

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

Dealing With Power: AN Experiential Exercise Using Movie and Personal Diary Analysis Techniques

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ABSTRACT

Organizations exercise power to enforce formal and informal norms that often conflict with the natural inclinations of individuals who operate within the organizations. This paper presents an experiential exercise that combines insights from exposure to a popular movie with personal diary techniques to sensitize students to the way these norms operate, providing students with insights into how they might survive organizational pressures without losing their sense of power and identity.

INTRODUCTION

Few topics are more central to the way students relate to organizations than power. Organizations can be defined as "a collection of people working together in a division of labor to achieve a common purpose" (Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn 1988 p. 10), whereas power can be defined as "the ability to get someone else to do something you want done or the ability to make things happen in the way you want" (Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn 1988, p. 445). The interdependence created by the division of labor in an organization and the exigency of trying to achieve a common purpose makes the exercise of power absolutely essential.

In practice, the exercise of power generally goes far beyond the mere directing of specialized personal work efforts toward an organizational purpose. Group theory suggests that group cohesion and, hence, potency can be enhanced by (among other things) exacting demands on members for conformity and support. Groups enforce these demands by administering sanctions to members who fail to follow group norms (Hackman 1976).

The price of this conformity can take two separate, but related, forms: First, it can alienate individuals from the organization. They may simply leave, or they may engage in non-productive, hostile activities such as those chronicled in the classic Hawthorne studies (Rothlisberger and Dickson 1939). Second, they may become alienated from themselves as well, adapting to group pressures and internal conflict by becoming apathetic, disinterested, and noninvolved, substituting a desire for money or other extrinsic rewards for a desire to self-actualize through intrinsically rewarding activities (Argyris 1957). The former pattern tends to be unhealthy for the organization. The latter tends to be unhealthy for the individual as well as the organization.

This paper describes an exercise that can be used in various types of classes to help students learn healthy ways of dealing with power --a way that achieves mutuality (between organizational and personal needs) and personal growth, opening the door to patterns of thought and behavior that are both organizationally and individually healthy.

VARIETIES OF POWER LAB TRAINING

Experiential exercises dealing with power can be characterized along two dimensions: First is the primary

objective of the exercise. Is it to produce some type of change in the way people relate to and/or use power (performance), or is it to increase people's sensitivity to power issues? Second is the focus of the exercise. Is it on dealing with environmental characteristics related to the

FIGURE 1: TYPES OF EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES TEACHING ABOUT POWER

Primary Objective	Focus	
	Environmental Characteristics	Individual Characteristics
Increase Competence	Exercises that seek to increase participants' ability to gain power in the face of power-deprived situations. 1	Exercises that seek to increase participants' overall ability to use power in a healthy and productive manner. 2
Increase Sensitivity	Exercises that seek to sensitize students to the problems of powerlessness that accompany power-deprived situation. 3	Exercises that seek to sensitize students to the way power is used by individuals in various types of situations. 4

availability of power or is it on the way individuals relate to and use power, regardless of the environmental setting?

Putting these two dimensions together, we get the four-part typology of power exercises shown in Figure 1.

I. Examples of a type-1 exercise would be programs following the deprivation model developed by Harry Oshry (Oshry 1972; Bowens 1973; Jelinek 1979; Bolman and Deal 1979; Shelhav 1987-8). In Oshry's program, participants are divided into "haves," and "have-nots," or in Oshry's terms, "elites" and "outs," where the elites have both physical advantages of a comfortable house and possessions, formal authority to govern, a knowledge of the system around which the lab is built, and the power to dispense or withhold rewards and sanctions while the outs were deprived of all of these. Oshry's lab included a middle group of "ins, who had relatively little power, but no deprivation of physical needs. Other designs include elites and outs, but not the ins (e.g. Shelhav 1987-8). A variant of the type-1 model seeks to stimulate the dynamics of power utilization within a group by forcing group members to interact politically" to win an allocation of scarce resources, such as a limited number of grade points (Dawson and Dawson 1986-7).

