

To the Top: A Role Playing Exercise Highlighting Leadership, Influence Tactics, Decision Making, Conflict Resolution and Communication

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Abstract. Leadership, influence tactics, decision-making, conflict resolution, and communication are key topics in Organizational Behavior courses at undergraduate and graduate levels. We discuss an exercise giving instructors the opportunity to engage students actively and meaningfully in learning these topics. We do so through the adaptation of a commercially available live action role-playing game. In this exercise, student groups of approximately six simulate the difficult ascent of an unclimbed mountain peak. Through this short but intensive exercise, students make crucial decisions that can either help or hinder their team's success. With each group member having a different agenda and role within the group, they move through group dynamics and decision-making capabilities, using and demonstrating the effectiveness of conflict resolution techniques and influence tactics. Following completion, students reflect upon the techniques and styles used during a group discussion and plenary session. Instructing materials, suggested uses, and student reactions to this activity are included.

Keywords: management education, organizational behavior education, experiential learning, role-playing, group activity.

1. Introduction

One of the key challenges facing educators today is student motivation and stimulating engaging interactions within the classroom (Debnath, Tandon & Pointer 2007; Mullane 2019; Plump & Meisel 2019). Students are often more focused on grades and grading (Levy 2007), rather than connecting with and

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understanding the long-term benefits and applications of course concepts. Combating this, Bain (2004) argues that instructors should create diverse learning experiences in which students are allowed “to talk things out, to interact with each other” (p. 118), as the use of student interaction to express questions or other thoughts (such as group decision making) stimulates more engagement (Crane 2017). In addition, prior research has called for instructors to use active learning techniques such as cooperative controversies (Bredfehoft 1991), dramatic performance (Lyons, Bradley, & White 1984) and mental aerobics (Weaver & Cottrell 1985) as avenues for impactful student engagement.

Within management classrooms, educators have long aimed to achieve realistic exercises for students to allow them to access and experience complex and valuable course topics. Many management instructors have turned to popular, computer-based simulations, but, to date, little attention has been focused on more analog, game-based activities or traditional role-playing activities (Mercer, Swab, Harris, Johnson, Tomczyk, & Morningstar 2021). In particular, Management and Organizational Behavior (OB) classes are becoming more and more important as employers increasingly demand and value the softer skills such as leadership, communication, decision making, and interpersonal and team skills. Yet many instructors still rely upon traditional teaching techniques, such as lecturing, to highlight these critical skills. In doing so, educators may not address the needs of today’s students who have been identified as active learners, who have demonstrated to benefit from group discussion and shared problem-solving (Wilson 2004). One such way to meet this need is through experiential learning which has been long recognized as beneficial for individuals and organizations (e.g., Bevan & Kipka 2012; Schmidt-Wilk 2018) and is now increasingly more salient as we prepare students for a business world characterized by “uncertainty, chaos and luck” (Collins & Hanson 2011).

Therefore, we incorporate gamification in our exercise, defined as using “game thinking and game mechanics in non-game scenarios, specifically in recruitment, training, and development, and motivation, in order to engage users and solve problems (Ergle 2015; p. 222; Deterding 2011), as it lends itself well to accessible, experiential learning, providing a foundation and structure through which the skills of organizational behavior can be experienced and applied rather than just discussed. Accordingly, in this manuscript, we focus on a traditional, analog gaming exercise that has seen positive results in assisting students with the learning process, namely, role-playing (Afota & Robinson 2020; Gibson, Ward, Comer, Rossi 2018; Skowronski & Bedi 2020).

In a role-playing game or activity, participants assume the role of a specific character in a fictional or hypothetical setting. The participant makes decisions for the character, often informed by prescribed or created information, knowledge, or motivations unique to that character, and acts within the narratives’ role, thereby playing an active, rather than passive, role in choices that the narrative determines (Waskul & Lust 2004). Participants use background information, and other traits

and characteristics of the character they assume, to help inform their decision-making capability. Role-playing games use an interactive narrative, relevant backstories, and asymmetrical characters to incorporate the tenants of experiential learning, which provides participants a learning process where “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984, p.41). In doing so, the experience for participants is often far more immersive, intimate, and interpersonal than through conventional simulation use.

2. Learning Objectives

This exercise was adapted to assist students with various aspects of interpersonal behavior often seen in organizations. More specifically, it focuses on leadership, interpersonal relationships, influence tactics, decision-making, conflict resolution, and communication. Instructors can further adapt the exercise to the extent they wish to focus on one or all these topics and the depth of that focus, as per the learning goals of their specific class. Specific objectives are:

1. Using role-playing to gain a simulated experience of working in a team under significant external pressure, and in turn, allowing for the practical application of course concepts, particularly critical soft skills that can be otherwise difficult to meaningfully demonstrate within a classroom context.
2. Recognizing and applying appropriate decision-making techniques (Phase 1).
3. Recognizing and applying communication methods (Phase 1, Phase 2).
4. Recognizing and applying conflict management and influence tactic techniques (Phase 1 and 2 through the use of asymmetric information within the character bios).
5. Identifying and using appropriate leadership styles to influence behavior.
6. Identifying power asymmetry and subsequent effects.

