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## ***Group Dynamics: Managing Interpersonal Conflict in the Group Decision Making Process***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this activity is to introduce students to group communication concepts, to teach methods of communicating, to expand student awareness of group dynamics, to expand student awareness of group decision-making, and to involve students in group discussions. Providing students with an opportunity to participate in discussion helps students develop an understanding of various dynamics at play in group communication and shows how group communication affects interpersonal relationships. The outcome of the activity is to improve students understanding of group decision making resulting in better decisions, less conflict, and more efficient use of time when working in groups.*

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this activity are multifold: to introduce group communication concepts to students, to teach methods of communicating, to expand student awareness of group dynamics, to expand student awareness of group decision-making, and to involve students in group discussions. Providing students with an opportunity to participate in discussion helps students develop an understanding of various dynamics at play in group communication and shows how group communication affects interpersonal relationships.

### **Courses**

This activity works well in many classes and contexts, ranging from introductory group communication courses through advanced business and organizational communication courses. Specific courses to which this activity could be applied include: Organizational communication, business communication, small group, interpersonal, and organizational behavior.

## **Rationale**

Students, including advanced students, often lack knowledge, confidence, and experience to participate, communicate, and effectively make decisions within groups. This activity illustrates group decision making, and gives students experience in a group setting and a better understanding of how to improve communication functions within those groups. The students experience systematic change by learning a more effective decision making process which allows for everyone's voice and/or opinion to be counted. The functional perspective of small group communication, also known as functional theory, states that group performance is directly related to the communication functions within the group (Hirokawa & Salazar, 1997). Dennis Gouran identified seven assumptions that underlie the functional perspective. One assumption is members of a group are motivated to participate (Gouran & Hirowaka, 2003).

The provided activity for this learning experience illustrates how changing the system/communication function can impact interpersonal dynamics. This is an original activity that illustrates how "ownership" and "buy-in" affect the decision making process.

Ownership and agreement of (concurrence with) decisions usually occur when people are involved in the process of the decisions being made. According to Adams and Galanes (2006), when groups engage in problem solving, they follow certain steps: first, they identify a problem, they identify potential solutions to the problem, and then they choose one solution, best suited to their needs. In this sense, problem solving is viewed as a process (Engleberg & Wynn, 2003). Individuals are more likely to make sure the decision-making process or a decision succeeds when they are invested in the decision (i.e. involved in the decision making process). If you are invested in an idea, you will be more likely to put in any extra effort necessary to ensure the success of the idea.

According to Gemmy (2002), leadership involves the influence one person has over others, and the critical determinant of organizational success is the quality of its leadership. The leadership process involves influencing, motivating, including, and listening to others' ideas throughout a decision making process. This exercise illustrates how an effective leader, by changing decision making processes, can have a profound influence on those they lead.

A critical piece to this activity is showing the students what ineffective communication is, what groupthink is, as well as, what ineffective leadership is. In addition, this exercise illustrates what effective leadership is. By simply changing the process, by aggregating individual scores, everyone's voice and/or opinion is part of the decision making process (invested).

## **Explanation of Activity**

Prior to the exercise, the instructor should be covering concepts with students about group dynamics and group decision making. The instructor may also use this activity to lead into leadership lessons and types of leadership styles. The activity will also give participants the opportunity to experience groupthink and an unbalanced amount of win-lose results.

### Time Frame

The activity can easily fill a two-hour time period, plus one outside assignment (optional) for students to respond to provided questions.

The instructor should hand out a “Working on the Rail Road” exercise. The Working on the Rail Road exercise is a scenario activity. Participants are to imagine themselves in a management position where they are asked to make critical decisions in the corporate downsizing of “the Rail Road.” The Rail Road is an example of what organizations face when dealing with cutbacks.

Some decisions the participants will make include ranking a list of items according to their importance for achieving corporate downsizing to save the Rail Road, 15 being the most effective downsizing suggestion on down to 1 being the least effective. The participants rank the items on their own and then rank the items again as a group.

Before beginning the Working on the Rail Road activity, participants should be instructed to read the directions for the exercise and to fill out answers individually and comment as to why they have made the decisions they have. The instructor should announce that participants have ten minutes to complete this portion of the activity on their own. The instructor should remind the students to comment on why they made the decisions they made, in the appropriate spot on the activity sheet. This will allow support for a participant’s decisions by documenting the reasoning behind the decisions. This should help play a part in minority and majority influence when working with the others in the group.

After students finish the first step, ranking individual suggestions for corporate downsizing, Step 2 of the activity begins. Students are asked to form some sort of consensus as a group and develop one ranked list for the entire group. Initially, students are given minimal instructions; they are simply told, as a group, to rank the 15 items. This is necessary so that when they are given clear directions and are shown a new way/process of decision making they see the difference in the two approaches. Students learn by example that by changing the way/process you make decisions, you can change group dynamics and improve the outcome of a decision.

The instructor should allow time to complete Step 2 (approximately 10-15 minutes). At the 8-minute mark, the instructor should announce the time. The time an instructor chooses may vary according to group sizes and pace of each group, but the idea is to allow time for group dynamics such as; monopolization of conversations, disengagement by those less assertive, lobbying for personal choices while negating the value of other or opposing ideas/choices (confrontation), in general, for disharmony to occur.

