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THE SURROGATE CLASS EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an experiential exercise designed to address issues and problems in the communication process. Individuals are asked to provide a surrogate to attend an experiential class session in their place, and to debrief the surrogate for specific and general information. Risk is introduced by the possibility of a quiz on the surrogate class experience. Discussion of the communication process, the barriers to the communication process, and how to overcome barriers to communication provide a valuable training experience.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

To demonstrate concepts of interpersonal communication, including barriers to communication.

Advance Preparation

In an organizational behavior class which is conducted using the experiential method, individuals should have been working in a group of 6 to 8 members. Over the course of a quarter or semester, experience should have been gained in the experiential methodology, the process of organizational behavior concepts, and the dynamics of the experiential group.

Group Size

The exercise is formulated to be done in a group of 6 to 8 members.

Time Required

One to three hours, as desired by the instructor.

Special Materials

An experiential exercise, or a set of experiential exercises of the instructor's choice, if the instructor desires to use one or several exercises with the surrogate class. For example, from Lau and Jelinek (1), "The Prisoner's Dilemma: An Intergroup Competition," and "Male-Female Interface on Work Relationships" have been found to be useful and workable exercises when dealing with a surrogate class.

Related Topics

Group dynamics, perception, decision making, and anxiety.

PROCEDURE

Step 1 - Preliminary

Without previous warning or discussion, somewhere past the

mid-point in an experientially taught organizational behavior course, the instructor informs the class that the next class session is to be a 'surrogate class'. Each class member is to arrange to have a surrogate attend the class in his or her place. If the class is following a teaching plan which utilizes a group out-of-class activity in addition to in-class activities, the surrogate class allows the class groups to meet on their own to work on the out-of-class activity.

Ground rules for the surrogate class are announced: no tape recorders, movie cameras, or video recorders are allowed. Students are responsible for obtaining knowledge from their surrogate of what transpires during the surrogate class. Class members are not to be in the vicinity of the classroom during the surrogate class.

If desired, variations or restrictions on the selection of surrogates can be imposed by the instructor to make this a group as well as an individual project. Since the experiential methodology relies upon the formulation of a group to experience various exercises during the quarter or semester, individuals in such a course have a group as well as an individual orientation in the class. Thus, with regards to surrogate selection, the instructor may require that the surrogates as a whole for the group have the same distribution of sex as the original group, or that the surrogate group contain members older or younger than the original group, etc.

In order to provide an incentive for meaningful communication with, and debriefing of the surrogate, the instructor is to suggest or hint at the possibility of a follow-up test or quiz when the regular students meet in the class scheduled after the surrogate class.

Step 2 - The Surrogate Class

When the surrogate class meets, the instructor welcomes and briefs the surrogates, explaining to them the classroom methodology. Specific information related to course concepts can be lectured on to provide material for a follow-up quiz. In order to demonstrate the problems of recommunicating difficult information, the instructor may include a few bits of highly technical information in the lecture to the surrogate class.

Following the brief lecture, the surrogates assemble into the corresponding group which the class member they represent belongs to. An exercise, or a set of exercises, depending upon the instructor's wishes and the amount of time available, may be performed by the surrogate group. The choice of an exercise which is straightforward, focusing upon a decision, or a discussion of general issues, is recommended.

Following the surrogate group exercise or exercises, discussion of the exercises is conducted. The surrogate class is often ended with the provision of a reading or a homework assignment to be passed on to

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the original class member.

Step 3 - The Exchange of Information

Depending on individual initiative, the class member and his or her surrogate meet to exchange information about what transpired during the surrogate class. No general directions are given by the instructor for this meeting.

Step 4 - The Next Class

At the beginning of the next class, when the original class members return to the class, a brief written quiz is given to the class members. Questions may be included on the content of the lecture material, exercise(s), or exercise outcomes.

Following the quiz, a general discussion of the surrogate class exercise is held. Topics for discussion include the communication process, communication problems, barriers to communication, and steps that can be taken to overcome communication barriers.

DISCUSSION

The use of the Surrogate Class Exercise (SCEX) as a communications experience methodology in actual teaching is both creative and interesting. It allows for experimentation by both the students and the professor. For example, the students can show much about their interest in the class and their interest in learning by the surrogate they select. The professor has fairly wide latitude in handling the surrogates and the work he/she makes them undertake. The SCEX has been used by the authors in Organizational Behavior related courses in adult evening MBA programs in both a public state university and a large private university. Some aspects of the use of the SCEX and its results are discussed in the following paragraphs.

The possibility of some functional issues, and perhaps some ethical issues, must be considered in use of the SCEX. To most students it appears that the SCEX is an interesting and useful class variation. However, occasionally a student may object to use of the SCEX because she or he is paying for the course and feels that surrogates are "not right". This situation might be avoided by stressing the experiential and experimental aspects of the course during the first course session, thus allowing those who find this technique and its requirements disquieting to register for another section of the course.

