

LEGO MANSION: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE FOR UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP STYLES

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential exercise that helps learners understand the impact of various leadership styles and answer the question, “What is the best way to lead?” The exercise invites groups of learners to build a house for an “important person” such as a president or prime minister under the guidance of leaders with varying styles. When groups fire a leader (as they inevitably do), another leader steps in who, in turn, is fired and replaced. This exercise is debriefed using concepts from Blake and Mouton’s (1974) leadership grid, Kerr and Jermier’s (1978) substitutes for leadership theory, and Hersey and Blanchard’s (1972) situational leadership theory. Also, this exercise explores additional insights concerning learners’ perceptions and preferences regarding leadership styles.

INTRODUCTION

Learning about leadership is an integral part of any organizational behavior course. Because many leadership theories exist, learners can find it challenging to distinguish between them, assess their effectiveness and develop a personal understanding of leadership. Although there are a number of exercises on topics related to leadership, none appear to address the topic of leadership styles directly and experientially. In this paper, I describe an experiential exercise in which learners are exposed to four leadership styles that either hinder or help them complete their task: building a mansion using Lego blocks. I first examine existing exercises that address topics related to leadership as well as those for which the use of Lego is central to the learning experience. I then present an overview of the leadership theories that serve as the theoretical grounding of the Lego Mansion exercise. Finally, I describe two options for carrying out the Lego Mansion exercise, and I draw conclusions regarding its use.

LEADERSHIP AND LEGO EXERCISES

A Google Scholar search for articles that present experiential exercises on the topic of leadership (experiential exercise +leadership) yielded few relevant articles. However, expanding the search to exercises and leadership (exercise +leadership) resulted in numerous articles. Similarly, my search for exercises that employ Lego in management courses (Lego +management) produced many articles. This section provides an overview of these exercises and describes how they differ from the experiential exercise presented in this paper.

As evident in Table 1, a number of exercises explore aspects of leadership or subsets of skills required for effective leadership. While several exercises focus on developing learners’ awareness of leadership characteristics (for example, Cunningham, 1997; Baker, Anthony, & Stites-Doe, 2015; Kane, 2011), others emphasize the interaction between leaders and their employees (for example, Sronce & Arendt, 2009; Page, 2004; Hurwitz, 2017). Although a few exercises appear to be truly experiential in nature (for example, Grimard, 2017; Sheehan, 2006; Bull Schaefer & Palanski, 2014; Betts & Healy, 2015), others involve role-playing (Theriou, Tasoulis, & Keisidou, 2016), analyzing case studies (McDonald & Mansour-Cole, 2000), or even analyzing movies (Comer, 2001). Although appropriate for learning about leadership and potentially modifiable so that their debriefing takes in the topic of leadership styles, these exercises do not address this topic directly. (See Table 1 on page 64)

Similarly, several exercises use Lego as a conduit for learning about workplace issues (see Table 2). For example, to bring home the importance of collaboration, Krivitsky (2011) adopts the rugby concept of a scrum or team huddle. In this exercise, teams plan and build components of a city in several stages over a two to three hour period. Other exercises appear to be variations of two themes: the ability to recreate a Lego model based on instructions received from someone who has seen the model (Reddy & Byrnes, 1972) or a simulation of the production process involved in building Lego vehicles or other items (Paxton, 2003). Again, although it may be possible to adapt these exercises so that they consider leadership styles, this is not their primary or intended focus. In summary, none of these exercises focus on helping learners understand Blake and Mouton’s (1974) leadership grid, Kerr and Jermier’s (1978) substitutes for leadership theory, and Hersey and Blanchard’s (1972) situational leadership theory. (see Table 2 on Page 65)

LEADERSHIP THEORIES

This section briefly outlines the theoretical foundations of the exercise presented in this paper: the behavioral theories of Blake and Mouton (1974; the managerial/leadership grid), Kerr and Jermier’s (1978) substitutes for leadership, and Hersey and Blanchard’s (1972) situational leadership theory. Behavioral theories of leadership focus on what leaders do, rather than who they are (their characteristics); thus, they assume that leaders are *made*, not born. Two types of behavioral leadership theories exist: universal and contingency. Universal theories propose that there is “one best way” to lead. These theories, such as the managerial/

leadership grid, suggest that there is a set of leadership attitudes or behaviors that are likely to be effective in all circumstances. In contrast, those that adopt a contingency approach, such the substitutes for leadership theory and situational leadership theory, argue that leaders should adapt their behaviors according to factors in the situation and employees. Let’s consider each of these theories separately.

MANAGERIAL/LEADERSHIP GRID

Blake and Mouton’s (1964, 1974) managerial/leadership grid (rebranded by McKee and Carlson in 1999) is a classic leadership theory that is universally presented in organizational behavior textbooks. According to Blake and Mouton, leadership concerns can be classified into two broad dimensions depending on the extent to which leaders are primarily concerned for people (relationship-oriented) or production (task-oriented). Based on their results on a questionnaire, leaders are placed on a grid with scores ranging from 1 to 9 for both dimensions. This results in four primary managerial or leadership styles as depicted in the following diagram (Figure 1). Although Blake and Mouton also posited that a “compromise”, middle-of-the-road, *organization man* (5,5) style exists, this paper focuses on the “extreme” types only. (see Figure 1 on page 67)

Country Club leaders (9,1) are most interested in ensuring that people’s needs are being met. Such leaders (referred to as Accommodating by McKee and Carlson, 1999) show a great deal of interest in their team members, are friendly and focus on having a good working atmosphere at the expense of ensuring that the work is done. They may make decisions that are popular with the team but that are not in the best interests of the organization (Maner, 2016). In contrast, Autocratic leaders (1, 9) focus on getting the work done according to expectations and specifications. These leaders (referred to as Dictatorial by McKee and Carlson, 1999) focus on the task and efficiently planning, organizing, delegating, and controlling work. For their part, Team Leaders (9,9) demonstrate concern for people and production. Thus, these leaders (referred to as “Sound” by McKee and Carlson, 1999) are likely to focus on achieving the team’s common goals by paying attention to individuals’ needs, while ensuring that the work is getting done. Blake and Mouton (1982) argue that a high concern for people increases employee satisfaction, but a high concern for production increases performance, grievance, and absenteeism levels. They posit that the synergistic combination of high levels of both concerns

