

The Nerf Ball: A Useful Technique For Management Education And Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a technique the first author imported from management practice to (a) develop students' meeting management skills, (b) improve students' listening skills and conflict management abilities and (c) encourage student participation and create a supportive learning environment. The technique uses a tangible prop (i.e., a Nerf ball) and is appropriate for use by individuals, classroom instructors, trainers and management professionals.

INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the Nerf ball technique, its rules, philosophy and its introduction in a university classroom setting. Examples illustrate rules and exhibits provide the slides we use to describe the technique to students and practitioners. We have two purposes in using the Nerf ball technique and presenting it here. It is our belief that the Nerf ball technique helps us develop our students' management skills and we wish to share the technique with our teaching colleagues. Second, we want to help others create a supportive learning environment in their classrooms. We have found the technique particularly useful in a diverse classroom environment, where representatives of different cultures tend to respond very differently to opportunities for discussion. The technique, imported from management practice by the first author for use in the classroom, uses a tangible prop (i.e., a Nerf ball) and is appropriate for use by individuals, classroom instructors, trainers and management professionals.

History suggests people have always had trouble staying focused in meetings and showing respect for others. Ancient solutions can be found in many cultures. Native American traditions provide two examples. The first is the use of the peace pipe. During peace negotiations, meeting participants would all smoke the pipe. Then whoever had the pipe talked and everyone else listened. The second is the use of the talking stick to guarantee everyone who wants to speak has a chance to be heard and is allowed to take as long as they need to say what was on their minds without fear of being interrupted with questions, criticisms, lectures or scolding, or even being presented with solutions to their problems (Donaldson, 1998). Zimmerman and Coyle (1998) describe the Native American council process of communication and community building in which participants sit in a circle, pass a "talking stick" from one person to another, and create a special, almost spiritual space for learning. Lawry (1998) briefly describes his use of this council process in his college classroom. Over the years our students have shared that the "peace pipe," "talking stick," "fire stick," and "talking rock" of their cultures use many of the principles embodied in the Nerf ball technique we describe below.

Our classes usually include ethnic diversity, especially with Native American, Hispanic and International students from Asia relatively well represented. For example, we have 9% Native American enrollment in our university, and 10% Hispanic – those are our largest minorities, with African Americans representing about 2.5% and International students 3%. All three authors require a significant discussion component in their courses (up to 30% of the course grade generated by evaluations of participation) and all share the challenge of drawing out the culturally silent minority students (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984) into what is frequently a lively discussion environment. The Nerf ball technique contributes to improving minority inclusion in these class discussions.

We usually present the Nerf ball process during the first week of our undergraduate courses as a technique that will help students manage meetings, facilitate listening and collaboration, reduce interruptions and make better decisions. Using transparencies presented here as Exhibits 1 thru 3, we describe Nerf ball use in meetings and classes while holding the Nerf ball for display. Following our discussion of the Nerf ball rules described below, we establish a contract with students to abide by the rules. This is an important component of the Nerf ball technique because it enables participants to refer back to commonly held expectations for Nerf ball behavior at a later date.

EXHIBIT 1

The Nerf Ball Process

It Takes Two Things To Implement The Nerf:

- Courage - To Implement The Use Of A Silly Prop In Front Of Others To Take Control Of Any Meeting
 - Contract - A Contract Up Front With The Meeting (Or Class) Participants To Abide By The Five Rules And The Purposes Of The Nerf
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Rules:

- Show Respect - For The Speaker And All Others In The Meeting Or Classroom.
 - Take Turns - This Is Difficult When We Are Hearing Things We Do Not Want To Hear, We Are Upset, Angry, Or Disappointed With The Person Speaking To Us.
 - Listen Attentively - Assist Us To Become Better Listeners.
 - Our Mind Goes Faster Than The Person Speaking To Us.
 - All Languages On Earth Are Programmed.
 - Value Differences To Minimize Bias
 - (Education Levels, Age Differentials, Ethnicity, Gender, Rank)
 - We Must Be Willing To Ask Anyone For Help With A Problem Or A Decision.
 - Make Better Decisions - By Asking Your Employees And Others For Help.
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EXHIBIT 2

Meeting Skills:

- Helps control peoples' behaviors in meetings or classrooms
 - Improves the ability to stay focused in a meeting or a classroom
 - Provides examples of appropriate meeting behavior
 - Improves decision-making process by encouraging participation
 - Promotes civilized discussion as an aid to conflict resolution
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EXHIBIT 3

