

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 17, 1990

THE CONCEPT OF FACE" AND THE APPLICATION OF EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES IN AN ORIENTAL CULTURE

EDITH C. YUEN, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

VIVIEN LIM, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

ABSTRACT

The experiential exercise is a learning tool developed in the west to facilitate learning by making learners responsible for the learning process. Effective experiential learning depends to a considerable extent on the willingness of the learners to engage in self-disclosure and the degree of openness and trust existing amongst group members. This paper examines participants' willingness to engage in self-disclosure in an oriental culture where "face" and the fear of "loss of face" are important considerations. The study was conducted in Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

A review of the literature shows that there are neither elements and conditions essential for the effectiveness of the experiential learning method (Laird, 1986; Hanson, 1981; Thayer, 1976). among the elements identified, one which is of particular relevance to facilitators using experiential exercises in the oriental context is self disclosure. Self-disclosure is an integral part of experiential learning as it is a precondition for building a climate of trust and openness in the class. By disclosing himself, the learner is actually building a climate, which encourages others to follow suit.

While openness and willingness to engage in self disclosure are, to a certain extent, personal characteristics affected by the disposition of an individual, research by social and cultural anthropologists has shown that such traits are also affected by the culture of a society. Prominent in many oriental cultures is the concept of "face". In the concept of "face" is the assumption of a distinction between the "self known only to oneself or to those whom one is closely acquainted with" and the "self as one presents to 'outsiders'". The concern about "face" in oriental cultures raises the question of participants' willingness to engage in self-disclosure in experiential exercises.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

A questionnaire on willingness to engage in self disclosure and the effectiveness of experiential learning was administered to 85 final-year students who were undergoing a Human Resource Management (HRM) course at the National University of Singapore. In the instrument, "willingness to disclose oneself" was measured by three items arranged in increasing degree of specificity and personal risk. Two aspects of "learning effectiveness" were included: effectiveness in helping participants develop self-awareness and acquire new skills. Each aspect was measured by a direct question asking the respondents to assess the degree of effectiveness on a Likert-type scale.

The relationships between willingness to disclose oneself and four independent variables were also explored. The four independent variables were: i) individual commitment to develop self-awareness; ii) group members' willingness to disclose themselves; iii) the existence of a climate of trust and openness; iv) the existence of support, empathy and

understanding among group members.

FINDINGS

1. While generally the students were "neutral" about disclosing non-threatening information about themselves, they were more reluctant when this involved personal information. However, when disclosure entailed the risk of "losing face", the level of willingness was significantly lower.
2. Participants who perceived group members as being unwilling to disclose themselves tended to find experiential exercises ineffective as a learning tool. The reverse was true when group members were perceived to be open.
3. As for the relationship between individual willingness to disclose, and learning effectiveness, the findings showed that disclosure at the general level was adequate to achieve effectiveness in skill development. However, effectiveness in the development of self-awareness was significantly associated with individual willingness to disclose at the specific and sensitive levels.
4. All four independent variables: the willingness of group members to disclose themselves, the existence of a climate of trust and openness, the existence of a supportive group environment and individual commitment to self discovery, were found to be significantly related to individual willingness to engage in disclosure of a general and specific nature. However the relationships between the four independent variables and disclosure at the sensitive level were mixed. Apparently, a participant may be committed to self discovery or may find group members supportive and empathetic, but remains unwilling to engage in sensitive disclosure.

CONCLUSION

The study confirms that local participants in experiential exercises are generally reluctant to disclose themselves to others. This is particularly so when disclosure becomes either more specific or when it entails the risk of a loss of "face". Hence in conducting experiential exercises in cultures where "face" and the fear of a loss of "face" are important considerations, facilitators should pay special attention to this issue. Based on the findings of the study, the paper proposes a number of ways to overcome this problem.

Jenster P and Duncan D, (1986), "Creating a Context of Commitment", *OBTR*, 3:60-71.

Laird D, (1986), *Approaches to Training and Development*, Wesley, 113-128.

Thayer L (1976), *50 Strategies for Experiential Learning*, UA Press.