TABLE 1
EXERCISES FOR DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

Topic	Name of exercise	Author(s)
Interplay of leaders and employees	Origami Frog	Sronce & Arendt (2009)
Leadership emergence	(Plane crash survival role-playing exercise)	No author/year indicated
Developing charisma	(Delivering historical speeches)	Potosky (2000)
Value congruence between organizations and their leaders	VBL Exercise	Reilly & Ehlinger (2007)
Assessing candidates for a leadership position	Meet Dr. Clay and Dr. Glass	Cunningham (1997)
Leading through change	Change requires Intensive Care	McDonald & Mansour-Cole (2000)
Leadership retreat	Wilderness Thinking	Watson & Vasilieva (2007)
Creating lists of behavioral characteristics and qualities	Most admired leader/most admired follower	Baker, Anthony, & Stites-Doe (2015)
Role-playing and assessment of competencies	Nuovo Espresso	Theriou, Tasoulis, & Keisidou (2016)
How differences in resources influence performance levels	PaperScope	Sheehan (2006)
Self-leadership	On the Ball	Grimard (2017)
Action learning and leadership	101 Leadership Exercises	Grimard & Pellerin (2018)
Serving others	various	Page (2004)
Project management	The Sky’s the Limit	Cook & Olson (2006)
Employeeeship	Introductions with a Twist	Hurwitz (2017)
Leadership awareness	Red Winged Leadership	Bauermeister et al. (206)
Learning about leadership from Disney movies	Not just a Mickey Mouse Exercise	Comer (2001)
Leadership behaviors (self/team assessment)	The Behavioral Matrix	Kane (2011)
Leader emotional contagion	Emotional Contagion at Work	Bull Schaefer & Palanski (2014)
Team development stages	Having a Ball	Betts & Healy (2015)

exemplified by Team Leaders results in high employee satisfaction and performance without the concomitant problems of grievances and absenteeism. Finally, Impoverished leaders (1,1), hereafter referred to as *Laissez-faire* leaders, do not show a concern for either people or production. Such leaders (referred to as Indifferent by McKee and Carlson, 1999) seek to avoid carrying out their responsibilities, making mistakes, and jeopardizing their job security. McKee and Carlson (1999) consider leaders who shift their style to be either Opportunistic (if done for personal benefit) or Paternalistic (if done with the intention of supporting employees while keeping them “in their place”).

Blake and Mouton’s (1964) conceptualization of leadership offers leaders a simple and easy-to-follow recipe for effective leadership. Moreover, since most individuals can easily identify and remember leaders who have adopted one or more of the proposed styles, the theory has face validity with learners. According to Blake and Mouton, only one leadership style is effective, that of team leader, and it is effective in all situations regardless of the circumstances, the tasks or the competence or motivation of the individuals performing the tasks. Thus, it is a “one size fits all” approach. They recommend that all leaders work towards developing a style that creates engagement in teams by active involvement in setting and reaching goals. Blake and Mouton consider

TABLE 2
LEGO-BASED EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES

Topic	Name of exercise	Author(s)
Team problem solving and interpersonal style compatibility	Lego Man	Reddy & Byrnes (1972)
Planning and teamwork	Lego Man	Toastmasters International (n.d.)
Team effectiveness (functional diversity and task complexity)	Fit for Performance	Clark, Blancero, Luce, & Marron (2001)
Managerial process	Plan Before You Play	Althouse & Hedges (2015)
Managerial functions, teams, collaboration	The Pacific Production Game	Erskine & Sablynski (2016)
Listening skills	(not named, Lego structure)	Morris (2012)
Giving and receiving directions	Blind Creations	Jones (1999)
Giving and receiving directions	Blind Sculpture	Jones (1998)
Learning and script theory	Lego Learning Exercise	Lindsey & Neeley (2010)
Learning curves	Lego vehicle	Paxton (2003)
Job characteristics theory	Under Construction	Donovan & Fluegge-Woolf (2014)
Communicating vision	The Vision Thing	Teckchandani & Schultz (2014)
Collaboration	Lego Scrum Simulation	Krivitsky (2011)
Project management (software development)	Scrum with Lego	Steghöfer, Burden, Alahyari, & Haneberg (2017)
Supply chain management	MHI Classroom Exercise	Drake & Mawhinney (2006)
Supply chain management	Siemens Brief Case Game (BCG) Supply Chain Simulator	Mehring (2000)
HRM implications of the production process	Lego vehicle production	Mills, Benson, Burns, & Ammons (2012)
Production management process	Lego cars	Rosen & Rawski (2010)
Operations management	Lego cars	Satzler & Sheu (2002)
Flow experiences and creativity	Lego Serious Play	Primus & Sonnenburg (2018)
Systems development process	Lego vehicle simulation	Freeman (2003)
Information systems acquisition	Lego role play	Freeman (2003)
Push and pull production systems	Lego Lean Game	Sato & Trindade (2009)
Problem-based learning in lean consulting	(no name; vehicle construction)	Conger & Miller (2014)
Identifying/understanding cost concepts (managerial accounting)	Angle bracket production	Mastilak (2012)
Cost accounting	Lego cubes	Roth (2005)

all of the remaining styles to be flawed and, as result, advise that they be avoided.

