THE GAME OF THE "IN" & "OUT" GROUPS

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ABSTRACT

Students (as vicarious employees) are introduced to an experiential exercise to help them learn about and understand the issues involved with "in" and "out" groups in organizations. The purpose of the exercise is to help them to break down the barriers in the workplace, to enable them to better understand the ethical dangers of "inside" groups and insider information, as well as to better understand their own membership in an "in" and/or "out" group. Participating in the exercise should help them better understand what impact being in an in-group or out-group will have on them in an organizational context.

Course level: This exercise is particularly appropriate for an Organizational Behavior class, but also could be used in a Communications course or for a professional development workshop focused on team-building.

Time required: Between 30 and 45 minutes.

Materials: Standard 52-card deck, student (player) instructions

Pre-preparation: Instructors may want to use the exercise in conjunction with the topic of teams and team dynamics; however, we suggest that instructors **do no**t discuss the issues involved with "in" and "out" groups until the exercise is completed.

Players: We recommend no more than 16 students actively play the game (between 8 and 16 students seems to be ideal). Although greater than 16 students is workable our experience indicates that with more than 16 players, the time necessary to complete the exercise might mitigate against the potential benefits. However, in terms of classes with more than 16 students (as is the case for most contemporary classes), those students who are not actively playing should be instructed to sit around the edge of the group and should be encouraged to take notes on what they have observed and what they think is going on. For example, they could be asked to write down examples of power, team work, good communications, trust, deception, etc. They must, however, **remain silent** as they will know what roles the players have. Unlike the active players, the observers should also be asked not to use any electronic communications during the game. As an interesting side note, our experience is that non-playing observers frequently provide useful and meaningful insights during the debriefing sessions at the end of play about what they learned as passive observers to the play.

The Exercise. Background & Theory

The "In" & "Out" group exercise is partially adapted from the *Game of Mafia*, created by Dmitry Davidoff in 1986. The *Game of Mafia* puts players into a conflict between an informed minority and the uninformed majority. A commentator of the game, David Menconi notes, "The basic concept is that members of the dreaded mafia have infiltrated a community and we, as concerned citizens, need to root them out. So every day we hold a town meeting and lynch (with a vote) someone we suspect of being a member of the mafia. Then, every "night" the mafia secretly meet and pick a townsperson to kill; the townspeople learn about it in the morning," (Menconi, 2003).

The "In" & "Out" game has been modified and adapted from the *Game of Mafia* to specifically focus attention on the role that "in" and "out" groups may play, and the significance they may have in an organization. To extend that point, inside groups may typically make insider decisions that outside members are not privy to. Insiders may also have special privileges that include bonuses, promotions, and access to private information that exceed those of the outside members of an organization.

In this game, inside members try to keep their membership in the insider group secret from being known by the outsiders. Further, it is the role of the inside group members to try to get outside members ejected (fired or removed) because their exclusion promotes their power and their rewards. The game scenario provides that if an out-group member leaves (is ejected), then that division of the company's productivity goes down 2% because of the loss, but the remaining players gain a larger share of the remaining pie. That presents a strong incentive for an insider to have an outsider ejected. To the contrary, if one of the inside group members leaves (is ejected) productivity goes up 5% because a trouble-maker is gone and all remaining players are clearly benefitted. Thus, the object of the game for the outsiders is to try to identify the inside group members and get them ejected, while the goal of the insiders is to get rid of as many outsiders as possible so as to increase their own organizational power and promote the productivity of their division of the company. Clearly, the goals of insiders and outsiders are in significant potential conflict.

Let's bring the focus of this game back to a discussion of the impact of inside and outside groups in an organization. This exercise will hopefully serve to show that inside groups are often a potential danger to a healthy, trusted work environment. According to Conaway and Fernandez (2000), a major ethical issue of business is the use of inside information to gain personal advantage. This information can include a full-spectrum of very significant business activities including significant corporate decisions, databases, stock trading, mergers, and firings/hirings. A further ethical issue involving inside and outside groups is suggested by Warkentin & Williamson where they expanded the conventional "in" group and "out" group taxonomy to include "low-grade and high-grade threats; the latter being a purposeful individual or organization who will seek obscure vulnerabilities and inflict far greater economic damage by maintaining intrusions for the maximum long-term gain," (Warkentin, 2009). This suggests that those with inside information and access to a company's data are the greatest threat to a company's well-being. Like members of the Mafia, these insiders may look for vulnerabilities and perform illegal acts to secure economic benefits for themselves.