Listening And Conflict Management Skills:

- Improves listening effectiveness
 - Encourages participants to respect each other
 - Requires participants to take turns and be calm, cool and collected - especially during conflict resolutions
 - Assists with understanding others first (Covey's Habit 5)
 - Minimizes bias based on differences in education level, age, gender, ethnic background, and organizational rank in the workplace.
 - Reduces temptation to think of other things or interrupt while listening or in a meeting, classroom or in a one-on-one conversation.
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After we describe the entire technique, we use the Nerf ball to facilitate student introductions and to practice and reinforce the Nerf ball rules. At this point, we have students stand up, face their classmates, and introduce themselves sequentially as they pass the Nerf ball to each other. Introductions conducted in this manner help establish a culture that encourages cooperation and mutual support. The protocol is first name, major, home town and country, and an area of interest outside school. The range of interests is remarkable - from snowboarding to music to spouses and children. Yet, many discover they have common interests. We remind students they will work in teams during the semester and suggest they use the Nerf ball process during their team meetings.

In subsequent classes, we throw the Nerf ball to individual students to keep their attention and encourage them to speak and contribute. Students have indicated the Nerf ball process encourages self-confidence. The social pressure associated with receiving the Nerf ball allows quiet students to overcome their reluctance to speak in class. We often give the Nerf ball to quiet students. Our example encourages more outgoing students to give the Nerf ball to non-participating students. We have found the Nerf ball helps students pay attention and encourages involvement. Importantly, the Nerf ball technique helps us address our faculty responsibilities to promote classroom civility (Feldmann, 2001) and create a conflict-free learning environment (Anderson, 1999).

We ask our students after the introductions if they have noticed that we open each class with a cue - and close each class with another cue. The opening cue is always "Let's call this meeting to order please." When this cue is given, our Nerf rules (presented below) are in effect. Each class always closes with "This meeting is adjourned, you people be safe." Until this is said the meeting is still on-going and the Nerf ball rules below are in effect.

NERF BALL RULES

The Five Rules include (1) Show Respect, (2) Take Turns, (3) Listen Attentively, (4) Value Differences to Minimize Bias and (5) Make Better Decisions.

Show Respect

The first rule is to show respect for the speaker and all others in the meeting or classroom. A student made the following statement in a class many years ago: "Whoever has the Nerf has the turf."

We learned the importance of the "show respect" rule from one of our former students who introduced the idea on her essay exam. Instead of answering the question by saying the purpose of the Nerf was to help us control a meeting - the answer we were looking for - she wrote the purpose of the Nerf was to show respect. Since that day, respect is our first rule. In all the many meetings we have been in, lack of respect was an issue. If we do not stay focused and listen, we are being disrespectful to all others in the meeting or class.

Take Turns

Our parents taught us this rule: take turns. It is difficult to do when we hear things we do not want to hear; when we are upset, angry or disappointed with the person speaking to us. However, this is precisely when our need to take turns is greatest. In the world of work we often hear the adage "shoot first and ask questions later." Shooting first does not work. We need to reverse the adage: first ask questions, listen to the answers, and then decide if we should shoot.

This rule helps us confront and civilly discuss our conflicts with others so that they can be resolved. This rule also helps us avoid making inaccurate causal attributions in our attempt to explain another's behavior. We should not first attribute, but should first ask and listen. This leads to collaboration and an increased likelihood that conflict can be fully and civilly resolved.

We explain we have had great success defusing personal and interpersonal conflict using the Nerf ball technique. We can use the Nerf ball technique anywhere and with anyone. We have used it successfully with our children, with students, with colleagues and, most importantly, with employees in the workplace.

The examples below create a bridge to help students understand how to use the Nerf ball process in the workplace or classroom. In our view, most students can more easily relate to interpersonal conflicts with parents, siblings, roommates and peers than they can to conflicts among employees and coworkers. The examples were drawn from the personal experiences of the authors. The readers are encouraged to examine their own store of personal anecdotes and select an appropriate match based on their unique experiences and perspectives.

Example One

Any parent can use the Nerf. We explain that a number of years ago one of the authors taught his 15-year old daughter the Nerf concept. Students easily understand that a 15 year old girl can become very angry with her dad. The daughter would approach her father extremely upset, convinced his decision would ruin her life and wanting to yell at him. He handed her the Nerf ball. She said, "I hate you for doing that!" She knew she had to be calm, cool and collected - the 3 C's associated with the Nerf ball technique. She explained her position. Her anger dropped. At these moments, whoever has the Nerf has the turf!

