An Exercise to Introduce Concepts in Organizational Change

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Abstract. Leading change is an essential skill for managers. Instructors in management education and organizational behavior must not only teach theories on effectively leading change, but also convince students of the necessity of developing their change leadership skills. Students may not be able to intuitively grasp the difficulty, complexity and nuances of organizational change. Thus, one exercise has been designed to allow students to experience Lewin's three steps to successful organizational change. This exercise simulates the organic process of organizational change and can be conducted in face-to-face classes or online classes via any video-conferencing platform. After participants experience the exercise, topics on leading change, following change, resistance to change and influence and power dynamics will be discussed.

Keywords: experiential learning, leading change, organizational change.

1. Introduction

Leading organizational change is a common topic taught in management classes. In practice, this important topic of leading change in an organization may be difficult for students who may have limited managerial or workplace experience to grasp. One way to help future managers understand the challenges and frustrations of leading change in the workplace is to apply Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model and develop exercises that may simulate the organizational change experience.

In this paper, we propose an exercise that simulates certain aspects of the organizational change process. First, we briefly summarize the potential benefits of using simulations as a pedagogical tool and provide a brief description of the exercise. Second, we review the key concepts in organizational change that are related to the exercise we have designed. Then, we introduce the exercise by providing details on how to run it in both face-to-face and synchronous online classes. Finally, we provide discussion questions and suggestions on how the instructor can debrief the exercise to highlight the key concepts in organizational change.

1.1.   Simulation as a Pedagogical Tool

Dewey (1938) asserted that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 25). According to Bloom (1956), impactful experiences followed by reflection and application can lead to higher-order learning. At the same time, it can also lead to greater skill development (Smart & Csapo 2007). Experiential learning prompts adult learners to be actively involved (Dachner & Polin 2016), and it provides a means to generate practical examples to reflect on the emotional, relational, and power dynamics of organizational change (Bridgman 2020; Larsen 2004; Reynolds & Vince 2007).

   Thus, we have designed an exercise to simulate organizational change for students to experience before introducing the concepts of organizational change. The popularity of simulations in business education has been well-documented (e.g., Faria, 1998). Simulations are sometimes used in business education because active learning has been found to be more effective than pure lectures (e.g., Daouk *et al.* 2016). In fact, simulations are a move away from traditional learning, which is focused on the instruction and content, to experiential learning. Simulations are focused on students as the main active players in the learning process. During a simulation, students get the opportunity to experience a certain phenomenon, get actively involved in the process of making decisions, and go through the consequences of their decisions (Coffey & Anderson 2006).

1.2.   Brief Description of the Exercise

In this exercise, a group of students will be standing in a circle, so that they can see one another. The key goal of this exercise is for the group to converge on the same action and sound, without any verbal communication with one another. At the prompt of the instructor, the exercise will begin, and the change process will emerge and evolve as some students take initiative to make an action and/or sound, while others may follow. At some point in time, students may under the prompt, or without the prompt of the instructor, make a change of action and sound. Others may or may not follow suit. This exercise simulates certain aspects of the organizational change process, as we will describe in detail in the latter parts of this paper.

2. Key Concepts in Organizational Change That Are Related to the Exercise

In the upcoming section, we will cover the key concepts that the exercise seeks to highlight to students.

2.1.   The Process of Organizational Change

Organizational researchers have examined the need for adaptive responses to an ever-changing environment (Leana & Barry 2000). The downsides of not adapting to change have been well documented (e.g., Kotter, 1996; Ring, Bigley, D'Aunno, & Khanna 2005; Singh, Tucker, & House 1986). However, even though the need to adapt to both short- and long-term changes is well documented, the fact remains that individuals often resist change despite knowing the need for change (Kotter & Schlesinger 2008; Piderit 2000). In fact, individuals may even resist beneficial change. Lewin's (1947) three-stage model posits that individuals must "unfreeze" or overcome inertia and barriers promoting the status quo before change can occur.

   Lewin's Change Model suggests that organizational changes entail these steps:

(i) Unfreezing. Given that people would naturally resist organisational changes, this step involves efforts to move them away from the status quo and towards a new end-state for the organisation. Two forces would be at work here. First, there is a need to strengthen the driving forces of change, such as enhancing the desirability of the new state of being as compared to the organization's current situation. Second, there is a need to reduce the restraining forces, such as people's preference for comfort, need for perceived control of keeping to the status quo, and fear of uncertainty.

(ii) Movement. This step involves the organization's actual transition into a new end-state. This is an implementation step where its people, having been swayed by the driving forces and having overcome the restraining forces, act on matters to effect change. At this stage, organizations would supplement the people's efforts with education, communication and support to smoothen the change process.

(iii) Refreezing. This step involves reinforcing the new state after the change. Organizations usually demonstrate the benefits of the new state of being by recognizing and rewarding the people's change efforts, to positively reinforce their preference for the new end-state. People, at this juncture, accept the changes to the organization's goals, strategies, processes, systems and structures as the new norm.

   Kotter's eight-step model (1995, 1996) emphasizes the importance of counteracting barriers to change through communicating not only the need for change but also the vision of what the change will accomplish. Kotter's model also highlights the role of the leader to share the reasons behind the change and potential benefits of change in order to create a feeling of urgency and necessity.

These two approaches of leading change can provide a framework to allow students to understand and counteract the reasons individuals may resist change. In the exercise designed for this session, participants will be able to experience the process of change. More details of how this takes place will be presented in the section on the exercise debrief.

2.2. Communication

To lead change effectively, leaders must not only understand the barriers to change; they must also communicate the rationale for change exceptionally well. Kotter (1995) argues that many change efforts fail because the leaders drastically underestimate the amount of communication required. Unfortunately, just increasing the amount of messages of having to change does not necessarily improve the quality of the communication.

In the exercise designed, which will be described in detail later, participants will enact and communicate change through observing others around them spontaneously. In summary, without any verbal communication, participants in the exercise will all have to enact the same body movement and / or sound spontaneously. They may also change the sound and movement with or without the cue of the instructor.

2.3. Power

According to Kotter's (1995) model for leading change, another crucial element to leading change, besides communication mentioned earlier, involves an understanding of power. Thus, the second step for successfully leading change involves gathering a coalition with sufficient power (Kotter, 1995). This can be highlighted in the exercise where participants have to all do the same body movement. Often, people will enact the body movement when enough people are doing the same movement. This parallels the learning point from Kotter's (1995) model that change will occur when enough people agree or adopt the change.

A common approach to discussing power in management classes involves French and Raven's (1959) bases of power. These bases of power include power based on outcomes one can control (i.e., reward and coercive power), individual aspects of the leader such as skills or charisma (i.e., referent and expert power), and power based on the position one holds in the organization (i.e., legitimate power). Referent and legitimate power are concepts that would play out in our organizational change exercise. For instance, students may focus their attention on and follow another student who may have been appointed a leader (legitimate power). In a situation where the instructor joins in the exercise as well, students may be inclined to look to the instructor for prompts on what actions to enact, highlighting how the instructor has legitimate power.