Type-2 exercises focus on developing individual power competence independent of the environment. The classic example of this is the work of McClelland and his students developing healthy power motivation (McClelland 1970, 1975; Winter 1973). They argue that the exercise of power is essential to the productivity of organizations, but that it can be abused. Abusive power tends to be self-aggrandising rather than -socially oriented. Their power laboratories sought to rechannel people's thinking and behavior from negative, self-aggrandising, toward positive, socially oriented outlets

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Type-3 exercises make no overt effort to address the participants ability to use power, but rather to recognize how it is distributed and used in the context of a given social system. For instance, a typical exercise would expose participants, either directly or indirectly, to the sense of powerlessness experienced by certain elements of society (e.g. Bies 1987-8). In an organizational setting, a similar exercise might expose participants to the way unskilled workers respond to management in autocratic organizations.

Type-4 exercises sensitize participants to the way power operates in organizations in general. For instance, students might draw their personal experiences with managers or in group projects to discuss the nature of power and how it can or should be used (Shermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn 1988, p. 471).

The 'primary objective' dimension in figure 1 can be seen as related to the notion of involvement. In order for the lab to have sufficient impact to influence participant's actual behavioral competence, one might argue that it must be relatively highly involving, whereas participants can be sensitized to issues with a much smaller personal investment. This is relevant because a highly involving exercise can sometimes emotionally overload participants, thus making it difficult for them to discuss (and, hence, maximize learning from) their experience (Shelhav 1987-8).

The exercise being proposed in this paper deals with emotional issues by staging activities to evoke increasing levels of involvement as the class progresses. The first portion of the exercise can be classified at the bottom of the type-4 category. It consists of a conventional discussion of the issues being addressed.

The second portion of the exercise uses vicarious experience, in the form of a movie, to stimulate emotions through a process of identification. While the movie takes the material from abstract ideas to experiential reality, its potential emotional impact is tempered by the fact that students still recognize that it is "only a movie." This places it in the middle of the type-4 category.

The third portion moves the exercise to the top of the type-4 category by incorporating direct personal experience (recorded in journals). The events being recorded may be very emotion-laden, but the act of recording them does not involve the ego risks of group exposure and tends to provide emotional release.

Finally, the class moves to the type-2 level, increasing involvement by probing personal examples from the journals and by engaging in role-play activities in a classroom setting. The final level is aimed at providing feedback and helping students understand their experience, thus enabling them to adjust to power situations without losing a sense of personal freedom and individuality.

The exercise is most involving when it creates a setting where students experiment with these methods in a laboratory situation, making the results of their experimentation immediately visible to and perhaps impactful on other participants in the exercise. For instance, journal entries might focus on power issues rising Out of a group project in which other class members participate. The discussion, then, would directly confront the way class members have interacted with each other. When choosing to take this approach, instructors must be willing to invest in the process of building trust among members of the class prior to the discussion phase. Furthermore, both the instructors and participants should have the skills and be prepared to invest the time necessary to work through the potentially intense emotional reactions people experience when they have to openly deal with the issues relating to

conflict and the way they perceive and are perceived by others.

THE EXERCISE

The actual exercise was designed to fit into any one of several different types of classes, as reflected by the notes on movie selections in table 1. This paper, however, will be written from the perspective of an instructor who would use the exercise in a course in Organizational behavior,

The underlying theory behind the exercise is derived from open systems theory, as is common with most laboratory teaching models (Golembiewski 1972). Students develop and test various behaviors, monitoring the feedback they get from the environment around them, adapting their behaviors to become more effective. The laboratory design does two things:

First, it focuses students' attention on a particular task. Second, it structures the environment to provide the kind of feedback needed to move students toward their educational objective.

In the case of this exercise, the task is less important than the nature of the feedback. Students can be engaged in virtually any task in which they are interdependent with other people. The required feedback relates to the way they respond to and exercise power, thus helping them become more effective members of organizations. The exercise proceeds in four parts:

Part 1: Prework

Part 1 of the exercise consists of an introductory presentation of basic issues and concepts that the students will use to analyze power relationships. The instructor should note that when an individual enters an organization, s/he must choose whether to conform to the norms and rules of the organization or whether to resist them. When organizational and work group norms are in accord with the individual's norms and values, no compromise is needed. Problems arise when the organizational and/or work group norms are contrary to the individual's own norms and values. These principles can be made more meaningful by using examples from actual organizations such as those students have encountered in the university itself.

