

NEEDLE AND THREAD: AN ACTIVITY FOR EXAMINING VARIOUS MANAGEMENT BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

The Needle and Thread activity serves several purposes and can be designed to meet a variety of objectives. The activity not only incorporates individual dynamics, communication and interpersonal relationships, but also addresses various management and organization issues such as interdependence, influence and delegation. Relatively little time and few resources are needed for an experience where participants have the opportunity to reflect on their own behavior, the behavior of others, and the impact these observations have on managerial responsibilities. This article explains the Needle and Thread activity and then discusses various elements of what personal, interpersonal and organizational dynamics can be examined.

KEYWORDS: *Interpersonal Skills Communication, Leadership,*

INTRODUCTION

Relevant literature in management education as well literature addressing successful managerial behavior and organizational performance clearly indicate that role playing is an established method of learning. Role playing has long been a strategy used in a variety of classroom and business settings (Beckhard, 1956; Corsini, 1960; Corsini and Howard, 1960; Jackson, 1951; and Johnson & Johnson, 1994). In addition, role playing has been documented as an effective approach to supplement reading and observing, the more conventional methods of learning communication and other interpersonal skills (Huych, 1975; van Ments, 1989, Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997).

Management education literature as well literature examining successful managerial behavior and organizational performance clearly indicate that communication skills are not only essential for effectiveness (Luthans & Larsen, 1986), but also consume a significant part of managerial time (Kotter, 1999). Further, teaching communication skills is an important part of management education (Porter & McKibbin, 1988.) One criticism perpetually plaguing business school education is that graduates with this degree have not been provided sufficient opportunity to develop proficiency in communication skills, oral and written, and other interpersonal behaviors needed to effectively manage people (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Increasingly, organizations demand that their members have good communication and other interpersonal skills. The importance of and interest in communication skills is heightened by an increasing emphasis on team behavior in organizations

operating in a collaborative, interdependent world (Bassin, 1996; Linden, Wayne & Bradway, 1996).

MATERIALS

Sewing needles, thread and scissors are the materials needed for this activity. The size of the eyes for the needles should be neither very large nor impossibly small. If the eyes are too large, the needles are threaded too easily and various aspects of the learning opportunity are squandered. On the other hand, if the eyes of the needles are too small, none of the participants are able to thread the needle and consequently, they focus more on the quality of the materials than on what is to be learned in the activity.

PROCEDURE

Participants are placed into triads. Any number of triads can participate in the activity. The activity has three rounds, and in each round, one person is the Threader, one person the Instruction Giver, and the third person is the Observer. The facilitator explains that the activity will have three rounds, and each person will have an opportunity to be in each one of the three roles. Each triad decides who will be the Threader, the Instruction Giver and the Observer for the first round. The facilitator then gives each Threader a needle and an approximately one foot long piece of thread, the ends of which have been cleanly cut beforehand.

Round One -- Threaders are told to keep their eyes shut until the needle has been threaded or the facilitator stops the round, and if they are tempted to "cheat" by opening their eyes, even if just briefly, then they diminish the value of the learning experience. If desired, blindfolds can be provided to the Threaders. Observers are encouraged to keep notes of the interaction, especially noting implications of behavior for communication, goal setting, feedback, leadership and any other dynamics on which the facilitator wants participants to focus their attention. The participants are told that if they accomplish the task of threading the needle before time is called by the facilitator, they can de-brief the experience among themselves, but otherwise, each triad is to continue until they are told to stop. The facilitator can tell the participants to continue working despite any frustration or discouragement they might experience. A certain amount of frustration is to be expected and is all part of the learning in this activity.

The only rules, other than Threaders keeping their eyes closed, is that Instruction givers can not touch the Threader or otherwise physically direct the thread to the needle. When all

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triads have the requisite materials and are ready to begin, the facilitator starts all groups together. The length of each round is dependent on facilitator preference, the nature of the group and the total time available for the activity. However, rounds of less than 5 minutes and more than 15 are discouraged. The time for all three rounds should remain the same.