3. Overview

“To the Top” is role-playing activity for small groups that can be conducted within a classroom-based environment in the course of a single class meeting.

The exercise detailed within this paper was adapted from a commercially available role-playing game called “The Climb” (<https://bullypulpitgames.com/games/the-climb/>). The designer’s permission was obtained to adopt and copy the material for use in the classroom. The exercise requirements and materials to be used are more fully detailed in Appendix A.

While it is recognized that a computer based virtual simulation called *Leadership and Team Simulation: Everest V3* (December, 2017), developed by Michael A. Roberto and Amy C. Edmonson and available through Harvard Business Publishing, has been widely employed within graduate and undergraduate courses, it is suggested that the exercise outlined herein offers a cost effective alternative and a more immersive experience for participants. This exercise also addresses similar learning objectives to Roberto and Edmonson’s (2017) computer-based simulation in that one can explore participation in, and leadership of, effective teams, explore team dynamics, understand the impact of conflicting views, and understand how competition and time sensitivity impacts the decision-making process and team effectiveness (Roberto 2002).

Roberto and Edmonson’s (2017) simulation is a 2D, screen-based simulation which offers participants the opportunity to play a limited role as part of a mountaineering team climbing Mount Everest. As others have observed, teaching with this simulation requires educators to create an environment in which students are expected to suspend disbelief in order to interact as if this simulation is a “real” situation (Gaba 2004; Aebersold, Rasmussen, & Mulrenin 2020). This can be problematic. Indeed, scholars have previously identified two limiting features of the *Leadership and Team Simulation: Everest* (Nichols & Wright 2015). First, the visual presentation of certain elements is limited, which may impact student engagement. Second, the decision choices are limited and may be accomplished without discussion and interaction between team participants. While expedient, this, unfortunately, restricts the ability of participants in the simulation to fully explore individual behaviors and interpersonal interactions. Within our proposed activity, however, participants who play a role are able to experiment with and experience new, valuable behaviors and skills in a risk free, immersive, and cost-effective environment.

In the To the Top exercise, students take on the role of a climber who is part of a small expedition team tasked with ascending to the peak of an unclimbed Himalayan Mountain. The class instructor takes the role of the exercise facilitator. Each character is provided with a small amount of background information detailing their climbing experience, motivations, and personal goals. Each pair of characters has a pre-existing relationship which can, and should, influence the way in which participants, in the role of their character, interact with their partner, further capitalizing on the value of this role-playing exercise. Full details of the characters are described in Appendix D. The exercise is split into three Phases.

In Phase 1, the students commence the game waiting at base camp, each paired with another student. Their primary task is to determine the group of climbers who will begin the climb and progress to the next stage of the mountain.

Within this stage, students will need to secretly pass information (that may either help or hinder the party, perhaps in favor of personal objectives) to the group that ascends, demonstrating the potential conflict between individual and team goals and the complex role of information asymmetry in decision making. During this stage, the exercise facilitator can increase the immersive experience by utilizing a soundtrack (see Appendix A) which not only adds to the atmosphere of the session environment, but also acts as a timer for the decision making portion of the exercise allowing facilitators the freedom to shorten or lengthen this phase as they see fit. In Phase 2, the group of climbers chosen to ascend to the next stage physically leave the initial playing environment by relocating to another room, thereby creating physical and temporal distance between the two groups. During this stage, both groups are tasked with information transfer among themselves and between these now two separated groups. Phase 3 is the debrief phase, where the two groups come back together, and the facilitator debriefs the exercise.

From a practical standpoint, the exercise involves students being placed in teams of six, and is appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate classes. The exercise can also be conducted with larger groups. If numbers do not allow teams of six, then either, one of the characters (Samson) may be removed and teams of five used instead, or a student acts as an observer in each team (team size seven). The observer's responsibility is to highlight aspects of interest during the debrief session that they witnessed during the exercise itself. Again, with larger class sizes, multiple teams and multiple observers may be used.

4. Conducting the Exercise

Appendix A details the session environment that is required and the materials needed, with facilitator notes in Appendix B, together with the relevant briefs to be read out loud to participants. The total time for the exercise is approximately 75 minutes (including set up and debrief). Suggested timing is set out in Table 1. If additional time is available, the exercise itself can be lengthened by simply running the sound track longer given this is used to signal the break in play and completion of the exercise. Once the facilitator has set up the exercise environment (Appendix A), handed out character bios, and has read the facilitator introduction (Appendix B) and highlighted the maintenance of a safe learning environment (Kisfalvi & Oliver 2015), the facilitator can then provide directions on the pacing of the exercise and how the information cards work (Appendix B). The facilitator can then direct the relevant participants to their "tents" and allow the exercise to commence.