The basic framework for analysis revolves around the French and Raven (1967) five-part typology of social power bases. The following is a list of the power bases with examples that can be used in class for illustrative purposes:

1. Coercive power (encouraging compliance by threatening punishment in the event of noncompliance):
 - o Threatening termination
 - o Evoking concern for one's reputation
 - o Stating or implying that one will receive bad references
 - o reducing ones responsibilities
 - o Spread rumors
2. Expert power (exacting compliance by convincing others that they are less able to make a good decision because they lack certain knowledge and information):
 - o Reference to ones credentials
 - o Reference to prior experience
 - o Implying intimacy with a recognized authority

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- in the field ("namedropping")
- o Usage of language that symbolically represents personal expertise (e.g. technical jargon)

3. Legitimate Power (evoking formal or informal norms so that others feel they ought to comply simply because of a role that is held):

- o Instructions from the person "in charge"
- o "Counseling" or reprimands from a boss
- o Memos from upper management
- o Reliance on formal norms (e.g. reference to established rules or procedures)
- o Reference to previous agreements
- o Ingratiating oneself through favors, gifts, or compliments, thus creating a type of social obligation.

4. Referent power (causing people to comply because they identify with someone who approves of the compliant behavior)

- o Providing a highly visible and attractive example for people to model
- o Engaging in empathic behavior (showing understanding and concern for the person being influenced) thus causing the person to comply because they feel close to the influencer
- o Evoking symbols of prestige, thus causing people to comply because they want to be like the influencing person
- o Using symbols of recognition or acceptance (e.g. "employee of the month" awards) to encourage compliance by causing people to identify with a group or organization

5. Reward power (encouraging compliance in return for physical or psychological rewards):

- o Salary
- o Promotions
- o Recognition (e.g. "key to the executive bathroom" and other "in-group" perks)
- o Approval (e.g. casual compliment or letter of commendation from the boss)
- o Political support or alliances
- o Promises of any of the above

Figure 2 provides a worksheet for students to use in analyzing the data they encounter the exercise. The figure includes data taken from an interaction portrayed in the movie, "Dead Poets' Society," between Keating (a charismatic and radical English professor in a traditional boys prep school) and his students.

FIGURE 2: A WORKSHEET FOR ANALYZING POWER SITUATIONS

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT: *A new English teacher comes to teach at conservative boys prep school and opens the students' eyes to literature and life in general in a new, non-conforming way.*

MAIN POWER ISSUES: *Power struggles revolve around (1) the conflict between the English teacher and the students who want to follow him versus the school administration and the parents it represents; (2) the English teacher's desire to be true to his values versus his sense of responsibility and desire to maintain his job; (3) the students' desire to follow the English teacher and experience a new liberated approach to life versus their response to pressure from their parents' wishes and the school administration; (4) the conflict between students who were drawn to conflicting sides of the issues.*

WHO WAS ATTEMPTING TO EXERCISE POWER?
Keating, the new English teacher.

OVER WHOM WAS POWER BEING EXERCISED? *The students.*

WHAT WAS THE OBJECTIVE OF THE EXERCISE OF POWER? *Open students' eyes to the possibility of really living life with a new sense of freedom, excitement, and meaning.*

WHAT TYPE (S) OF POWER WERE ATTEMPTED (WITH SPECIFIC EXAMPLES)?