At this point we emphasize the need to listen. Yes, we will hear things we do not want to hear, do not agree with, or that upset us. But we should never interrupt. As long as the other person holds the Nerf ball, we must listen and not say a word. If we do not listen attentively, we violate rule number one: we disrespect the other person be they a child, a student, a colleague or an employee. This rule is consistent with Covey's (1990) Habit 5: Seek first to understand before you are understood.

After she finished, she gave her dad the Nerf ball and it was his turn. Now he had no need to speak crossly to her. His frustration had been defused. We tell our students the strangest thing happened. The dad actually carried out a civilized discussion with his daughter even though they were both in disagreement and very upset with each other.

Example Two

We share with our classes that there are times when students come to our office upset over a low and seemingly unfair score on an exam. When this happens we simply give the student a Nerf ball. Students have even employed a wide range of expletives because they knew they had to sit down and quietly explain their views on the matter, knowing we would listen and not say a word. They were aware they needed to be calm, cool and collected. When they were done they handed back the Nerf ball. Back and forth the Nerf ball went until the issue was resolved. We took turns just like our mothers taught us to. In other words, the Nerf became a "peace" pipe. We believe any professor can use the Nerf ball technique in similar situations.

Listen Attentively

Before being assigned to an overseas executive position, the first author received training in linguistics and negotiation skills at Upjohn's International Division. The trainer, a Ph.D. sociologist, designed the program to help executives learn how to endure long cross-cultural meetings that included translators and not lose focus.

The training program had two central themes: (1) our brain can process information about five times faster than a person can speak to us and (2) all languages are structured and words are arranged in an established order.

The first theme helps us understand why it is so difficult for people to remain focused in a classroom or other meeting. It also explains why we can think of many other things, talk to our neighbor and have difficulty staying focused during a meeting or class.

We tell our students we think they are very bright and can probably think ten times faster than the speaker can speak. As a result, they can think of many other things while someone is talking or when they are in a class or meeting. Then we ask students what they think the number one complaint is on surveys of employees regarding their boss's shortcomings. In every class five to eight students raise their hands and say, "they don't listen." We say, "Sure, they are Nerfless."

We ask students if they have ever talked to someone and saw that person's eyes glass over and know he or she was thinking of other things and had not heard a word. Roughly a third of each class will say they have. We respond by saying that is how "bright" these people are. Your boss is able to think about many other things while you strive to tell him or her something and not hear a word you say. Then we tell our students not to make this mistake. They must stay focused and concentrate. They must use their powers of concentration to look at the speaker and hear every word. They must not think about no milk in the frig, the shirts at the laundry, and plans for tonight, if they are to listen well and respond effectively.

The second theme was that every language is programmed. This concept means that all languages have structure and words must follow preset orders. This phenomenon is why it is often possible to start listening to the beginning of a sentence and know the rest of the sentence before we hear it.

Again we tell our students they probably do not have the bad habit we have. We can listen to the first four words of any eight word sentence and interrupt a person right in the middle of their sentence. It is not necessary for us to waste the time to let them finish. We are so "bright" we can often hear only one or two words and interrupt or stop the speaker because we know what comes next. If speakers hesitate because they cannot think of a word we say the word for them. Sometimes if they are really slow, we actually finish their sentence for them.

We tell students about some of the incorrect assumptions we have made in the past by not allowing students or employees to complete their sentences or by not paying attention to what was being said.

We explain we are conducting a weird experiment. We are allowing people to complete their sentences without interruption. We try to hide from them how bright we are. We try to fool them and pretend we do not know what they will say. Our students understand our meaning.

Value Differences To Minimize Bias

To minimize potential bias, we must be willing to ask for help with a problem or a decision. It is often said that two heads are better than one. The authors believe it is even better if they are different. We all have a tendency to associate and interact with people just like us. This tendency is why fraternities, sororities, and student groups exist. It also explains why friends, members of the same clubs and people with the same major sit together in a classroom. This behavior does not encourage synergy or effective brainstorming. To be effective in the even more complex world of tomorrow, we must include people who are different: those with different educations, ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds and organizational rank. We must learn to ask our employees for help with our decisions, especially

those who are different and think outside our box. Sometimes we must ask people who work outside our discipline. But most important, we need to ask employees for advice and assistance because it leads to better decisions.

