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AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE YOU CAN TINKER WITH--DESIGNED TO TEACH
ASPECTS OF TEAM BUILDING, COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP, CUSTOMER
SERVICE AND QUALITY CONTROL

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INTRODUCTION

Today, there is more and more emphasis being placed on teams and teamwork. As instructors of future business leaders, we are asked to foster team-oriented skills in our students. The following series of three related experiential exercises were designed to develop team-based skills. Like many existing team based exercises, these exercises provide for the student an experientially based appreciation of teams and teamwork, but they go farther than many existing team-based exercises by emphasizing the relationship between a professional team and a customer or client who requires the team's services.

Intended Audience. Any setting where team building is required. This includes, but is not limited to, undergraduate students, graduate students or working professionals

Audience Participation. Exercise requires at least 9 participants, with a recommended maximum of 21. If the class contains more than 21 students, the remainder should serve as spectators. The spectators can become active participants in the debriefing.

Time. Thirty-five to 50 minutes.

Exercise Description. The exercise consists of three discrete, but related sessions, described below.

Equipment Needed. (1) A large box of Tinker Toys, Legos, or an Erector Set or a set of materials for which the average person could assemble a fairly simple set of products in 5-10 minutes; (2) the instructor also needs a clear picture or photograph of two completed products; (3) the instructor needs a set of black and white pictures or photographs (from

4-6) for a third product. However, none of the individual pictures for the third product should show the complete view of the entire product. Each picture should provide an "almost" complete view of the final product, so that the viewer experiences some ambiguity and is unclear as to exactly what the final product should look like, and; (4) a stopwatch for timing each session.

Session 1. During the first session, 3-7 people are selected to form a team to work on a project, ostensibly for a customer. A team leader is chosen and taken out of the room. The team leader is told that the team has to make a product. The leader is shown a picture of the product, but told they cannot show the picture to anyone else on the team. However, the leader can refer to the picture during the session. The team leader is given the packet of materials (i.e., tinker toys) and told to re-enter the room and begin work in whatever way he/she wants-just let the instructor know when the final, perfect product is completed. The leader re-enters the room, assembles his/her team and gets them working on the product. The remaining participants are told to quietly watch and observe the process. The instructor times the session. Session 1 Time: 10-12 minutes, including instructions.

Purpose/Point of Session 1. The authors recommend that the instructor wait until at least the first two sessions have been completed, and preferably all three, before debriefing. The point of this session will probably be obvious to students. It is difficult to complete a team project when the leader (or someone) withholds important information or communicates vital information through one type of medium (i.e., only verbally as opposed to verbally and graphically or pictorially).

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Session 2. A second, new and different group is formed and a leader chosen. The leader is taken out of the room and shown a picture of a product (different from the first group's product) to make. However the leader is told that they can do anything they want (including showing the picture to all the members) in assembling the product. The leader reenters the room, assembles his/her team and gets them working on the product. The remaining participants are told to quietly watch and observe the process. The instructor times the session. Session 2 Time - 5-7 minutes, including instructions.

Purpose/Point of Session 2. At this point the instructor can de-brief the first two sessions. The instructor can get the participants to explain why the first group was slower than the second. The instructor can also discuss the dynamics each leader employed in getting the teams to assemble the products. De-briefing can take between 15-20 minutes.

Session 3. This is perhaps the most interesting session. Again, a new and different team is formed. A leader is chosen and taken out of the room. The leader is told that the instructor represents a "typical" customer, who has "some idea" of what he/she wants from the team (i.e., company), but is not totally sure. The leader is shown one of the black and white pictures, which illustrates a product or object which looks "almost" complete or looks complete, but it is hard to see exactly all of the parts which are required to assemble the final product. The customer tells the leader that he/she can show the team the product, but if the leader "should need more information about the product, the leader should contact the customer (who will be in the room with more pictures) for more information. The leader re-enters the room, assembles his/her team and gets them working on the product. The participants are told to quietly watch and observe the process. Someone other than the instructor times the session.

Usually, it takes about 4-5 minutes before the team is stumped as to the exact way in which the product is to be assembled. At that point, the leader tells his teammates that the customer either gave incomplete information about the product, or that the customer does not know exactly what he/she really wants. So, the leader goes and meets with the customer for more information. The customer can either provide another picture of the same product-but again with the picture being somewhat incomplete, or the customer can change the picture (and product entirely). This process can go on for about 10 minutes until the team finally is able to assemble the product exactly the way the customer wants it or convinces the customer to be satisfied with the product the way the team has built it. Session 3 Time - 10-15 minutes depending upon the points the instructor wants to make.

Purpose/Point of Session 3. If the instructor has not de-briefed sessions 1 and 2, this should be done in conjunction with session 3. It is the author's experience that it is better to debrief all the sessions together as then students can easily compare and contrast the dynamics of all them as if they were actually one large session. In terms of session 3, it can be debriefed in several ways. First, students can be asked if it is reasonable for a customer to not really know what they want and whether the team's (or leader's) role is to help clarify what it is the customer wants? A second aspect has to do with the clarification issue: Does the clarification problem lie with the leader, who cannot seem to get the proper information each time he/she visits the customer? Or, should the entire team meet with the customer? How should the team leader interact with the team under such circumstances? A further topic revolves around the frustrations team members have when they have to keep disassembling one prototype and starting a new one. The instructor can use this issue to discuss ways in which the team can and should handle such situations. De-briefing all three sessions can take between 20-30 minutes.