However, research and history have not borne out the view there is “one best way” to lead (Fleishman & Peters, 1962; Reddin, 1967; Walter, DeJarnette Caldwell, & Marshall, 1980). If this perspective was indeed correct, then one leadership style would be successful in all economic circumstances with all tasks and with all employees. However, there are countless organizations (such as Blockbuster or Pan Am, for example) that have not survived because their leadership did not adapt to the changing demands of their environment (Myatt, 2012). Also, there is ample research that demonstrates that situational factors affect leadership effectiveness. For example, in emergency situations, autocratic leadership may be necessary (Maner, 2016). Indeed, Maner considers this “dominance” type of leadership to be appropriate in numerous circumstances, especially those in which quick action is needed to ensure that everyone is working toward the same clear goals and vision, especially within a tight timeframe and in organizations with well-demarcated chains of command. Furthermore, Maner (2016, np) argues, “During times of organizational crisis or change, dominance may be needed to manage various stakeholders with opposing viewpoints.” Maner warns, however, that individuals who employ this leadership style exclusively are likely to experience relationship problems and have difficulty allowing “stars” to fully contribute to the team.

SUBSTITUTES FOR LEADERSHIP

In response to the deficiencies of universal theories, researchers developed contingency theories (Morgan 2007). Their answer to the question, “What is the best way to lead?” is “It depends.” Kerr and Jermier’s (1978) substitutes for leadership theory posits that employee and situational characteristics may serve as substitutes or replacements for leadership. Some employees are highly skilled and motivated. They have a professional orientation. They are able to establish and focus on attaining concrete goals, direct their efforts towards accomplishing key value-added activities, take initiative through self-development, and develop a ‘web’ of relationships with others. In this case, they are unlikely to require hierarchical or directive leadership. There is also little need for external leadership (leadership offered by someone other than the employee) if the tasks to be undertaken are routine, well defined, intrinsically satisfying, and carried out according to established procedures. In this context, the primary tasks of leaders, then, are to (a) help employees build their skills and motivation so that they become self-leaders, and (b) create unambiguous, manageable, satisfying tasks for them to carry out on their own. Consistent with the substitutes for leadership perspective, recent research has identified “enhancers,” factors that increase the need for external leadership (the opposite of the substitutes) and “neutralizers,” factors that weaken the influence of leaders (such as employee indifference or resistance or the lack of rewards for task performance) (Den Hartog & Koopman, 2002). Unfortunately, although the propositions of the substitutes for leadership theory have face value, the number of contingencies that it incorporates has made it difficult to test (Keller, 2006).

SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Just like the substitutes for leadership theory, the situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1972; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008) is based on the view that leaders should adjust their style based on situational contingencies. If employees lack competence (knowledge, skills, and abilities), then leaders must provide them with direction and structure. If employees are not motivated or committed to performing their assigned tasks, then leaders must provide them with the needed support and encouragement.

As does Blake and Mouton’s (1974) managerial/leadership grid, Blanchard’s situational leadership theory (1988) adopts a 2

FIGURE 1
ABRIDGED VERSION OF BLAKE AND MOUTON’S MANAGERIAL/LEADERSHIP GRID

Concern for people	High	Country Club	Team Leader
	Low	Laissez-faire	Autocratic
		Low	High
		Concern for production	

Note: the Team Leader position is in the extreme upper right-hand corner of the diagram, reflecting its “9,9” position. (Source: adapted from Blake & Mouton, 1974)

x 2 grid but the dimensions of the latter are supportive behaviors and directive behaviors (see Figure 2). Leaders who engage in supportive behaviors use two-way communication as a way of listening and providing support, reassurance, and encouragement to employees. They involve employees in decision-making and facilitate employees' problem-solving. Leaders who engage in directive behavior provide comprehensive instructions and guidance for how a task is to be accomplished. Such leaders explicitly identify their expectations and tell employees what to do, where to do it, when to do it and how to do it. Their role is that of setting goals, planning and organizing work, monitoring work accomplishment, and closely supervising employee performance. See Figure 2 above)

Leaders adjust and balance these two sets of behaviors based on employee maturity or development levels for particular tasks (also called "readiness for self-direction" by Thomson and Vecchio, 2009). According to Blanchard (1988), there are four broad levels of employee development: (a) level 1: those who are low in both competence and personal motivation to undertake a given task (reluctant/uncommitted); (b) level 4: those who are high in both of these areas (peak performers), and (c) levels 2 and 3: those with varying degrees of competence and motivation (low competence/high motivation; high competence/low motivation). Consistent with William Glasser's (1965) assertion that we should never do for others what they can do for themselves [since to do so would be to infantilize them (also attributed to Alinsky, 1971)], leaders should provide to employees what they cannot provide themselves. In other words, leaders should offer high levels of support to those who are not self-motivated and high levels of direction to those who are not self-directed (i.e., those with low levels of competence for a given task).

Thus, as illustrated in Figure 2, reluctant/uncommitted employees should receive coaching (high levels of both support and direction); high competence/low motivation employees should receive supportive leadership, and low competence/high motivation employees should receive directive leadership. Finally, leaders would simply "get out of the way" and delegate work to high performing and self-motivated peak performers. In doing so, leaders offer "reduced: levels of support and direction; they do not eliminate these two behaviors altogether. Leaders should work towards ensuring that all employees become peak performers. As employees become more competent and self-motivated, leaders should gradually reduce the extent to which they offer direction and support.

Hershey and Blanchard's theory has been widely employed in leadership development programs in industry and has continuing relevance (see Blanchard, 2007). Despite its popularity, it appears that this classic theory of leadership has not been validated by empirical studies (Johansen, 1990; Northouse, 2007; Shonhiwa, 2016; Walter, DeJarnette Caldwell, & Marshall, 1980). As Johansen (1990, p. 73) indicates, "Research regarding the effect on subordinates' performance when situational leadership is properly practiced by the leader has provided mixed results and only limited support for the theory." Thompson and Vecchio (2009) argue that some of the failure to validate situational leadership theory may be attributed to the use of cross-sectional designs, which do not adequately capture the model's dynamics as employees attempt to rapidly develop their competencies.

