LEADER BEHAVIOR FEEDBACK: A LEARNING EXERCISE

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The need for effective leaders is pronounced in the competitive, global business world. This environment demands that managers "make things happen" within complex organizational structures with diverse populations. Business students receive management theory in class but most leave college without understanding either their leadership behaviors or how their behavior affects leadership outcomes. Although our behavioral course work has been experientially driven for many years, leadership theory on behavior and outcomes always seemed difficult to operaionalize. This lead us to develop a process to help students recognize some aspects of their leadership style, and to appreciate the value of obtaining feedback concerning their leadership styles.

Simulations provide effective learning experiences as students are more likely to retain outcomes over time compared to conventional classroom instruction (Randel, Morris, Wetzel, & Whitehill, 1992). One simulation specifically related to leader behavior is The Looking Glass, Inc. (McCall & Lombardo, 1982; Lombardo & McCall, 1982). The Looking Glass, Inc., simulation is an in-basket exercise which creates a day in the lives of the top twenty managers of a mid-sized manufacturing corporation. Using The Looking Glass, Inc. as a laboratory, 80 undergraduates in two management fundamentals classes participated in an exercise to obtain information to modify, add, or eliminate particular behaviors in order to enhance organizational results. We based the approach on Luft's (1984) model of interpersonal perception. He suggests self-perception is limited and opportunities for growth and development are increased when feedback is received from others.

Also many studies (Bass and Yammarino, 1991, London and Wohlers, 1991; Riggio and Cole, 1992) indicate the presence of a leniency factor in self-evaluation. That is, individuals generally rate themselves higher than others rate them, with generally negative performance outcomes. Thus developing an awareness and an appreciation for giving and receiving organized feedback is also an important part of this experiential learning process.

While the merits of feedback are well documented, (Erez, 1977; Hillman Schwandt and Bertz, 1990; Vecchio, 1995), upward feedback is particularly problematic. The balance of power is unequal so a subordinate is at risk unless upward feedback is positive. Thus, the pedagogical challenge is clear--develop an exercise that provides upward feedback and then compare that to self-feedback. And, do this in a way that can be generalized and reflected upon by the class as a whole.

THE LEARNING EXERCISE

Overview

Following experiential learning principles outlined by Lewin (1935), and Lewin and Grabbe (1945), students were encouraged to enter the simulation as they would a real business. Acting in supervisory and subordinate roles during The Looking Glass, Inc. simulation, students gained concrete management experiences. From the experiences, students generated hypotheses about leader and subordinate views of leader behavior. Then they complete a questionnaire about their supervisor's leadership style. The supervisory self-responses were compared to their subordinates' responses. Summary statistics of this result provided the data for reflection, debriefing and learning. Questions were also assigned to encourage individual students and then groups of students to reflect and learn further from their activities.

The Facilitator's Role

The facilitator's role throughout the simulation can be managerial. If a student assistant is not available, ask students to volunteer to fulfill the needed administrative tasks prior to the simulation. Start this process about a month before the simulation. Some of the tasks include securing an appropriate location, setting up chairs and desks, making nametags, organization charts, and so forth. Adding variety to the simulation such as conducting the simulation at an actual business site or conducting the simulation on a different day than class day enhances the activity but also provides opportuni-

ties for things to go wrong. At least for the first time, it is suggested that the simulation be conducted on campus.

Generally the facilitator may be needed at the beginning of the simulation to help manage tasks that are beyond student control. Once the simulation starts, students are capable and should be challenged to directly handle issues such as absences, tardy managers, lack of interest, and so forth. Gentle coaching with questions like, "Who is your boss?" "How do you think it should be handled?" helps. Not answering, and reflecting problems back to the student managers, helps them attain independence more quickly. Once the simulation is underway, it is fun to walk around and listen to hierarchical and peer conversations. Observations will help the illumination of concepts during the debriefing process.