We ask students to consider this when choosing their teammates later in the semester.

Make Better Decisions

Example Three

A Nerf meeting was held at a Ford Motor Company parts plant in 1971. Seven employees were gathered together to help solve the problem of getting a new conveyor that was too large to fit through the receiving dock door into the plant. This group of non-managerial employees included both men and women with only high school educations. None were connected with engineering. They had come from payroll, the plant floor, janitorial services, and the cafeteria. An 18-year old receptionist, who had just received her G.E.D. and had worked for Ford for one week, saved hundreds of thousands of dollars (in 1971 dollars!) by helping solve the conveyor problem. She also embarrassed several of the engineering staff with masters degrees by having a better idea than they did!

The engineers wanted to tear out a wall to put the conveyor inside or dismantle it and reassemble the conveyor. Both would take several days. The Ford corporate officials said closing the plant for a week would close three assembly plants due to lack of parts. The plant manager showed the conveyor sitting in the shipping area parking lot to the group of employees. Then he took them to the conference room to join representatives from engineering for a Nerf meeting. He described the problem and the engineering people presented their solutions. He then asked, "Before I accept an engineering solution, does anyone have a better idea?" Within thirty seconds, the female receptionist said, "Well, I don't know but. . ."

At this point we ask our students how many times someone has said to them, "Well, I don't know, but" and then given them helpful advice or information.

At this point, we translate that phrase "Well, I don't know, but" into what is really meant. We believe the employee is really trying to say, "I do not know as much as you do, nor am I as educated as you are, nor do I have as high a rank as you but I have an idea, would you be willing to listen? Many times we have had supervisors, managers or executives say "No, thank you" or ignore the employee. These responses are why so many employees will not offer to help. They get rejected or ignored. We ask our students not to make this mistake as a future manager.

To continue with the example, the receptionist said: "Well I don't know but, when I was on the plant tour last week, I noticed the whole ceiling was one big jalousie window to let the heat out. Well I don't know but, why don't you rent a crane and drop it through the roof? That idea kept three Ford assembly plants from being shut down for several days. Listening to your employees and others who think outside our box yields better decisions – that's the "bottom line."

At this point, when we have presented the Nerf ball rules, we ask students for a contract. We ask them to abide by the Nerf ball rules and to make that commitment by raising their hands. Thus far, not one student or workshop participant over the past fifteen years has ever said no. Everyone has agreed to the contract. Subsequently we can refer to this contract to quiet any class instantly. We simply say, "The Nerf is in effect and you gave me your word."

SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

While we recognize that physical attributes of the classroom (e.g., temperature, size, adequate and comfortable seating) contribute to the creation of a supportive learning environment, we focus most of our effort on establishing a supportive classroom culture by clearly articulating our expectations for student behavior. According to Gudykunst and Kim (1984):

“...every culture has acceptable means to reach cultural goals. The means to reach cultural goals involve shared agreements about how people are expected to behave. . . cultural norms and rules (are) those widely shared agreements about how we are expected to behave. (p 39).”

We have found the Nerf ball technique helps us establish shared agreement on expected classroom behaviors that support a classroom culture that:

- Reduces non-class related discussion.
- Provides examples of appropriate behavior.
- Focuses attention on the speaker.
- Promotes active listening.
- Encourages participation and increased contributions from all students.

A supportive classroom culture or any culture:

“...can be described in terms of a coherent set of rules. Rules provide a statement of expected or intended behaviors and desired outcomes. Thus, rules serve to bring order to social life and render it meaningful. Rules provide a set of mutual expectations, rendering the behavior of each person predictable and understandable to others (Noesjirwan, 1978, p. 305 - 306).”

In our classroom, the Nerf Rules provide our shared set of intended and expected behaviors that serve to order the classroom situation and reduce the levels of uncertainty and discomfort for all participants including our minority students.