Situational leadership theory differs from Blake and Mouton's model in several respects. Indeed, Blake and Mouton (1981, p. 439) consider their model to be "incompatible" with that of Hersey and Blanchard since the latter "entails arithmetic combinations of the task and people variables" whereas theirs is interactive in nature (9,9 as opposed to 9+9). In their research, Blake and Mouton found that managers consistently preferred the "9,9" style of leadership regardless of the maturity level of their employees. In response, Hersey and Blanchard (1982, p. 208) argue that, while Blake and Mouton's model emphasizes attitudes, theirs focuses on behaviors. Indeed, they suggest that, while it is always important for leaders to have a high concern for both people and production:

Leaders [should] use differing styles on different occasions, depending on the specific problem or circumstance.... [In the case of a highly mature employee], the leader plays a background role, providing socioemotional support only when necessary. In using this style appropriately, the leader would not be 'impoverished' (low concern for

**FIGURE 2
ABRIDGED VERSION OF BLANCHARD'S SITUATIONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL**

Supportive behavior	High	Supportive leadership	Coaching
	Low	Delegating	Directive Leadership
		Low	High
		Directive behavior	

(Source: Adapted from Blanchard, no date)

both people and production). In fact, delegating to competent, confident people is an important way leaders can demonstrate their concern for production and for people.

Additionally, in contrast to Blake and Mouton's "one best way" model, Hersey and Blanchard's model suggests that a variety of leadership styles may be appropriate and effective depending on the situation. Thus, situational leadership theory offers a more nuanced approach to leadership. Also, Hersey and Blanchard suggest that leaders can – and must – adapt their style; they should not lead by simply using their (one) preferred style. Hersey and Blanchard's focus is on developing employees so that all employees work towards becoming peak performers. They are not bound to be "subjected" to one leadership style *ad infinitum*.

Finally, if we consider both models together, we see that Blake and Mouton's recommended Team leader style is likely to be effective primarily with Hersey and Blanchard's reluctant/uncommitted employees and ineffective with other types of employees. At the same time, a style that Blake and Mouton strongly criticize, *Laissez Faire*, when re-branded by Blanchard as delegating (not avoiding responsibility or employees but allowing employees to manage their responsibilities), is appropriate with peak performers. In other words, when the models are considered together, it appears that Team leaders are significantly over-managing employees who are moderately or highly competent and motivated. Such employees are likely to feel frustrated and demoralized and interpret Team leader behavior as hovering, untrusting, or even infantilizing. In contrast, rather than feeling shunned by their leaders' *Laissez Faire/Delegating* style, top performers may view this style as a signal that leaders trust in and have confidence in their ability to plan and do their work and motivate themselves.

LEGO MANSION EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the Lego Mansion experiential exercise are to help learners develop a personal understanding of the noted leadership theories [Blake and Mouton's (1974) leadership grid, Kerr and Jermier's (1978) substitutes for leadership theory, and Hersey and Blanchard's (1972) situational leadership theory] and gain insight into their own preferences and tendencies regarding leadership. By the end of the exercise, learners should be able to differentiate between four leadership styles, understand the situational appropriateness of each style, identify their own preferences for how they like to be led, and consider the impact of their preferred leadership style. If the exercise is undertaken in the context of a management/leadership course, it may help individuals reflect on how managers/leaders can help members of their teams become peak performers.

PARTICIPANTS AND TIME REQUIREMENTS

Typically, this exercise has been undertaken with approximately 40 learners in undergraduate organizational behavior or leadership courses. However, it can be adapted to learners at the MBA level and different class sizes [from 20 to 60 learners, with the complexity of the exercise (set-up and debriefing) increasing with the number of learners]. The exercise takes from 60 to 90 minutes to carry out including debriefing, depending on the version of the exercise undertaken. Although not required, prior to the class in which the exercise takes place, learners have read a chapter in their organizational behavior textbook on the topic of leadership.

REQUIRED MATERIALS

Prior to the class in which the exercise is presented, the instructor should determine the number of teams that will participate in the exercise, taking into consideration that there should be from five to six members per team. The instructor should prepare a large bag of Lego pieces (approximately the size of a gallon) for each team. The bags should contain an assortment of Lego blocks and characters along with a flat platform (or a serving tray) on which to build the mansion. To help create "randomly composed" teams, the instructor can prepare playing cards by creating groups of six Aces, six twos, six threes, etc. depending on the number of teams that will be formed (for example, if there are seven teams, then seven groups of cards will be prepared). The instructor should prepare a "signaling device" for each team that they can use to "fire" their leader. This may take various forms such as a red folder, a "pink slip," or some other appropriate item. If Version 1 of the exercise is used (as explained below), the instructor must prepare role descriptions for the learners who will be serving as leaders (see Appendix 1). If the exercise is presented as a competition with a prize for the team with the "best mansion," the instructor should have a desirable prize (such as chocolates) available and displayed for all to see.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR CARRYING OUT THE EXERCISE

1. **Introduce the exercise** – The instructor should introduce the exercise by explaining that the class will be doing an exercise on the topic of leadership styles. The instructor should tell learners that teams will be created, and their leader will give them all the necessary information for doing the exercise.
2. **Form teams of 5 to 6 members each** – It is important that teams are randomly composed because existing teams are likely to have established norms and relationships as well as an existing informal leadership structure. These factors will affect the dynamics of the exercise. For example, if teams are already functioning effectively, they are less likely to look to an outside leader to provide direction. In contrast, newly composed teams are likely to look towards the leader to provide a sense of direction. To ensure that team membership is completely random, the instructor should distribute playing cards to learners, being careful to not distribute cards with the same value to members of existing teams. Then, the instructor should ask learners to form a team with others who have the same card, for example, all "aces" form a

team, etc. If desired, it may be helpful to verify that learners have chosen the correct team by asking them to present their card. It is possible that some learners are in the incorrect team, or that some learners have “traded” cards with others so that they can be with their “friends.”

