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CUSTOMIZED DEBRIEFING: THE ACHILLES HEEL OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING?

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ABSTRACT

The debriefing or feedback segment of the experiential exercise is a very critical part of that exercise and has not been given the attention and planning it deserves. If questions of manipulation of participants, credibility and intent of the faculty leader, and real applicability of results for the manager are to be resolved, we must do a better job of debriefing. Since the experiential method recognizes that participants are unique and perceive differently, debriefing segments should be reasonably customized for increased acceptance and understanding by those participants. The results should be more long-term internalization of cognitive material and Interpersonal skills.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequent questions (complaints) a user of experiential exercises hears is, "What does this event/data/experience/outcome really mean? The dilemma of the incomplete circle seems to abound, and these Gestalt "gaps" haunt the class participants and plague the faculty member.

It appears that there are several questions contained in the question stated above. Those "interior" questions are: (1) Is this conclusion/outcome limited to this class only? (2) How do our results/actions compare with other groups/earlier classes? (3) Isn't there some other (more subtle) meaning we should discern from this exercises results? (4) Is that all there is -- I did not learn any new facts?! (5) Since the exercise is just an enjoyable "game," --how can we convert the results into real-world terms? (6) How do these outcomes/conclusions relate to the manager -- how can he/she actually use this information? And --- there are probably more questions than these which have not been perceived by me~

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

These questions indicate that there is some unfinished business in the experiential sequence of events that many of us use. It would seem that the learning climate for participants can be made more predictable, and the credibility of the faculty member can be strengthened by a more carefully thought out and customized feedback discussion or debriefing. A feedback session which is rationally prepared in advance of doing the exercise, and adhered to care- fully, is doubtless better than a careless debriefing, or not attempting a feedback session at all! This last comment may appear to be reckless or completely unreasonable. Yet, is it not possible for a dedicated and enthusiastic faculty user of experiential material to become so caught up in the action/ process segment of the exercise that the interpretive feedback segment is drastically cut short and, therefore, largely left to the participants to interpret for themselves? A related, and just as haunting a thought, is that as the faculty member becomes increasingly familiar with an exercise through repeated use and/or redesign of that

experience, that same member presumes that the participants perceive and conclude the same things that he/she concludes. Thus, "logic" says that there is no need to go into any detailed interpretation of the behavior and results.

THE ACHILLES HEEL

The above series of thoughts creates the topic question for this session: Customized Debriefing:

The Achilles Heel of Experiential Learning? The issue is then - careless or seriously incomplete feedback discussions which do not relate exercise results to the unique personalities of each specific group of participants may be our Achilles heel!

S. Altman suggests that specific areas be covered in an exercise debriefing:

- 1) Identification of different perception and attitudes of what occurred.
- 2) Linking the exercise to specific content theory for a given segment of the course.
- 3) Linking the exercise to skill-building techniques (useful at the time of the exercise and in subsequent class sessions).
- 4) Development of a common set of experiences for further data analysis.
- 5) Making certain that each participant, or group of participants receives feedback on the nature of their involvement and their specific behaviors.
- 6) Re-establishing the desired classroom environment. (1)

In this writers experience not all of the above actions are of equal weight or priority. Further, I believe that Altman does not intend them to be of equal priority. It would seem that: identifying differing perceptions/attitudes toward what has occurred in the exercise ($r \neq R$), ascertaining that each participant (or group) gets feedback on their involvement and behavior, and re-establishing a positive classroom climate are all related and of critical importance. They are here-and-now factors for the participants and the faculty moderator. If these areas are incompletely or carelessly done, or ignored, they cannot be effectively recaptured at a later time for discussion and resolution.

On the other hand, the areas of: linking the exercise to specific content theory and to skill-building techniques, and developing a common set of experiences for further data analysis are also related. These factors are obviously more content than process- oriented, and can be dealt with fairly well at a later session or - even with a prepared handout showing the linkage and/or the data results for comparison/contrast by the participants. I am not recommending that such

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handling is to be preferred, but only that the different nature (more content than process), allows this to be done.

CREDIBILITY CREVISES

I have frequently used exercises which involve using "planted" persons to be autocratic and stubborn supervisors; independent "deviant" employees; or some other clandestine role. While it generates (almost always) the conflict behavior and resulting emotional patterns sought, it always generates a credibility problem for the faculty moderator. One reaction can be, "So What? I'm the faculty member in charge of the class, and I remain in control regardless of whether the participants are concerned about manipulation or not!" Another reaction may be, "I have to do some role manipulation to get the desired behaviors and attitudes to surface, but I am concerned about the participant's view of my intentions." A third view might be, "I don't like the high price that role manipulation brings into the class climate, and therefore I either reveal all "assigned" roles or avoid exercises that call for such actions."

I have no way of knowing what exercise-users, or even ABSEL members believe about the above issue. More interesting still, would be to know what they are doing relative to this issue. The credibility issue can and does make a difference to the participants --and thus, it must also have an impact on the faculty moderator. It affects the thoughts/actions of participants, which affect exercise interpretation and results, which color the data generated which limits the usefulness and the comparable usefulness of such data. Therefore, it would seem to this writer that the 'I don't care, I'm still in charge' attitude is short-sighted and dysfunctional for all involved. Further, I am not aware of anyone who is convinced that they have solved this problem. I submit that this topic should be explored and our own beliefs, actions and experiences shared with each other.

REALITY-WHERE ARE YOU?

Keys suggests that learning (and especially experiential learning) is "the organization of reality." Further, he cites three factors prerequisite to such learning as follows:

- 1) The dissemination of new ideas, principles, or concepts which are known as content.
- 2) An opportunity to apply content in an experiential environment which will be called experience.
- 3) Feedback as to the results of actions taken and the relationship between performance at each chronological phase in experience and the subsequent result. (2)

Thus, Professor Keys raises the very critical question of, What is the proper balance between content, experience, and feedback in the management of learning environments? I would suggest an equally critical dilemma, that is: As humans we never come into direct contact with reality. We only perceive (r) reality R, and thus $r \neq R$. This, of course, implies that what is believed to be the "proper" balance for one person is not considered proper/appropriate for another.

The attempt to do some customizing of feedback for each class of participants - thus recognizing their uniqueness

should be done. It is more time-consuming and more difficult than handling debriefing only in terms of generalized or course-wide results. The payoff for faculty and participants alike is more personalized learning, more satisfaction, higher motivation levels, and hopefully more long-term internalization of cognitive material and interpersonal skills.

REFERENCES

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