COERCIVE POWER? *Keating used the (implied) threat of grades (if students refused to do assignments), ridicule (when a student refused to read his poem in class), and refusal to assume professorial responsibilities (when students did not address him as "Captain, my captain") to encourage students to experiment with new behaviors.*

EXPERT POWER? *Keating used Ms obvious mastery of literature to undermine the authority of the text and other teachers who opposed his ideas.*

LEGITIMATE POWER? *Keating used the normative influence of his role as teacher to get students to look at pictures of past graduates, and to rip pages out of their text.*

REFERENT POWER? *The most significant use of power was Keating's influence as a role model. Students came to respect him so much that they revived the Dead Poets' Society that he had founded when he was a student at the same school. They ultimately defied the authority of the administration as a demonstration of their support for his teaching.*

REWARD POWER? *Keating promised excitement and new meaning to life through an understanding of literature. He offered the excitement of rebelliousness at a time when the students felt oppressed by parental and school norms.*

WHAT WERE THE EFFECTS? *Students were caught up in a conflict between new values and the power of the conventional system (represented by parents and school administration). The conflict caused one student to commit suicide. The school expelled Keating and one of the students. Students disavowed Keating under pressure from the school administration and later reaffirmed him in defiance of the school power.*

WHAT ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES MIGHT HAVE BEEN TAKEN?

Keating might have worked more slowly, operating on system as well as students to avoid systemic conflicts.

GENERAL COMMENTS: *The movie presents a powerful and classic example of the trade-offs between being true to one's personal convictions and the need to compromise to avoid systemic conflict. The jury is still out on what should have happened.*

Part 2; Movie Analysis

Figure 2 illustrates an example of the output coming from the second part of the exercise. Proponents of experiential learning are giving increasing recognition to the role of artistic media, such as literature (Zajdel and Vinton 1987-8; Harris and Brown 1988-9), music (Powell and Veiga 1985-6); Zimmerman 1985-6), and motion pictures (Geoia and Brass 1985-6). In the exercise, the class is exposed to a movie in which power relationships play a significant role. They are asked to select one or more interactions in the movie to analyze using the worksheet. We used "Dead Poets' Society" as an example because it was profound and involving in the way it dealt with issues of power, Table 1 includes a list of movies, all or part which might be used as "data" for this portion of the exercise in different types of classes.

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Part 3: Personal Journal Analysis

Having moved through parts 1 and 2 relatively early in the course, part 3 should be spread out over the remaining portion. It draws on principles of journal analysis (Allen and Enz 1986-7; Harris and Brown 1988-9) to record their personal experience. Students are instructed to use the worksheet illustrated in figure 2 to analyze critical interactions that they encounter, either in or outside of the classroom context. For instance, they may choose to analyze interactions in a project group or even events that take place in the classroom itself.

As we noted earlier, using data from project groups in which participants have worked together during the class will enhance involvement, but it will also require a greater investment in trust-building prior to the final discussion and more time and skill to manage the emotional reactions to the issues raised as the discussion progresses.

Part 4: Class Discussion

The final part of the exercise uses class discussion to link generalizable principles of conflict management with the specific experiences students have accumulated during the course of their diary experience. General guidelines for discussion are available in the literature (e.g. Harnack and Fest 1964) To the extent that the class will be dealing with behaviors involving a shared experience among class participants, discussion should follow a more rigorous set of guidelines for providing feedback and disclosure in order to ensure that participants do not become threatened and withdraw from the discussion.

Feedback refers the verbal and non-verbal information one gives to another about how the person is perceived and reacted to. Disclosure refers to the revealing of oneself to another (Golembiewski 1972). Feedback is essential because it provides vital data regarding the effect of the behaviors with which people have been experimenting. Disclosure is essential to the trust-building process that underlies a healthy discussion. It says, 'Here is where I'm coming from,' thus protecting another from threats of unanticipated responses to what they might say or do.

In our exercise, feedback will address the power-related activities and responses recorded in participants' diaries. If the events being described are not taken from shared experiences, other participants must try to reconstruct the experience in their own minds, as it is described and react accordingly. If the events are taken from activities in which other class members participated, the basis for feedback will obviously be much richer. As we have noted, it will also be potentially more threatening, thus making the disclosure process more important.