3. **Provide preliminary instructions to learners** – Once the teams are established, the instructor should indicate that you will be doing an exercise in which the teams will be experiencing different leadership styles. The instructor should tell the teams that they can “fire” their leader if all team members agree to do so. Teams need to signal their desire to fire the leader through the use of their “signaling device” (which the instructor should distribute to each team at this point). Some possible further instructions are as follows:
 - a. After 5 to 6 minutes, I’ll ask you if you want to dismiss or fire your leader.
 - b. If you fire your leader, you will be assigned a new leader.
 - c. Steps a and b will continue through several iterations.

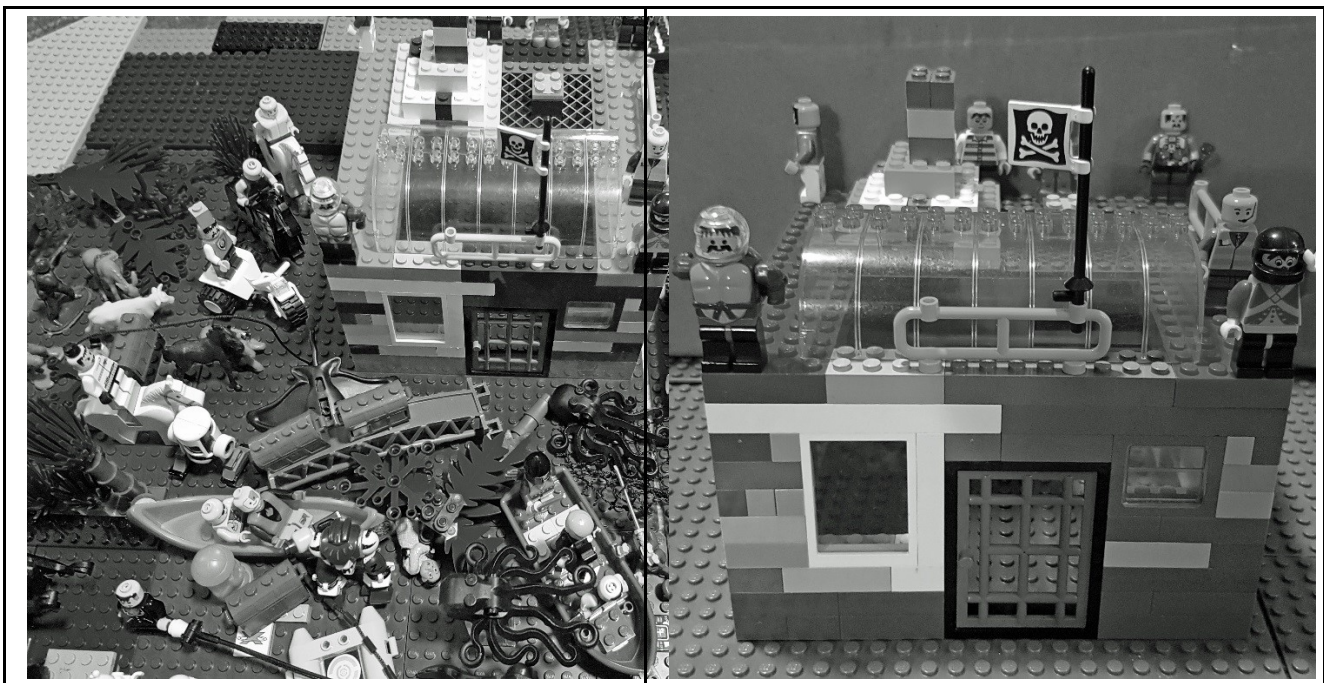
Two options at this point include: (a) Asking each team to select a learner who will serve as an **observer** of their team. In this case, the instructor asks the observer to consider the team’s reaction to their new leader, the team’s progress in building the mansion, and how they decide to fire each of the leaders. It can be beneficial to appoint observers since they can provide detailed information about their team’s reactions and functioning. Although learners who serve as observers may benefit by seeing the dynamics of leadership styles from a more objective perspective, they are not actively involved in the exercise and, as a result, may not reap all of the benefits of the exercise. (b) Announcing that this is a **contest** between the teams. In this case, the instructor should indicate that, at the end of the exercise, teams must describe their structure in glowing detail. The team with the best structure (as judged by the instructor) will win a prize. This element of competition may have the effect of increasing learners’ motivation to build their structure. However, it may also increase their level of frustration if they believe that their leader is impeding their progress.

These first three steps are common to both of the following versions of the exercise.

VERSION 1

In version 1, the instructor assigns the role of leader to one member of each team. This version offers student “leaders” with an opportunity to see how well others are accepting their leadership. Because each team is assigned a leader, they have ongoing and personal contact with a leader (unlike version 2). Depending on the number of teams, all the teams experience a different style of leadership at the same time. For example, while team 1 has a Country Club leader, team 2 has an Autocratic leader. This option may allow for a richer debriefing because the leaders and the teams tend to have unique perspectives of the experience and the leaders’ effectiveness. However, relative to version 2, this process requires more time (student leaders must be chosen and “trained”) and is more complex (each team should have the opportunity to experience all leadership styles). Most importantly, however, is that, if the student leaders do not play the roles appropriately (due to shyness, misunderstanding, or a general reluctance to adopt the role), the learning potential of the exercise is reduced.