The Set-Up:

The instructor begins the process with a standard 52-card deck and a set of guidelines that vary based up the ultimate number of players of the game. If there are 11 or more playing, the instructor leaves **three** queens in the deck and removes the remaining queen and as well as all the rest of the cards necessary to make to number of cards in the remaining deck equal to the potential number of players. If there are 10 or less playing, the instructor leaves **two** queens in the deck with the number of remaining cards sufficient that each players gets one card. After shuffling the cards, the instructor gives each student a card, being very careful that no one sees what anyone else gets. For the exercise to work, it is essential that none of the active players know what card any of the other players have at this point.

Next, the instructor passes out a complete list of the students who will be actively participating in the game, along with their email addresses (to facilitate their electronic communication with each other during the game). Students who are not active participants are asked **not** to use their electronic devices during the game to minimize the potential of unwarranted electronic interaction.

As the next procedural step, the instructor tells the entire group that there are insiders (trouble-makers) in this division of the company and they are to be identified and removed. The instructor tells the group that there will be a series of open meetings (conducted by a student moderator) in which the majority (i.e., the outside group) has the collective goal to try to identify the in-group culprits and have them ejected. At this point the instructor tells all those students who were determined to be **outsiders**, by virtue of the card they drew, to close their eyes. While all "outside" players have their eyes closed, the inside players should determine who are the members of the insiders group. Typically, all the inside players simply tip up their cards and expose their queen cards so they can prove their affiliation and hopefully gain the support of potential allies. Obviously, these insiders have a strong incentive to work with other insiders and to try to ruthlessly exclude the outsiders in their group.

Once the insider group members have identified themselves, they can use email or texting (based upon the email list assembled before the game started that was provided by the instructor) to discreetly discuss how and whom they should try to eliminate from the outsider group members.

All players are told that the next step will be open meetings with a goal to ferret out and eject insiders. Clearly the insiders have a strong incentive to come up with ways to manipulate the meetings (and to keep themselves from being identified as insiders and from being ejected). All players attending meetings are told that it is totally acceptable for them to use their electronic devices concurrently while the formal process of the meetings is being conducted (so both in-group and out-group members are expected to multitask both in the formal meeting; but, additionally, electronically). As an aside, we have noticed that our students seem to have a great capacity to not only listen to our lectures, but maintain a simultaneous conversation with their BFF's, so they seem very comfortable in this environment.

Finally, the instructor appoints a student moderator who will run the game (i.e., conduct the meetings). This person is not part of the initial card drawing process and is told to assume a neutral status in the process and must keep anything he or she knows about the other members secret. The moderator will simply conduct the open meetings and insure that they are conducted reasonably and impartially as is possible, in spite of the agendas of members.

As the process proceeds, it is important that no one reveal his/her card until he/she is formally ejected. However, immediately at the end of an ejection, the ejected member must show his/her card to make it clear if his/her assigned role was that of an insider or outsider.

Ejected students (employees) must not continue to participate in the game in any way. It makes the game play especially dramatic if students keep their cards face down in front of them and flip their card up, if and when, they get ejected. Adding to the tension and drama although the insiders know which group all players are in, the outsiders don't learn this information until the "card flip."

Possible Game Variation:

As an interesting variation that game administrators may want to consider centers around the role of the ejected players. The game variation would have the ejected players not divulging their affiliation as an inside or an outside group member. It is a simple matter to change the rules of the game to specify that the ejected player **does not reveal** his/her card at the time he/she is ejected. He/she is simply excluded from the active play. This variation provides the potential to address different theoretical paradigms. It clearly adds to the level of uncertainty existing in the remaining group of players, but also might present a more realistic picture of the "real world."

Step 2: The Meetings:

It is the student moderator's role to convene and conduct meetings. In the typical class, it would not be uncommon for the student moderator to call for the next meeting immediately at the end of the first meeting. Obviously, prescribed class times have to be factored into all final determinations.