Providing Effective Feedback. The following are some guidelines that might be helpful for encouraging constructive feedback. (See Golembiewski 1972 a more complete list and in-depth discussion):

- o Separate the Person from the act. For instance, one may say, "I really don't like the way you did that!" But not, "I really don't like you!" The former addresses a behavior and can be responded to if the individual desires. The latter simply severs a relationship.
- o Feedback should be non-evaluative. For instance, one may say, "I don't like that!" But not, "That is bad!" The former is simply an honest statement of how one responds to a stimulus, while the latter is a

condemnation based on values that others many or may not accept.

- o Feedback should be non-interpretative. For instance, one may say, "I felt manipulated by what you said!" But not, "You were trying to manipulate me!" The former provides data on one's own feelings, while the latter is an inference based on an interpretation of the data provided.
- o Feedback should be given in a climate of "psychological safety." This is where disclosure comes in. For instance, one might say, "You know, this is hard for me to say, but I find that I really enjoyed manipulating my group." By owning what might be an unpopular sentiment, the person creates a norm of trust in which others feel they too can be honest about what they really think and feel, even if it makes them look flawed in the eyes of their peers.

Encouraging Effective Disclosure. The following are some guidelines for governing the disclosure process:

- o Make disclosures appropriate to the situation. While virtually any honest, self-risking disclosure can create a climate of trust, some topics are simply inappropriate during a laboratory exercise on power. For instance, a confession of one's history of crime or drug abuse would be inappropriate unless it supported a particular point, and maybe it would be inappropriate even then.
- o The motive for the disclosure should be authentic. Often, people make a statement that takes the form of disclosure but in fact has a hidden motive. For instance, one might say, "You know, this is hard for me to say, but I find that I really enjoyed manipulating my group." While this could be an honest disclosure, in a given context, it could also be a hidden way of saying, "My group consisted of a bunch of wimps who never would have gotten anything done if I hadn't be there working behind the scenes." This kind of hidden message is meant to be understood on one level, but denied on another. The effect is devastating to the trust disclosure tries to build.
- o Make sure the disclosure is timely. If others respond, "Now you tell us," you know the timing is wrong.
- o Avoid too much disclosure. While most discussions are characterized by too little disclosure, too much disclosure can be destructive to the purpose of the discussion. For instance, a participant should generally not go into a lengthy personal history, no matter how honest and revealing. It would tend to focus group attention on the individual and the content of the disclosure rather than on the topic at hand.

An instructor can share these guidelines in order to facilitate group discussion. However, students will need practice to incorporate them into their discussion patterns. Ideally, they will have been addressed early in a course and practiced before the final power discussion. The instructor's example and skill in handling unhealthy comments will also be important.

Using the Discussion to Facilitate a Healthy Relationship to Power. The key outcome of the discussion should be to give students a sense of control relative to issues of power. There is a difference between being manipulated by power and consciously deciding to yield to it. The behavior is the same, but the latter approach preserves freedom and dignity by emphasizing a sense of choice. Indeed, it enhances the power of the people being influenced

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by clearly establishing limits on the degree to which others can influence their behavior, namely the limits established by reasoned self interest.

The discussion portion of the exercise should highlight instances where individuals asserted personal control in the face of power by consciously choosing either to yield or resist it. In response to examples of passive yielding, the discussion should explore other, more assertive alternatives. Role playing provides a very useful tool for this exploration.

The role of feedback will be to help students understand how their responses to power are perceived by others so that they can develop methods of asserting their personal control that are at once effective and minimally disruptive to the legitimate tasks of the organization.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the exercise described in this article is to help students develop the skills necessary to maintain a sense of personal control and integrity in a conflict situation without detracting from group effectiveness. The exercise is based on two key premises:

First, groups seek to exact conformity from group members in order strengthen the groups' effectiveness. This is potentially damaging to the sense of control and integrity of group members.

Second, control and integrity do not inevitably fall victim to the exercise of power, but only to the group members unhealthy processing of power acts. Indeed, individuals inherently have ultimate power - - the power not to play the game. They only become victims when they make themselves vulnerable to this game.

The optimal solution, however, is not to opt out of the game, because this undermines the group, rendering it incapable of carrying out the tasks for which it was formed. The optimal solution is to process power acts in a way that will not be damaging.