THE EXPERIENTIAL PROCESS

Step 1. Develop a psychological contract

Edgar Schein (1970) developed the notion of a psychological contract. Authors recognizing the benefit of psychological contracts developed exercises to facilitate this activity. Some examples are KoIb (1991); Lau and Shani (1988); and Marcic, D. (1988). Employing psychological contracts helps the instructor learn about student expectations and helps students learn about your expectations. This two-way communication exercise empowers students to question course goals, instructor philosophy, and voice important concerns they may have. This dialogue processing can set the basis of learning and change, therefore its importance cannot be overstated.

One purpose of this particular exercise is to develop student awareness that individuals see situations, actions and issues differently, depending on their experience, personality traits and whether they are appraising self versus appraising others. If the instructor does not request feedback during the development of the psychological contract the instructor should request it before the simulation. It could be included as an integral part of a chapter on human resources, or executed during any class. Giving feedback is a learning point for students and modeling this behavior will help students later when they are giving and receiving feedback after the simulation. The first student comment may be given

cautiously, but if it is received reasonably, students will make additional comments. Modeling non-defensive listening, accepting comments and soliciting additional feedback, will set the tone for students to give and receive feedback in The Looking Glass, Inc. and other experiential exercises.

Step 2. Develop hypotheses about supervisory vs subordinate appraisals

Provide students information about behavioral and situational components of leadership. This information is in most organizational behavior and management principles textbooks Ask students to develop tentative expectations and explanations of the view of leader behavior by both the leaders and their subordinates. Previous research may be mentioned; it has confirmed differences in rater perceptions of leader behavior (Avolio, Yammarino, and Bass, 1991; Riggio and Cole, 1992; Roberts and Page, 1992), and in subordinate/superior perceptions of leader behaviors (Bass and Yammarino, 1991; Harris and Schaubroeck, 1988; Yu and Murphy, 1993).

Students in this exercise developed the following hypotheses; any related hypothesis will serve this point.

HI There will be no difference in the boss's (self) and subordinate's evaluation on the supportive dimension of the leadership scale

H2 There will be no difference in the boss's (self) and subordinate's evaluation on the instrumental dimension of the leadership scale

Step 3. Conduct the simulation.

To accommodate three sections of Management Fundamentals classes two Looking Glass Organizations were established. The simulation took place on a Saturday morning for three and one half-hours. After the simulation, lunch was provided, and the exercise continued with a two-hour debriefing. First in the debriefing students completed questionnaires which measured instrumental and supportive leader behavior. Two congruent questionnaires based on House and Dessler's (1974) Leadership Scale, and modified by Page, Roberts and Schriesheim (1993) were developed. Superiors

responded to one set of questions and subordinates responded to a similar set of questions. One questionnaire asked participants in the role of superior how frequently they behaved in a specific way toward each subordinate. The other questionnaire asked participants in the role of subordinate, to report how frequently they perceived their boss behaving in a specific way towards them. A seven-item Likert scale enabled participants to report a range of behaviors.

Next, each Looking Glass: Inc. president was required to prepare a state of the company address. It took them fifteen to twenty minutes to prepare for this ten-minute presentation. Students took a short break during this preparation time. Returning from their break, each Looking Glass Organization went to a breakout room where their president presented his/her analysis of the company's accomplishments.

The large group debriefing followed in this learning exercise. One important element here was a letting-off of steam, or closure, after a very hectic four hours of simulation. The debrief was deliberately short because the students had been simulating for about four hours and their attention spans and time constraints were severely challenged.

The large group debriefing began with some general questions, such as: "How do you feel about the simulation? Students were given about ten minutes to cathart and release anxieties, then more specific questions were posed, such as: "How would you describe your leadership style during the simulation? Which behavior were you more comfortable with? Instrumental? Supportive? Which did you use more often? Explain. What about your boss? How would you describe his/her leadership style during the simulation? Which behavior did you observe more often? Instrumental? Supportive? Describe.

During this process results of a prior The Looking Glass, Inc. simulation were presented. See Roberts and Page (1992). Students noted that subordinate/superior perceptions were different, particularly concerning the supportive domain. Previous participants, acting in supervisory roles, had a "rose colored" view of their leadership style, because they rated themselves higher in supervisory skills for both instrumental and supportive dimensions, than did their

subordinates.