FIGURE 3
SAMPLE LEGO MANSION (WITH AND WITHOUT SURROUNDING COURTYARD)



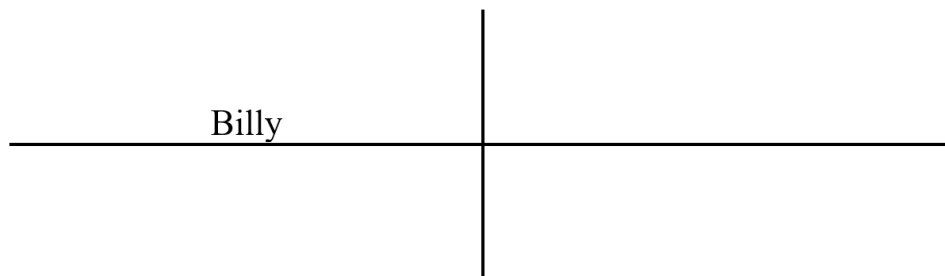
4. **Assign roles to student leaders** – The instructor should ask one volunteer from each team to meet just outside the classroom. When all the volunteers have assembled, the instructor should indicate that they will each be playing a role as a leader. The instructor should distribute a role sheet to each learner (see Appendix 1). Although there are four distinct roles, several people must play the same role if more than four teams are formed. If it happens that there are several “Country Club” leaders, for example, it is important that the instructor keep this in mind when shifting the leader of a team (so that a team doesn’t have two “Country Club” leaders in a row). The instructor should inform the student “leaders” that it is important to enact the role as indicated and not ignore the role instructions or greatly exaggerate aspects of the role. In both cases, team members tend to have difficulty deciphering which leadership style is employed and experiencing its effects. If some student leaders are uncomfortable with their assigned roles, they may exchange them among themselves for another role. The instructor should give each student leader a bag of Legos, ensure that each volunteer understands their role, and ask if they have any questions. Then, the instructor should inform the student leaders that they must not share the nature of their role with the teams and that they should not take it personally when they are fired. At this point, an option is for the instructor to tell the student leaders to remain outside the classroom while they return to the classroom “to confirm that the teams are ready.” While in the classroom, the instructor can ask a team to play the role of “**reluctant**” workers; i.e., workers who are unmotivated and (seemingly) unaware of how to assemble Lego pieces. Team members must not divulge the nature of their role to their team leader.
5. **Carry out the exercise** – The instructor should ask the student leaders to return to the classroom, go to their assigned teams, and begin the role play. The instructor should pay attention to how the teams are functioning. When a team signals that they want to fire their leader via their signaling device, the instructor should switch that team’s leader with that of another team, preferably a leader with a contrasting style. If within approximately five minutes no or few teams have signaled their desire to fire their leader, the instructor should announce that all team leaders have been transferred to another team and switch leaders. The instructor should continue switching leaders for approximately 20 minutes, ensuring that each team has had the opportunity to build a mansion (see sample in Figure 3) and experience all four leadership styles. At this point, the instructor should announce that the exercise has ended and will now be debriefed.

VERSION 2

In version 2, the instructor plays all of the leadership roles. This approach is quicker than version 1 (there is no need to assign roles to learners), simple (there is no need to reassign leaders to individual groups), and “exact” (the instructor has control over the portrayal of the various leadership styles). The downside of this approach is that learners are not given the opportunity to practice their leadership by playing leadership roles. Also, individual teams may not be completely involved in the exercise because they do not have a leader assigned solely to their team.

4. **Carry out the exercise** – The instructor should follow steps 1 to 3 above, indicating that they will be playing the role of leader and announcing that learners are permitted to fire the leader as desired. On the whiteboard, the instructor should draw two perpendicular lines, and write “Billy” in the upper left-hand quadrant (see Figure 4).
 - a. The instructor should introduce themselves as Billy and play the role of Billy (the Country Club leader) as instructed in Appendix 1. When Billy is fired, the instructor should express surprise, say that they will find another leader for the class, and leave the room.

**FIGURE 4
DIAGRAM TO BE DRAWN ON THE WHITEBOARD**



- b. When the instructor re-enters the room, they should write “Bob” in the lower right-hand quadrant of the diagram on the whiteboard. The instructor should introduce themselves as Bob and then play the role of the Authoritarian leader. It is at this point that the instructor distributes the materials to the teams and attempts to oversee every step of their work by offering them precise instructions. It is important to not be negative or dismissive because this negativity in itself, beyond the leadership style, may account for some of the teams’ reactions. When Bob is fired, again, the instructor should express surprise, indicate that they will find another leader, and leave the room.
- c. When the instructor returns, they should indicate that their name is “Patty,” write their name in the upper right-hand quadrant of the diagram and play the Team Leader role. Often, learners are happier to see this leader and are not as eager to fire Patty. If, after 15 minutes, Patty has not been fired, the instructor should indicate that they have

been transferred to another division and that they will be replaced with another leader. Then the instructor should leave the room.

- d. The instructor should return to the room, write their name, “Jo”, in the lower left-hand corner of the quadrant of the diagram, and play the “Laissez-faire” leader role. The instructor should take note of the teams who want to fire Jo but indicate that they are the last remaining leader. The instructor should stay in the room until the teams have made significant progress toward building their mansion (approximately 7 minutes or so). Then, the instructor indicates that they must leave to attend a meeting.
- e. The instructor should return to the classroom and indicate that they are now the instructor and that they will now debrief the exercise. This distinct removal of the “leadership hat” helps learners understand that the instructor is no longer playing a role.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

Before debriefing the exercise, if teams have been competing for a prize, the instructor should ask each team to describe their mansion and present their mansion’s “story.” After all the teams have presented their report, the instructor should select “the best mansion” (either based on their personal judgment or by asking for a round of applause for each team) and award the prize.