Role expectations may be profoundly different from culture to culture – perhaps especially so between American Anglo culture and the traditional Asian, Native American (primarily Navajo) and Hispanic cultures of most of our minority students (Cf. Chaney and Martin, 1995). Comments the authors have received from Native American students are illustrative of these differences. “In Navajo culture, we would rarely speak up in the presence of elders at a meeting. Maybe if we were asked something directly...” and “As a Navajo, I believe you don’t speak up unless you have something really important to say.” Further, differences in cultural preferences can color the view of Anglo students’ behaviors. “Sometimes the Anglo students just talk to talk – they really don’t have anything to say. When you do have a comment, it’s hard to break into the discussion because they dominate it.” Asian cultures follow a similar pattern, especially in terms of role expectations in schools and universities (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984, p. 73). The Hispanic culture also tends to encourage a more formalized view of classroom interaction among students. According to Pajewski and Enriquez (1996), “Hispanics hesitate to openly show what they know (in a classroom) for fear of embarrassing those who don’t know.” Other educators have emphasized the importance for Hispanic students of not being interrupted when they are speaking in class as an important determinant of an inclusive classroom environment for them (www.as.wvu.edu).

Bridging these differences the Nerf ball becomes an agreed-upon symbol of the behavioral and role expectations embodied in the Nerf Rules. With the possession of the Nerf ball, minority students are formally thrust into the role of speaker for the group – and at the same time the Nerf rules suppress the usual interruptions from the more verbally intrusive and less formal majority students.

One prominent value of the dominant culture in the United States is directness. Those valuing directness expect others to be open and to the point. Consistent with this value, students in the United States are frequently encouraged to engage in discussion of topics in classroom situations. However, not all cultures value directness. Many cultures value silence and maintaining harmony much more highly than “laying one’s cards on the table.” People from these cultures are much less likely to reveal what they think, or (in a classroom) expose what questions they might have. (adapted from Chaney and Martin, p. 41).

The Nerf Rules tend to formalize the role expectations for classroom participants. Roles denote the conduct that accompanies certain “parts” played by students. When the role is enacted according to the expectations of the

group, the enactment is seen by group members to be convincing and legitimate (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984 p. 67). In this way, the possession of the Nerf confers legitimacy and respect on the speech of the holder and helps to reinforce the “classroom culture” rather than the traditional cultures of each participant.

One potential barrier to classroom communication may be the minority students’ perceptions of where they stand in the social hierarchy. As real or perceived outsiders in the majority society, they may feel that their contributions don’t carry as much weight as those of representatives of American Anglo culture. (cf. Chaney and Martin on social hierarchies, pp. 33-34.) The Nerf rules, especially those with regard to respect for the holder of the Nerf, tend to override the social hierarchy – the one with the Nerf has the turf, and all other participants must defer to the Nerf-holder.

CONCLUSION

Why do we advocate the use of the Nerf in our classrooms? Why do we want to encourage smooth, respectful discussions and communication for our students, and especially for our minority students? Harris and Moran (1987) provide the answer:

Communication is at the heart of all organizational operations and international relations. It is the most important tool we have for getting things done. It is the basis for understanding, cooperation, and action. In fact, the very vitality and creativity of an organization or a nation depends upon the content and character of its communications. Yet, communication is both the hero and villain – it transfers information, meets people’s needs, and gets things done, but far too often it distorts messages, develops frustration, and renders people and organizations ineffective. (p.31)

We have found the Nerf ball technique promotes positive, effective communication and minimizes the negative results of communication errors.

While the efficacy of the Nerf ball technique has yet to be subjected to empirical examination, the authors have viewed first hand the differences in student behaviors exhibited by students exposed to the Nerf ball technique. Importantly, the effect appears to last beyond the class in which students are introduced to the technique. The second and third authors primarily teach upper division courses for which the first author’s class is a prerequisite. The primary reason these authors have adopted the first author’s Nerf ball technique is their experiences with students who brought Nerf behavior into their upper division classes. These students were easy to spot. They were courteous, listened attentively, and involved other students in class discussions. Many offered the Nerf technique as a potential solution for case study assignments that included communications and/or decision making problems. These students were also frequently selected as leaders of student groups because they were better able to manage student group meetings.

It is our belief the ability to manage meetings, conflicts, and the classroom is important to faculty, our students and the organizations they will join upon graduation. We offer the “Nerf ball” concept from the first author's bag of tricks learned at Ford Motor Company in 1971 and practiced in many subsequent management positions. The Nerf ball has been used continually for 34 years in many venues including university classrooms, professional development programs, numerous businesses, and private schools. Thus, thousands of former students and hundreds of workshop attendees remember and appreciate The Nerf. A Certificate of Merit from an Intel class of fifty occupies a prominent position on one author’s office wall. It reads: "To Bill (Nerf) Archer - Let's call this meeting to order. "

We are convinced the Nerf ball technique helps us develop our students’ management skills and create a supportive learning environment in our classrooms. We hope the reader will also benefit from its use.

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