

A KISS BEFORE DEBRIEFING

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A particular experiential exercise I find useful for promoting leaning points up many of the needs of effective debriefing. The exercise falls in the motivation segment of my course and requires only that students have read the assigned chapter before attending class. No other advanced warning is given.

I walk into class and move directly to the board, writing “the topic for discussion today is motivation.” I turn and face the class and wait. No pleasantries, no ice-breaking, no sound. Silence. The air gets thick with tension, and the squirming begins in about 30 seconds. After about a minute or a minute and a half, the silence gets intolerable, and the anxiety level is very high. Finally, one of the students inevitably, can’t stand it any longer and blurts out a tension reducing wisecrack. I throw the student a piece of candy (a Hershey “kiss”). Laughter mixed with disbelief: Another wisecrack, another piece of candy. Another wisecrack, but no more candy until some reference to the topic of motivation is made. Selected reinforcement continues until the topic for discussion, motivation, is initiated. Of course, confusion continues. Some students try to “psych” me out; others try to get a handle on the process. Some retreat to their texts to elicit pearls of wisdom (real pearls get lots of candy!), while some are furious with me and withdraw.

The process continues for one to two hours without a word from the instructor. The variety of reactions would be too lengthy to review here (some throw the candy back to motivate me, others form strategy groups to plot their retaliation, or to brainstorm my reasons for linking the exercise to the chapter in the text), but the lessons to be learned regarding the debriefing process are highlighted. I believe this to be so because of the extreme ambiguity of the situation, the surprise, and the unpredictable reactions of different groups of students.

Debriefing such an event is important for personal and professional reasons. Many students take it personally if they don’t receive enough candy. Others believe they have been double-crossed (by me) and run the risk of dysfunctional behavior for the rest of the term. But more important, without proper debriefing, the exercise becomes a game devoid of meaning and a waste of precious class time.

The debriefing model focuses on particular aspects of the exercise in terms of activity, time and direction. By activity I refer to events and particular occurrences that have learning

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potential. Time is a factor as the class develops progressive or regressive behaviors, and is related to organizational growth. Direction refers to goal oriented behavior, both in terms of identification and implementation.

Six specific areas are explored in the debriefing

- 1) identification of different perception and attitudes of what occurred,
- 2) linking the exercise to specific content theory for this segment of the course,
- 3) linking the exercise to skill building techniques (useful at time of exercise and in subsequent class sessions),
- 4) development of a common set of experiences for further data analysis,
- 5) making sure that each participant, or group of participants receives feedback on the nature of their involvement and their specific behaviors,
- 6) re-establishing desired classroom climate.

A “kiss” without debriefing is a class without learning.