Kolb’s experiential learning cycle should be used to debrief this exercise (Kolb, 2014). After the teamwork (experience), the instructor should ask learners questions about their experience (reflection), invite learners to consider the broader lessons revealed by the exercise and draw linkages to leadership theories (abstract conceptualization), and then encourage learners to consider the implications of the exercise for future action (action planning). Here are some broad questions that the instructor can ask learners to discuss in their teams or in a plenary session:

1. **What happened?** What style of leadership was used at first? What was the effect of this style of leadership? Did you like this style of leadership? Why/why not? Other thoughts? How about the second leadership style? The third? The fourth? Which specific actions demonstrated an interest for people? For tasks?
2. **So what does this mean?** What lessons/principles/conclusions can you draw from your experience: (a) about yourself; (b) about leadership, more generally? Describe what you learned about leadership. What theories might inform and help us understand the exercise? How well did the exercise “fit” with these theories? How has your understanding of leadership (and “the best way to lead”) been confirmed or changed as a result of the exercise?
3. **Now what?** How would you lead others in the future given what you learned from this exercise?

In addition to these general questions, instructors may wish to employ the following debriefing sequence:

- a. **Identify leadership styles** – While referring to the diagram on the whiteboard (figure 4), the instructor should ask learners what leadership style each of the leaders demonstrated. Usually, learners have no difficulty identifying the four leadership styles and their impact. The instructor can insert the names of the Blake and Mouton (1974) leadership styles (Country Club, Autocratic, Team leadership, and *Laissez-Faire*) or their variants on the diagram as the learners identify them.
- b. **Reflect on the effectiveness of the four leadership styles** – The instructor should ask learners why they fired the different leaders, starting with the Country Club leader and ending with the *Laissez Faire* leader. Here are some possible responses:
 - c. At times, teams are reluctant to hurt the Country Club leader’s “feelings” because they like this person, but, ultimately, they fire Billy because they want to “work.” Teams may feel that Billy is wasting their time or unnecessarily delaying their progress toward building a structure. This is especially true if teams are competing for a prize. In organizations, employees may appreciate their leader’s interest in them and their comfort, but they also inherently want to accomplish something of value.
 - d. Teams tend to fire the Autocratic leader rather quickly. Teams appreciate the direction offered by this leader (especially after having received no direction from the Country Club leader): “We’re finally getting to work!” However, eventually (indeed, rather quickly), this leader’s constant presence and “meddling” affect team morale. Team members tend to stop taking initiative and responsibility for building the mansion; instead, they wait for further instructions. At this point, teams may begin to question whether they made a mistake in firing their Country Club leader.
 - e. Teams tend to view the Team leader as “a breath of fresh air” in contrast to the Autocratic leader. Initially, teams feel more positive and supported by this team. However, the Team leader’s ever-present enthusiasm and guidance begin to grate on them (“He’s over-the-top.” “Why can’t he just leave us alone?”). The team leader’s sincerity may be questioned (“Is this guy for real?”), and teams tend to view their presence as distracting. If the teams are unable to “tolerate” their leader, the Team leader is fired. Whereas the Country Club and Autocratic leaders are always fired, the Team leader is fired about 50% of the time.

- f. The style adopted by the *Laissez Faire* leader contrasts significantly with those adopted by the three preceding leaders. The *Laissez Faire* is fired about 50% of the time. Some teams feel “abandoned” (“He doesn’t care about us.”) and characterize this style as “a lack of leadership,” consistent with the teachers in the study undertaken by Walter, DeJarnette Caldwell, and Marshall (1980). However, others feel relieved that they can move forward on their task on their own. When asked to describe why they appreciated this style, the latter explained that they knew what to do and felt confident that they could do their work without the presence of the leader. In other words, they felt that the leader was not needed given their pre-existing expertise. In contrast, those who reject the *Laissez Faire* leader tend to prefer having the constant guidance and support of the Team leader; they believe that the Team leader has information or ideas that they do not possess themselves. As such, they are not confident in their ability to build the Lego Mansion. It is especially important to ask learners to discuss why they wanted to fire or retain this leader as well as the Team Leader. The underlying factors that they identify tend to point to the weaknesses of the “one best way” approach and the strengths of the situational leadership model.
3. **Draw linkages to Blake and Mouton’s managerial/leadership grid and the substitutes for leadership theory** – The instructor should incorporate the axes on Blake and Mouton’s grid (concern for people, concern for production) on the diagram on the whiteboard. The instructor should ask learners which of the leadership styles was most effective. The response to this question is often mixed, with most of the learners “voting” for Team leadership and some preferring *Laissez Faire* leadership. The instructor should then ask why these two opposing styles might be effective. Learners will often say that, once they knew what to do, they no longer needed the ongoing direction and support of a leader. At this point, the instructor should build in references to the substitutes for leadership theory by asking learners to describe the factors in the situation and the learners “substituted” for external leadership.
4. **Build connections with situational leadership theory** – This is an appropriate moment for the instructor to refer to situational leadership theory by inserting the names of its four leadership styles in the appropriate quadrants in the diagram on the whiteboard. The instructor can then ask students to use the situational leadership theory to explain the differing impacts of the four leadership styles in the exercise. This is also an opportune time to ask learners to compare and contrast Blake and Mouton’s managerial/leadership grid and Hersey and Blanchard’s situational leadership theory and to build in elements of the discussion of the leadership theories presented early. Some additional points from this discussion include:
- The results are not only influenced by leadership style; they also depend on the skills and motivation levels of team members.
 - It’s not all about the leader. The team must want to follow and be high-performing. Even the best leader cannot force people to work.
 - Leaders must understand and employ the strengths of each member of their team.
 - Leaders need to adapt their leadership style according to the situation and the degree of self-direction of the team. When a leader tries to be too friendly with their team, their authority level is likely to decrease. Friendship may compromise leadership in situations of conflict.
 - Despite having an *absent* leader, a team can succeed if they have the necessary expertise, team spirit, and collaboration.
5. **Discuss learners’ preferred leadership styles and their impact** – The instructor should ask learners to think about the leadership styles that were demonstrated and identify the ones that they preferred and especially disliked. Learners tend to react in their own “unique” way to specific leaders depending on their personal preferences. Some, for example, appreciate the *Laissez Faire* style because they prefer to not have a leader constantly present or serving as a cheerleader. Others believe that this style reflects an absence of leadership and detest it. Typically, young learners (in their 20s) express a strong affinity for Team leadership because it ensures that “all bases are covered.” When they think of leadership, they think of the Team leadership style. However, as explained previously, adopting this style in every situation regardless of team members’ level of development is inappropriate and, indeed, discouraging to high performers. As a result, leaders need to diagnose and read the situation well and develop a sense of their employees’ level of development. Moreover, it is possible that our own preferences for how we are led influence how we lead others. For example, if we prefer that leaders adopt the Team Leadership style when they are leading us, we may adopt this same style when we are leading our own teams (regardless of its appropriateness). Learners need to keep this potential for “rigidity” in mind when leading their team.

