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LEADERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN DECISION-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a short experiential exercise for imparting an appreciation of the effects of empowerment in decision-making situations such as occur in flattened, team-oriented organizations. The exercise is useful for instructors treating notions of empowerment, particularly if they are attempting to really impress upon students the impact of empowerment on attitudes and the ability of people to work together. The exercise is short enough to be conducted in a single class session and is appropriate for an introductory course in organization behavior.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The literature on leadership is increasingly attending to two aspects of power--abuse of power and empowerment. The study by McCall and Lombardo (1983) is highly interesting in this regard. They identified approximately twenty executives who had risen to the top of their firms, matching them with another group of twenty executives who had failed to reach their career aspirations. Those "unsuccessful" executives were described as insensitive, cold, and unable to delegate to others or build a team (Whetten and Cameron, 1991, p.28°), while the "successful" executives had used their power to "empower" others and to accomplish exceptional organizational objectives. That is, they used their influence in positive ways, and so doing gained more power and formal organizational authority, creating a positive, upward spiral that carried them up the organizational ladder (Whetten and Cameron, 1991, p.281).

Thus empowerment, or the process by which managers help others acquire and use the power needed to make decisions affecting themselves at work, is essential for effective leadership:

"More than ever before, managers in progressive organizations are expected to be good at--and highly comfortable at--empowering the people with whom they work. Rather than considering power to be something held only at higher levels in the traditional 'pyramid' of organizations, this view considers power to be something that can be shared by everyone working in flatter and more collegial structures" (Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn, 1994, p.473).

Empowerment is becoming increasingly common in a climate of organizational downsizing. As the number of employees or staff in an organization is cut back, fewer people share the decision-making power. Thus, throughout the organization, at lower levels as well as top echelons, organizational members engage increasingly in decision making. Ideally, satisfaction is enhanced through participative processes that allow higher involvement of workers and staff.

OBJECTIVES AND USE OF THE EXERCISE

One of our educational challenges is to impart an appreciation for and sensitivity to empowering others. As instructors, it is essential that we: a) transmit a clear understanding of this concept, b) provide students of management with opportunities to engage in decision making that allow the implementation and practice of these concepts, and c) create classroom opportunities for feedback on students' leadership styles and the extent to which they are receptive to engaging others in decision processes.

A useful role-play that allows us to achieve some of these objectives is "The New Truck Dilemma" by Maier, Solem, and Maier (1975). The instructions to the role-play describe the work setting in a telephone company with a group consisting of one supervisor and five telephone repairers, each of whom drives a small truck to various locations in the city to do repair work. The names of the crew members along with information regarding their seniority, ages, and the age and make of the truck currently driven by each individual are as follows:

George	age 52	17 years seniority	2-yr old Ford
Bill	age 31	11 years seniority	5-yr old Dodge
John	age 42	10 years seniority	4-yr old Ford
Charlie	age 32	5 years seniority	3-yr old Ford
Hank	age 27	3 years seniority	5-yr old Chevy

The supervisor learns that a new truck has been allocated for assignment to one of the crew. In addition to the information above concerning the crew, each participant (repairer) is provided with an individual role description, including some data that could be used to argue why he or she should receive the new truck. The supervisor's role description charges him/her with making a fair decision regarding

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who will be assigned the new truck, and notes their dissatisfaction with his past decisions. The supervisor is also told to “put the decision to the crew themselves” and specifically instructed not to take a position. “Do not take a position yourself because you want to do what the crew think is fair”. A seventh group member acts as observer while the others engage in the role-play. The observer instructions provide guidance for observing the supervisor’s management style, effectiveness, etc. The observer shares insights with the group following the role-play. To ensure that the goals of this exercise are realized in the classroom, the instructor should attend to a number of issues as discussed below.

Timing

Preferably this exercise is conducted following students’ exposure to theories of leadership and consideration of leadership styles. This allows the observer to focus on relevant leadership characteristics such as the degree of task or person orientation. Also, it allows the student who role-plays the supervisor to apply some learning to a real problem.

All Participants are Feedback Givers

In addition to the original instructions to the observer, we ask the observer and the group members to diagnose the leadership style of the supervisor on the leadership grid (Blake and Mouton, 1978). Consequently, all participants take part in giving feedback to the supervisor, who receives multiple opinions.

Fairness of the Decision

In examining the decision making process, the exercise relies primarily on the Observer Instruction Sheet focusing on these main issues:

1. How did the supervisor present the problem?
2. What occurred in the discussion?
3. What did the supervisor do to help the group explore ideas?

While discussion of these points relates to fairness, the issue of fairness is more thoroughly focused upon by raising an additional question in the discussion following the exercise, namely “How many members in each group are satisfied/dissatisfied with the decision”. We recognize that a decision may be fair and leave some group members dissatisfied. However, we also believe that the same decision, when

thoroughly explained and discussed among group members, leaves fewer group members dissatisfied. Following a brief report of how many group members are satisfied/dissatisfied, we encourage the group members to account for their experience.

Self Awareness

To maximize the impact of feedback to the supervisor, the instructor also should act as an observer, without being designated formally as such. It is important that the instructor move among the role-playing groups trying to “diagnose” the level of “empowerment.” In a later stage of the exercise, when group members examine the dynamics of the decision process, the instructor can provide additional insights and observations. This is important in this exercise, since some students’ leadership styles are totally incongruent with the instructions to “put the decision to the crew themselves”. They appear overly independent by making the decision themselves to the extent that they are not even aware of the instructions. Feedback to these people can lead to considerable self-awareness. It is quite interesting that these individuals may reach quality decisions that leave all group members dissatisfied.

Gender

In the original exercise, as cited here, all the repairers’ names are male. If desired, the names can be changed to either unisex names (e.g., Chris, Dana, Kim, Lynn, Pat, Sandy, etc.) or to male/female pairs (e.g., Don/Dawn, Gale/Gail, Gene/Jean, Randy/Randi, Joe/Jo, Terry/Ten, etc.).

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