: (1) selecting meaningful and non-manipulative exercises; (2) carefully planning the exercise to meet the desired objectives; and (3) respecting the personal feelings and rights of the participants. The last point is particularly important. Too often we involve people in learning experiences that they prefer not to be in, or we debrief their behavior as if they were objects not persons, or we forget to desensitize the exercise by pointing out that the participants may have been playing roles for purposes of the exercise.