When the facilitator calls time for the first round, all triads are given an opportunity to de-brief their experience. They are encouraged to spend time discussing what was helpful, what was not helpful, how to make adjustments for the second round, and to incorporate the information contained in the notes that the Observer has taken.

Round Two -- In the same triads, participants are told that in the second round, they are to switch roles such that they are in a different role than the first round. The same instructions are given regarding Threaders keeping their eyes closed etc. For this round, prior to starting the groups, Threaders are instructed to tear their piece of thread in half, and pick up one of the halves of the thread up such that a torn or frayed end will be threaded into the needle. In addition, they are instructed not to do anything to prepare the thread prior to the start of the round. The Instruction Giver is told that if, once the round begins, the end of the thread needs to be prepped in some way, for example licking the end to shape it, then the Instruction Giver must give the Threader those instructions once the round starts. Once all triads are ready, the facilitator begins the round. Once again, any triad that completes the task before time is called is encouraged to begin de-briefing the round, and once the round is over, all triads are told to de-brief for a specified period of time.

Round Three -- Once again, the roles are to change such that each person in the triad should now be in a role not previously held in the other two rounds. For this round, the facilitator gives each triad a new piece of thread, torn at both ends. Depending upon the room setting, the Threaders are told to put the needle and new piece of thread down on the desk or table in front of them, or in their lap or on their legs. That is, for the third round, the needle and thread do not start in the hands of the Threader. The participants are told that for this round, the instructions will have to include picking up the needle and thread, again, with the Threaders' eyes closed. Once all triads are ready, the facilitator starts the third round. As in other rounds, triads finishing the task early are encouraged to begin de-briefing the round, and once the round is over, all triads are told to de-brief for a specified period of time.

Once all triads have had a chance to de-brief round three as well as their entire three rounds experienced together, they are asked to reassemble as a large group for the remainder of the de-briefing session. The discussion in the group as a whole can include such topics as the implications this activity has for communication, both verbal and nonverbal, leadership, power, goals and goal attainment, giving and receiving feedback, trust, handling frustration, and the continuous improvement process.

DISCUSSION

The Needle and Thread experiential activity serves a variety of purposes in any class, and is able to address a wide array of intrapersonal as well as interpersonal dynamics. As such, the

activity can be discussed from several different perspectives. For example, insights gained in each role are important, as is an examination of the dynamics contained in the process of engaging in the task as a whole.

Inherent in the Threader and Instruction Giver roles are issues of interdependency, trust, power and feedback. Although when asked, participants commonly indicate that either Threaders or Instruction Givers have more power or control in the activity, the task realistically cannot be accomplished with only one of these people participating. Each role must have confidence that the other has the best interests of the triad in mind and trust the other to do the best possible job of cooperating. Just as Threaders who have their eyes closed, people in organizations commonly lack vision and do not know where they stand in any big picture sense. Like Instruction Givers who must instruct Threaders to complete the task, managers in organizations must direct subordinates who may work very diligently to accomplish a task, but can lose or lack entirely a sense of direction and purpose. As an example, commonly in the process of this activity, Threaders will grasp the needle and thread so tightly as to have the tips of their fingers turn white and with the resulting loss of feeling in their fingers, they no longer have a sense of where the needle or thread are located. During the discussion of the activity, the instructor can point this out and relate this to organizational situations where people are trying so hard to accomplish a task, that they lose a sense of where they are in the process.

The vital importance of the Observer role might not be immediately evident, but this role is crucial to the success of the activity. The Observer role relates to issues such as being able to remain an objective participant when appropriate, being adept at maintaining enough distance from a situation to be able to provide feedback and perspective to people who are totally absorbed in a task and can not have this objectivity. The needle threading task in this activity is quite compelling. In most instances, Observers get over-involved in the task by simply watching the needle and thread, and as a result, they do not focus on the participants themselves in order to maintain sufficient distance to be able to provide quality feedback to the triad.