CONCLUSION

This exercise has been used in university courses in organizational behavior, management, and leadership as well as with groups of working managers over the past decade. Learners have no difficulty recognizing the different styles that are being adopted by the leaders, including their strengths and weaknesses. Learners are also able to employ the managerial/leadership grid, the substitutes for leadership theory, and situational leadership to explain the efficacy of various leadership styles. Learners report that the experience enables them to understand their own preferences and tendencies regarding leadership styles.

In answer to the opening question (“What is the best way to lead?”), learners conclude that there is no one best way to lead. The best leadership style depends on situational factors. Learners affirm the importance of reading the situational requirements and flexibly applying the leadership style that is likely to be the most effective. Thus, leaders must have all of the leadership styles in their *toolkit* (Maner, 2016) instead of clinging rigidly to their preferred way of leading. They must be willing and able to switch their styles. This ability to fluidly change one’s style depending on situational demands permits leaders to be effective in many different situations and with a variety of employees and changing workplace conditions (such as globalization, technological change, or workforce diversity; Yukl & Mahsud 2010). Finally, leaders must remember that, rather than being linear, leadership is shared and everyone’s responsibility (Simkins, 2005). It is inherently more complex than what can be presented in 2 x 2 models. Evaluating employees’ levels of self-direction can be challenging (Goodson, McGee & Cashman, 1989), and leaders may misjudge this especially in a complex and changing context.

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APPENDIX 1 LEADER ROLES

Billy	Patty
Jo	Bob

Do not show your role description to anyone. Be as true to your role as much as possible.

YOU ARE BILLY – THE COUNTRY CLUB LEADER

Billy likes people; his priority is getting to know people and helping them to feel comfortable. Work can wait; feeling comfortable is the priority and, indeed is necessary before work can begin. Billy hangs on to his Lego bag (under the table), saying that the team will get to work soon enough, but it's important to get to know each other first. Billy asks the team to talk about their last trip, their weekend, their interests and hobbies, and themselves. That is how he spends his time. His team might get antsy about getting to work, but Billy simply says that work can wait. When Billy joins a team that is already functioning, Billy asks everyone to take a break and stop working so that they can get to know one another. He then begins chatting with the team about their vacations, etc. Billy will be fired despite your best efforts. It's not you, so don't take it personally. (Summary: high interest in and focus on people, zero focus on production/task/organizing work)

YOU ARE BOB – THE AUTOCRATIC LEADER

Bob starts by greeting his team – briefly. He says that we have to get right to work because that's what everyone is here for – to work. Bob tells his team that, under his guidance, they are going to build a mansion for ___ (name the person), that they have to use all the pieces, and that they have to create a story to explain their mansion. Bob divides the Lego pieces in front of him and then assigns specific tasks to each member. For example, a person is responsible for the figures, another has to build a car, another has to organize the pieces, another has to develop the story, and two people have to help Bob build the mansion. Bob keeps “the action” (the assembled materials) in front of him and may undo some of the work of team members, saying that it is not correct. Bob provides specific details (for example, make sure that the mansion is made of red and white bricks, that it is 10 bricks high and perfectly square, etc.) and tells people what to do. Bob is careful to not be overly negative. He knows exactly what he wants and communicates it without being overtly destructive. Bob will be fired, but don't take it personally. (Summary: high focus on work; little consideration of people's needs, suggestions, or talents)

YOU ARE PATTY – THE TEAM LEADER

Patty wants the work to be done but in a supportive and encouraging atmosphere. Patty tells her team what the overall challenge is (build a mansion for ___), that they have to use all the pieces, and that they have to create a story to explain their mansion. She shares her vision, assigns roles, and is detail-oriented and “ever-present.” Patty tries to be both a source of support and encouragement AND direction for the team. She distributes the pieces to everyone and offers compliments for any efforts and ideas. Throughout the exercise, she shares slogans such as, “Teamwork is important,” “Wow, our house is so cool!” “Awesome!” Team members feel her support and guidance in a constant and persistent manner. Patty will be fired, but don't take it personally. (Summary: high focus on both work and people)

YOU ARE JO – THE *LAISSEZ FAIRE* LEADER

Jo is an agreeable person but does not spend much time directing and encouraging her team members' work. Jo greets her team, asks if they've ever played with Lego, tells them they're going to build a mansion for ___, that all the pieces must be used, and that they must create a story to explain the mansion. Jo then asks if there are any questions or comments, and then she responds to any questions. Jo empties the bag of Lego pieces in front of everyone. Only after the team starts their task and confirms that they know what they're doing does Jo tell them that she must leave so that she can prepare for a meeting. She says that she is available for questions if needed. Then, Jo opens her book or notes and does not pay attention to the team. Jo will be fired, but don't take it personally. (Summary: low focus on both work and people; if the team knows what to do, leave them alone)