The problem faced in this paper is how to structure an exercise that will imbue students with a sense of choice in group-related decisions. The exercise approaches the task by systematically focusing students' attention on objectifying group efforts to enforce conformity. By systematically testing and noting group response, group members gain a sense of personal freedom and control.

The exercise has the advantage of running simultaneously with other group activities, thus making it easy to fit into a given course design. Indeed, by drawing on data generated from other class activities, the exercise can actually function as a unifying factor in the overall structure of the course.

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TABLE 1: A LISTING OF POTENTIAL MOVIES AND THE RELEVANT COURSES

Movie Title	Brief Description	Relevant Courses
All the President's Men	Journalists and editors are forced to decide whether to print a potentially harmful story; power issues include those between government and reporters and between the reporters themselves.	Journalism Org. Behavior Political Science
Amazing Grace and Chuck	When a famous basketball player is murdered because of his views on nuclear weapons, a young boy must put his principles to the test and give up little league; power issues include those between the individual and society, between individuals, between countries and between sports teams.	Philosophy Political Science Sociology
...and Justice For All	A public defender is forced to defend an unfair judge accused of a brutal rape; power issues include those between lawyers and judges, lawyers and ethics committees and between lawyers themselves.	Law Org. Behavior Political Science Ethics
The Apartment	A young executive loans his apartment to senior executives so they can cheat on their wives; power issues include those between junior and senior execs, spouses, and individuals.	Org. Behavior Psychology Ethics
Being There	A simple man becomes the talk of Washington merely by repeating phrases from T.V.; power issues include those between individuals, social classes and politicians.	Political Science Psychology Sociology
Billie	A teenage girl who is very adept at sports finds that boys (and girls) avoid her because of her talents; power issues include those between teenagers, family members, coaches, teammates and society.	Sociology Education Psychology
Blackboard Jungle	A dedicated teacher attempts to educate while in the midst of urban problems; power issues include those between the teacher and students, faculty, supervisors and parents.	Education Psychology Org. Behavior Sociology Urban Affairs
The Brother From Another Planet	An alien lands on Ellis Island and is thrust into an unknown world. In his attempt to go home, he runs into a couple of bounty hunters; power issues include those between individuals, and society.	Psychology Sociology Philosophy

Brubaker	An idealistic warden attempts prison reform -- only to destroy any chances because of his obscure moral principles; power issues include those between the warden and staff, inmates, government and committees.	Org. Behavior Sociology Political Science Law Criminal Justice
The Caine Mutiny	The trial of a "crazy" ship captain reveals a variety of personal agendas of the crew; power issues include those between the captain and crew, crew members and between the judicial system.	Org. Behavior Law Psychology Ethics
The Candidate	A senatorial candidate realizes his vacuity before anyone else does -- including his staff, wife and voters; power issues include those between the candidate and staff, wife, voters and himself.	Political Science Org. Behavior Sociology
Coming Home	A wounded (physically and mentally) Vietnam war veteran returns home only to fall in love with a career officer's wife; power issues include those between the soldiers, government and society; between handicapped and non-handicapped, and between individuals.	Political Science Psychology Sociology
Continental Divide	An aggressive big city reporter is assigned to interview a reclusive naturalist, only to learn that there is another way to live; power issues include those between the reporter and editor, reclusive and society.	Org. Behavior Ethics Journalism
The Defiant Ones	Two (white and black) chain gang escapees learn about their similarities and differences; power issues include those between the two escapees, wardens, guards and society.	Sociology Psychology Law Criminal Justice
A Doll's House	Ibsen's classic play showing the determination and alienation of a desperate woman's choices; power issues include those between the woman and herself, society and her family.	Journalism Sociology
Dr. Strangelove	Details a day in the life of a crazed general who is determined to save the free world from communism and nearly starts WW3; power issues include those between societies, individuals and ideologies.	Psychology Political Science History
From Here to Eternity	Details the lives of military personnel months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor; power issues include those between military personnel themselves, as well as civilians, between societies, and between individuals.	Org. Behavior Sociology Political Science History