STAR POWER: A SIMULATION FOR UNDERSTANDING POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, empowerment is a frequently used tool by organizations to enhance the performance potential of their employees. The purpose of this paper and the proposed presentation is to introduce a simulation called Star Power (Shirts, 1993) which deals with issues related to power and its use. Through active participation in a simulated organization, the participants are expected to personally experience the various facets of power and the effects of powerlessness on their own and others' behavior.

STAR-POWER

Star Power (Shirts, 1993) is a game designed for eighteen to thirty-six participants and takes approximately ninety minutes to play and debrief. It can be played in two fifty-minute sessions as well. In this game, participants personally experience a corporate political structure's impact on political games, empowerment, powerlessness and their possible consequences on their and others' behavior. In this game, the participants are divided into three groups of approximately equal numbers. The game involves use of different colored chips where different colors have different points associated with them. The chips are used to classify individuals into different status groups thus creating a hierarchy similar to a corporation.The group at the top of the hierarchy is given the right to make the rules for the lower-level groups, and that is when the dynamics related to power truly unfold. However, in order to get from the first stage (random assignment of participants into three groups) to formation of three groups with different status, much as to be managed. How that is accomplished is explained below.

First Round:

Initially the participants are randomly assigned to three groups of approximately equal numbers and are told that they will be trading and bargaining different colored chips to accumulate the highest points possible as three persons with the highest points will be declared the winners of the game. Each individual in each of the three groups is randomly given five chips of different colors and then the value of each color is explained. The scoring chart (appendix 1) is displayed and explained to the entire group. The facilitator also explains the trading rules (appendix 2). After the rules have been explained, the first trading session takes place which lasts from 8 to 10 minutes depending on the number of participants. At the end of the first trading session, the participants display their scores on the board. At this point, the participants are regrouped on the basis of their scores.

The one-third of the participants with the highest scores are now formed into a group called the Squares; the one-third with the lowest scores now sit together as the Triangles; and the third with middle-range scores will become the Circles. Once the groups are formed, a bonus point session is announced and its rules are explained to the participants (appendix 3). The purpose of the session is to create opportunities for promotion/demotion and to intensify the group dynamics. Depending on the scores after the bonus sessions, individuals are promoted to Squares or demoted to Triangles. This completes the first round whose phases are trading, bonus session and promotion.

Second Round:

This round has the same phases as the first one, but the Squares draw from a pool of chips that have a higher number of high-point chips than

the pools of the other two groups. After the second trading session, a bonus session is conducted and the points of the second trading and bonus sessions are added to the scores from the first round. If appropriate, promotions and demotions to and from Squares are made.

At this time, the facilitator announces, "Because the Squares have worked so hard, they now have the right to make the rules for the game. Any group may suggest rule changes, via written message to the Squares, but the Squares may accept, reject, ignore or modify any such suggestions." After giving the Squares some time to make the rules and others a chance to make their own plans, Squares are asked to announce any new rules they establish to all the participants, unless they want the rules kept secret. After this, the game has no specific structure and the facilitator has to manage it as things develop. The expectation is created that after the new rules are formulated by the Squares, the third round will take place according to the new rules. However, the facilitator encourages Triangles and Circles to make their own plans for dealing with the new rules. They are informed that they have the same alternatives as anyone who is part of a system. They are told that they must obey the rules without question, try to change the system by working within the system (or through other means), or they could even overwhelm of sabotage the system. Much takes place at this time. Actually, the dynamics between the Squares and the other two groups may make it difficult (or unnecessary) to hold the third round. Also at this time, a participant will step forward and take charge because the facilitator practically transfers his authority to the Squares.

What usually happens is that Squares make the rules that protect and enhance their own power. The other two groups experience a sense of powerlessness and the frustrations associated with it. Many times, the Squares and the circles get organized and revolt against the Squares. Other times the Circles and Triangles give up and drop out. If the frustration and conflict reaches a certain level and the groups are unable to handle it

through reasonable strategies, the facilitator should end the game. The experience then should be analyzed and discussed in the debriefing session. Recently, in one of my classes, Squares were able to see the unreasonableness of their behavior. Recent readings about how to appropriately empower others became part of their discussion prior to the debriefing session. Drawing upon this knowledge, they were able to work with circles and Triangles in a way that a successful third round could be conducted. The debriefing session then analyzed the changes Squares had made to make a dysfunctional system functional.

Debriefing Session:

The nature of the debriefing session will vary depending upon the purpose and the audience for which the facilitator used the game. Because I primarily use the game in my graduate classes in conjunction with the chapter related to power and politics, I use the debriefing session to highlight issues related to political games people play and their impact, powerlessness and its consequences, and techniques for creating empowerment and the benefits of doing so. Students are usually surprised at their own behavior and the intensity of their feelings.

Here are some general themes that can be developed and used across various situations in which the game my be used. These are: (a) The nature of power and in particular the need for self-perpetuation of power by those who hold it. (b) The impact of system on human behavior and the need to change the system if meaningful change in human behavior is desired within that system. (c) Consequences of powerlessness and its impact on system effectiveness. (d) Challenges in creating an empowered organization when powerholders want to self-preserve. (e) Differences in perception of those who hold the power and those who don't and the ability of the two groups to work together effectively.

References and appendices available upon request.