Following the group discussion in Step 2, the instructor will ask that the group’s collective ranking be placed aside and the original individual rankings be retrieved. Each person’s suggestions for corporate downsizing will be added to one master list for the group. For each item on the master list, individual rankings for each item will be added together resulting in a group aggregated score for each item. Upon completion of the aggregation, the items can then

be prioritized by identifying the item with the largest aggregated score being the group's most important suggestion to the smallest aggregated score being the least important.

### **Debrief**

The instructor should allow for a discussion following the activity and ask the students what issues arose in their relationships and communication. Upon the completion of the exercise, the instructor should discuss Dewey's Reflective Think or a specific process orientated decision making model to allow for emphasis on the group decision making process. Another discussion could be on Asch's Minority and Majority Influence and how it plays a role in group decision making (Asch, 1951). The instructor will ask questions relating to group dynamics that occurred during the activity such as: "Did anyone monopolize the conversation?" "Did anyone, eventually stop participating?" "Was there a time when team members began lobbying for their ideas (highlighting the merits) while explaining the weaknesses of another team member's ideas (highlighting the weaknesses)?" Next, the instructor will ask the same questions about the process occurring when groups worked to aggregate the scores.

When relating to group discussions with little or no structure, the likely responses to questions from the teacher would be that there was: monopolization of the discussion, disengagement, lobbying for personal viewpoints, and diminishing of opposing viewpoints, etc. Students will probably say, "Yes, all these behaviors occurred." All of these behaviors have the potential to contribute to interpersonal conflict, to result in poor decisions being made because information from a few students contributed to the decision rather than information from all members of the group, and to miss-gleaning the best aspects of the best ideas being used in the final decision.

In contrast, when relating to group discussions with structure, the likely responses to questions from the teacher would be that the process moved more quickly, no one was allowed to monopolize the conversation, no one was allowed to disengage, and there was little or no lobbying for or against another's ideas resulting in better decisions, less chance of interpersonal conflict and a more efficient use of time.

### **Activity Appraisal**

This activity works well in many classes and contexts, ranging from introductory group communication courses through advanced business and organizational communication courses. This activity expands communication resources, critical thinking skills, problem solving, and group decision making skills. Most importantly, this activity illustrates the effects of changing the process of how a group communicates and shares information and how this change can profoundly affect the behavior of the group. In other words, how changing the communication system changes the outcome.

One limitation of this activity could be that students may not be comfortable openly answering these questions immediately following the activity; so, you may want to consider asking the students to respond to these questions as an after class assignment and then come back to them as a discussion.

Experience indicates that many students have the most difficulty recognizing the need to include everyone's voice during the activity. Most students will fight for their ideas and engage in conflict or will reluctantly engage in the exercise and let others make decisions for them.

Specific reading material which can be exceptionally helpful to the students for understanding "systematic change," "group decision making," and "group dynamics" include: Eisenberg and Goodall (2007), *Chapter 4: The Systems Perspective on Organizations and Communication*, which addresses systems theory. Also, *Chapter 6: Critical Approaches to Organizations and Communication*, which examines and opposes the assumptions of the dominant frameworks. This chapter also addresses critical organizational theory, which reveals the persuasive power that organizations have over individuals. *Chapter 7: Identity and Difference in Organizational Life*, explores how socially constructed differences (including gender, race, and class) are produced through everyday organizing. Finally, *Chapter 8: Teams and Networks: Collaboration in the Workplace* covers the global emergence of a demand for increased participation in information sharing and decision making.

### References and Suggested Readings

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## Appendix

### Working on the Railroad Activity

You are a member of management on the Burt Iron railroad. Due to the impact of the downturn in the economy, the Burt Iron railroad needs to make cuts in order to survive the hard economic times. Major decisions need to happen very quickly to cut cost and save the company. You were originally scheduled to have a couple of months to make decisions, but senior executives have another idea and want decisions to be made today. You have one hour to deliberate and report back to senior management, however, senior management has ruined your original plan and gives you a list of pertinent decisions you must decide from. Only the 15 items below are what you have to choose from.

The survival of the railroad depends on reaching and making the most appropriate decisions to cut costs in a certain order. You cannot, however, cut all items; you must choose the most important items to cut cost in order to save the railroad. Your task is to rank the 15 items in terms of their importance to the railroad survival. Place a number "1" by the item that you believe is Least important, a "2" by the item that is second-least important, and so on through the number "15," which you should place beside the item that you believe is most important.

After you have completed your ranking, answer the following question: Why did you decide on this order for these items?

ITEM	YOUR RANKING	GROUP RANK	GROUP RANK (aggregate)
Early retire 10 employees			
Lay off 20 employees			
Reduce company retirement investment			
Shut down 10 trains out of 30			
Invest in solar-powered trains			
Build new rail ways			
Get new investors and sell stock			
Communicate with employees to ask ways to reduce costs			
Hold off on buying new safety equipment			
Reduce employee health care plan			
Reduce employee vacation time			
Sell unused office equipment			
Reduce employee pay			
Remove productivity bonus			
Increase train loads per day			