Additional questions posed to the class at this point included: What are the implications of differences in boss/subordinate perceptions? Should the boss address them? How can he/she address them? What are the advantages and disadvantages of seeking feedback? These questions sparked a vigorous discussion about self and other appraisals, boss/subordinate perceptions and the necessity of accurate feedback upward and in other directions.

Step 4. Individual reflection

The learning model requires reflections and conclusions after an exercise or simulation, which lead to insights and learning. So, for this exercise students were asked to provide written answers to nine questions one week after the simulation. This effort was to force them to record the results of their reflections of the simulation exercise. The first question asked how they generally felt about the simulation and elicited about an 80-90% positive response. Students generally viewed the simulation as enjoyable, educational and a good experience.

The next four questions required each student to focus on behaviors of others that helped or hindered his/her job performance, and his/her behaviors that helped or hindered others in their job performance. Behaviors that helped the respondents' performance included responsiveness, communications, and teamwork Behaviors which hindered job performance were approximately opposite.

The fourth question in this series "Did you do anything to hinder others?" elicited few responses. In other words, there was a modest leniency effect exhibited here, which is a teaching point as well as an impetus to continue the exercise.

The last question was seminal to this exercise. It was based on the large group meeting directly after the simulation, where the instructors presented a mini lecture with data from the previous years "run" of the simulation. The data showed that the supervisor's view of self-leadership behaviors was more favorable than the subordinate's view of their behaviors. The instructors made this leniency effect very clear in a mini lecture during the large group simulation debrief. The last question asked the students to discuss the organiza-

tional importance of supervisor-subordinate differences of views of leadership behaviors. Most comments about this difference were "on target" for the instructors. Students mentioned that the boss needs to be empathetic, needs a self-checkup, must be aware, must communicate, must be open; and several commented on the potential problems, which might arise due to a leniency effect. It was interesting however, that about 90% of the students made a comment which suggested they "got" the point of the mini lecture; i.e., the leniency effect. However, only about 75% indicated any negative aspects of the effect. So, about 25% of students apparently did not "get" the main point of the exercise at this stage in the processing.

Step 5. Small group debrief

Two weeks later, the actual data for the simulation was provided to each student in written form with the average scores of the supervisors self ratings and the ratings by subordinates. Also provided were statistical tests of significance of supervisor/subordinate differences and an explanation of the statistical results. Differences were significant. The students were formed into small groups with this information from their simulation and asked to provide group answers to two questions.

The first question concerned potential negative consequences of the leniency effect. Approximately 90 percent of the groups commented about negative organizational consequences and/or indicated that the leniency effect should be addressed in organizations. Many of these answers indicated that managers must initiate some sort of process/feedback to overcome the leniency problem. The remaining 10 percent of the groups did not indicate a problem or suggest the situation should be addressed; in other words, they did not conclude that the leniency affect was a problem. The authors acknowledge that the exercise was probably unsuccessful for those students.

The second question, "To what do you attribute the differences in perception between boss and subordinates" elicited a very mixed bag of group responses. From "human nature" to "lack of self objectivity" to "bosses don't check until problems arrive' to "differences in expectations, social status, education, career stages' and so forth. There was no consistent pattern in the answers and no good evidence of

worthy learning outcomes for this second small group question.

SUMMARY

Giving and receiving feedback can be troublesome. It is, nevertheless, critical to human growth and important to managers expecting to achieve organizational goals. This experiential learning activity provides feedback to students in a specific way. Participation in The Looking Glass, Inc. provides data for reflecting and learning about supervisory behaviors, feedback, and the leniency effect. Students review data from previous Looking Glass simulations that demonstrate the leniency effect, and establish hypotheses about their own behaviors. Later they receive data about their own behavior during the simulation, and reflect upon their specific experience. From this activity, most students recognize and understand the importance of giving and receiving feedback about their behavior, the likelihood of the leniency effect, and its deleterious effects upon supervisory performance.

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