An examination of communication skills that emerge during this activity is important. Here, Observer notes can provide essential information. For example, if the needle does not get threaded, who gets "blamed"? The Threader can be perceived as having failed to competently follow directions, or Instruction Givers can be faulted for giving poor instructions. These roles can also entirely shoulder the blame themselves by saying "I really gave awful instructions." Or "I just couldn't hold the needle steady enough." However, the interdependencies must again be noted here as well as when the needle does get threaded. In these instances, comments such as "You did it!" or "I did it!" are frequent.

In addition, the actual comments made during the activity are frequently instructive regarding various communication issues. Because Observers frequently miss these seemingly innocuous comments, the instructor is encouraged to listen in on various triads and note specific quotes that might be appropriate when discussing the activity. For example, Instruction Givers will frequently make statements like "Move the thread or needle up a titch.", or "Move the thread up an inch." During

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discussion, the instructor can point out that even with eyes open, one would be hard-pressed to know the meaning of a “titch”, and although the concept of an inch might be commonly understood, when eyes are closed, assessing that distance becomes a challenge. These issues can be related to situations in an organization when a manager delegates a task or communicates concepts that others might not understand. Even if a concept is ordinarily understood, under certain prevailing circumstances, understanding is altered, and this activity can address those dynamics.

Asking for and giving feedback appropriately are important aspects of this activity as well as managing people in organizations. Observers should note how much feedback was requested by the other two roles and how much was given. Did the Instruction Givers ask for feedback regarding the helpfulness of their instructions? Did they give feedback to the Threaders regarding progress toward the goal? Did Threaders ask for feedback regarding their progress toward the goal? Did Threaders let Instruction Givers know which instructions were helpful and which were not? These same feedback issues are important for managers when they engage in such activities as delegating and assessing performance.

The Needle and Thread activity also provides an opportunity to examine interpersonal accommodation. For example, do the Threaders and Instruction Givers sit face-to-face regardless of whether such an arrangement is helpful to task completion? Frequently, a more productive arrangement is having Instruction Givers move behind Threaders and in that way can better serve as the “eyes” for the pair as they work on the task.

Leadership style, power, creativity, interpersonal accommodation, planning and preparation, goal attainment, responsibility and dealing with frustration and discouragement are also issues that emerge from this activity and can be examined during the discussion of what occurred. When discussing the activity, participants can be asked about examples of creatively approaching the task. They can be encouraged to reflect on how frustration and or discouragement might have affected their behavior during the activity and whether or not frustration or discouragement had differential affects depending upon being the Threader, Instruction Giver or Observer. The implications of these reflections should be discussed relative to participants’ organizational behavior. In addition, leadership styles from laissez faire (“Just move the thread toward the needle.”) to democratic/participative (“How should we approach this?”) to autocratic (“Here is how we are going to proceed with this.”) emerge as participants engage in this activity and can be explored during discussion.

The Needle and Thread activity also contains an element of continuous improvement. Task difficulty increases for each round. Discussion of the activity can include the observation that when feedback is given appropriately and people have an opportunity to debrief a task upon its completion, expectation that improvement will occur in subsequent tasks of similar nature is realistic.

Upon occasion, a triad will blame the instructor for a needle that has an impossibly small eye, or for faulty thread or some other difficulty they experienced while doing the task. If this happens, the instructor is encouraged to initiate a discussion

regarding assuming responsibility for one’s own actions, and looking first to modify one’s own behavior prior to assuming fault lies with someone else.

The more experience an instructor has with the Needle and Thread activity, the more possibilities for relating behavior in this activity to management and leadership issues both intrapersonal and interpersonal. In addition, the more active an instructor is in collecting examples of words, phrases and behaviors during the activity, the more thorough the instructor can be in leading a discussion of the learning opportunities afforded by the activity and their implications for management and organizational behavior.

CONCLUSION

The Needle and Thread activity, a seemingly simple exercise, potentially addresses many aspects of personal and organizational issues. A wide variety of intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics emerge as participants work together to thread a needle when the threaders have their eyes closed. Such management topics as communication, leadership, delegation, feedback, goal attainment can be explored and discussed as part of the analysis of what occurred during the three rounds of this activity. The implications for people who manage or aspire to manage readily emerge as a result of this discussion.

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