A presumed desirable goal of a meeting would be to rid the organization of the heinous insiders. So, as part of the meeting process, at some point, the moderator calls for nominations on who should be ejected because he/she is an insider. Anyone can nominate someone to be ejected. Students will need a reason, but reasons can be just about anything (for example, "I nominate Tom because he was late to class"; or "he did not share his…"). A minimum of at least 3 workers need to be nominated for potential ejection before a vote is conducted. After 3 people are nominated, the moderator stops the nomination process and each nominated person may (not required) give a reason why s/he should not be ejected. These arguments must be short (a couple of sentences). For example, "I'm innocent!", "Dave is the guilty one", "I heard John make a noise last night," or "I saw Susan gossiping with Sarah…"

Common decency dictates that everyone should listen respectfully and not make rude comments during the defense statements. By the way, this point in the process can be especially poignant for the students who don't have active roles but presumably are carefully watching and capturing the goings on.

To move the process along, the moderator is asked to try to keep this part short and not allow for long reasons to be given for eliminating someone or for defenses. After the defense statements, the moderator uses a simple majority vote to eliminate one (or two) workers. This should take only a few minutes. After the vote, the person (or persons) with the most ejection votes leaves the group (and sits quietly on the sidelines). Students do not have to vote if they do not want to as this is a public vote. (Some may view not voting as a reason for being ejected in the next round). Of course, no one (except for the in-group members) knows if the person (or persons) ejected are in or out group members. Depending on the game rules being employed, the ejected person either shows his/her card or does not show his/her card (if the variation of the game is being used).

Step 3:

The student moderator will announce that there is now another open meeting to decide who should get ejected next. All active players may now talk openly about who should be ejected next and/or use their electronic devices to discuss the matter more privately. Obviously, the in-group members will discreetly use their electronic devices to figure out how to set-up out-group members for ejection. Once the meeting starts, the same process is re-iterated. The out-group members try to figure out ways to eject in-group people while the in-group people do their best to eject out-group people.

From here on, the game repeats the same process as described in the above steps and continues with the same process until there are just 4 students left.

The End.

The game ends when there are only 4 members left. Either the two (or three) in-group members survived, or the out-groups members figured out (somehow) who the in-group members were and ejected one or all of them. It does not matter. The instructor can use whichever ending it is to start the debriefing.

Debriefing.

Debriefing is an important—perhaps the most important—aspect of an experiential exercise (Fekula, 2008, Markulis & Strang, 2003, Warrick, 1978). After the game is concluded, the instructor has the option of discussing several issues:

- Teamwork
- Communications
- Fear (not knowing, and being vulnerable)
- Ethical behavior & trust
- Power

For example, focusing on power, the game is an excellent portrayal of the risk of "inside" groups and their access to insider information, but it would also address the differences of power within the workplace hierarchy. Ardichvili writes, "An ethical culture is associated with a structure that provides for equally distributed authority and shared accountability. It also has policies such as an ethical code of conduct that is clear, well communicated, is specific about expected procedures and practices, thoroughly understood, and enforced." (Ardichvilli, 2009) This further explains that power should be distributed properly through a workplace hierarchy. No level should have too much power, or too little power. When one level does in fact receive too much authority, they may form an unethical inside group that strives to gain more power.

With that said, a main topic of discussion should be the "in" and "out" group phenomenon. An **in-group** is a group to which a person identifies him or herself as being a member. By contrast, an **out-group** is a social group with which an individual does not identify with any particular group or grouping of individuals In organizations, for example, people may find it meaningful to view themselves with others who are similar in age, race, social background, or on any number of common characteristics. However, fear, and/or the belief that being a member of some clique will enhance one's status or success in an organization are often major motivators for membership. The instructor should ask the following questions:

- Do members of each group know the members of the other groups?
- How many groups and subgroups could there be in an organization?
- Do members know why employees are members of one group or another?
- Can/should anything be done about these groups?
- What is the manger's obligation in terms of "in" and "out" groups? (For this topic, the instructor may want to discuss LMX, Leader-Member Exchange Theory) and the role of the leader in forming "in" and "out" groups (Deluga, 1998, Graen 1995).
- Does the manager consciously (or unwittingly) foster "in" and "out" groups?
- What is the impact of being in either group have on job satisfaction (and even job performance)?

On a more personal level, the instructor could ask:

- Are there in and out groups here (at the college, in the B-school, at my job)?
- Are you a member of a group—why or why not?
- What is my "takeaway" from this exercise?

CONCLUSION

This exercise can be fun, but it also can get serious and personal, just as being in an in-group or out–group can be. The exercise should give students a real sense of how being in one or the other (or both) groups can impact job satisfaction and to some extent, job performance.

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