If problems occur, the most common problem is the student who comes to the instructor and says, "I can't find a surrogate," or some variation of this statement. The instructor may give suggestions to the student for finding a surrogate; ask the student to rethink the problem he or she is having in obtaining a surrogate; or use the traditional academic approach to student performance problems, stressing that this is a requirement vital to the student's completion of the course. In all cases, it is the student's responsibility to choose the surrogate. This choice is one which simulates a choice which is often necessary in the corporate setting. Overcoming barriers to effective delegation, and knowledge of how to delegate effectively are goals of the surrogate class exercise.

Realistic expectations for the students need to be set early in the course so that they will know that this section of the

course (which might use surrogates, or other special techniques) is a variation from the standard lecture method. Students should be prepared to accept learning in a variety of situations.

One example of the SCEX was its use in an MBA program in an evening class composed mainly of military officers from the Washington, D.C. area. The military officers reacted very strongly to the SCEX. The use of the SCEX apparently was contrary to their organizational relationship concepts of hierarchical structural patterns, and created a large degree of uncertainty and discomfort for them. They objected to its use, but tolerated the exercise reasonably well after sufficient reassurances from the instructor about how the SCEX would affect their grade in the course. This was mildly surprising in that student focus was on individual rewards rather than on the team effort, communication, etc., which are processes that the military is supposed to perform well. At least by reputation, the military is trained to perform its mission by the management of various organizational efforts at different levels, including the control and use of surrogates. Apparently what was "shaky" in the use of the SCEX was that the element of organizational control was minimal, and this appeared to upset the military students.

The SCEX is generally used without too much disruption to the class content, or to the students. Most students are able to choose a surrogate, instruct the surrogate, have the surrogate attend class, and then gain sufficient feedback (debrief) from the surrogate so that the learning is accomplished. The use of the SCEX has generally enhanced communication techniques, such as listening and paraphrasing, and learning. It is probably in both the student and instructor "variations" that most experimentation is attained. Consider the following "variations":

a) The Surrogate Professor - Consider what happens if, in addition to the surrogate students a surrogate professor conducts the class for the surrogate students (known or unknown to the students). This multiplies and compounds the communication experience and interaction problem. In addition, if the "unknown" technique is used and some significant deviation from the class norm is displayed, then instability and stress is multiplied for the student effort at the debriefing or feedback stage (e.g., "he said what?"). The surrogate professor routine (both known and unknown) has been tried successfully by the authors as a variation in the use of the SCEX.

b) Student Messages - In the use of the SCEX some students find a way to express their individualism and personal styles. Consider, for example, the following choices of surrogates. One student sent his nine year old daughter as his surrogate. She listened intently for a while, then napped for the remainder of the class. Rather than being interested in feedback, this student was sending the instructor a message about the class. Thus, the professor was given an experiential lesson.

Another student sent his eighty-three year old, partially deaf grandfather to the surrogate class, and encouraged him to mildly disrupt the class with a "movie like" - Eh? What did you say sonny? - sort of attitude and behavior. Again, this action reflected on the student's view of the class, and gave the professor an experience in behavior to consider.

Another student, either in an attempt to be humorous or to satisfy his own curiosity, attempted to disguise himself and attend the class as his own surrogate.

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After discovery, he was excused from the class. However, this experience did awaken "professorial curiosity" as to how many other disguises, hidden tape recorders, etc., had been undiscovered? In summary, student messages may provide feedback to the professor, and an opportunity to the student to be creative *

Most uses of the SCEX are completed without such widespread variations as described above. While these add humor, etc. to the class, unless encouraged by the professor they rarely occur. In noting the student comments on evaluation forms regarding the class, a large number of favorable comments are found on the use of the SCEX as a classroom teaching device. While some students find some negative features, the great majority find the SCEX a positive learning experience. Perhaps the best summary came from a student who said "I didn't realize how difficult real communication was, even with someone you know well, until I sent my husband to the surrogate class. I thought I told him what to do, but I had difficulty finding out what went on in class after it was over."

In conclusion, the authors believe that the SCEX warrants further experimentation and use in the classroom as a technique of teaching organizational behavior through the experiential methodology. The SCEX appears to be an effective way of demonstrating communication, behavioral, and organizational problems commonly found in modern complex organizations. Its use introduces uncertainty, risk, insecurity, and other factors against a communications background and requirement. Students are forced to deal with these factors on a personal basis in order to attain individual effectiveness, and to possibly enhance organizational effectiveness. The students experience communication impediments and successes, and are able to better focus on their own leadership and communication styles. Therefore, the SCEX appears to be one of several promising methodologies that can be used in the organizational behavior teaching area to increase experimentation and experiential learning. The exercise provides a vivid experience in the process of information transmittal.

REFERENCES

- (1) Lau, James B. and Mariann Jelinek, Behavior in Organizations: An Experiential Approach (Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1984, 3rd edition).