

Do you see what I see? An exercise in communication and structure

Karen L. Proudford
Morgan State University

ABSTRACT

This experiential exercise demonstrates the complexity of interacting across levels in an organizational environment. Students are assigned differentiated roles in a simulated organization and given a simple task. The resulting dynamics mimic those that occur in everyday organizational life. The exercise (1) highlights the impact of structure on behavior, attitudes and feelings, (2) suggests the need for incorporating structure into one's understanding of behavior, and (3) suggests ways in which individual can act to shift dynamics. The exercise is appropriate for both undergraduate and graduate students.

Keywords: communication, group dynamics, systems, experiential exercise, conflict



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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most frequent comment researchers and practitioners receive about conflict in organizations – and the most cited culprit – is communication. Even in workplaces in which seasoned professionals work, miscues, missteps, misunderstandings and errors can occur as people carry out their daily tasks. Those misunderstandings have implications for how people interact with and view each other – sometimes causing long-standing rivalries which are resistant to resolution tactics.

In teaching group dynamics, it is often difficult for students who may be steeped in an appreciation for individual characteristics to fully understand that groups have a life and experience of their own (Bion, 1961). Moreover, to understand how dynamics form within and between groups (Brown, 1988; Smith and Berg, 1987; Alderfer, 1977) can also present a challenge. People may communicate differently by virtue of their position in the organization and its attendant responsibilities and expectations (Oshry, 1986); though misunderstandings, conflicts - and conversely – cooperation and intimacy are often attributed to individual characteristics. Despite decades of research, many students continue to view group behavior as a black box of “politics” and their own behavior as characterized by agency.

This exercise allows students to experience the impact of structure – hierarchy – on their intragroup interactions. It challenges participants’ thinking about how “they” act – whether the “they” refers leaders, managers, or workers – and encourages students to question their assumptions. The exercise is appropriate for undergraduate or graduate students studying organizational behavior, with an emphasis on leadership, group behavior, power, conflict and diversity. The exercise can be especially helpful in discussing aspects of transformational leadership (Burns, 1978) in that it asks students to envision the organization’s work in a way that will resonate with organizational members. Creating and articulating a vision is a critical component of leadership (Kouzes and Posner, 2007), in part, because it can build cohesion and loyalty among group members. It provides stability for organizational members since they gain an understanding of what values the leaders consider to be most central to accomplishing the work. Employees can then determine the desirable behaviors that fit with the organizational culture as shaped by the leader. Though the vision should encompass the input of followers in the organization (Kouzes and Posner, 2007), it is typically created by the leader and communicated, in linear fashion, to the rest of the organization (Kelly, 2000). This is not an easy process given that the perspective of the leader may differ dramatically from that of the followers (Oshry, 1986).

OBJECTIVES OF THE EXERCISE

The objectives of this experiential exercise are to (1) demonstrate the impact that structural position has on group dynamics, (2) show the complexity of interacting with others, (3) surface both cognitive and affective reactions for closer inspection, (4) emphasize the need for incorporating structure into one’s understanding of behavior, and (5) highlight the importance of individual action in shifting structural dynamics.

This exercise can be held with groups 15 – 60, though a recommended upper limit of 30 is ideal in order to debrief the exercise effectively. The exercise works well as an introduction to topics related to leadership, group behavior, conflict, diversity and communication. We most often use this exercise to highlight group dynamics; it works well in opening up students' assumptions that one's position has little or no effect on behavior. Because the exercise addresses these areas in an engaging way, it typically peaks students' interest in the topics since they "see the whole" in a way that might be difficult in their daily lives.

The exercise can be carried out in one hour – or adjusted easily to fit longer periods of time.

ADVANCE PREPARATION

A room with movable chairs is recommended for the exercise, though it can be done in just about any setting. Task statements can be prepared in advance for each group, printed on slips of paper and inserted into envelopes. These task statements should be straightforward action statements that can be accomplished within the classroom or meeting space provided. Examples of task statements are included in Appendix A.

Participants will need paper in order to write or draw. A flip chart can be made available for each group during the debriefing. Additional materials may be needed, depending upon the exact content of the task statements.

CONDUCTING THE EXERCISE

The design of the exercise, which relies on the framework of the Power Lab (Oshry, 1986), is based upon an organization with three differentiated roles. The childhood game, "Whisper Down the Lane," may also come to mind for some students and participants.

The exercise proceeds as follows:

1. Students are briefed on the new organization – XYZ Organization, a lean organization with a singular mission. Students are divided into groups of three – and within these "units," they self-select into the roles "A," "B," or "C." They are then instructed to position themselves side-by-side in sequence with those roles. The professor states that the task for each unit of XYZ is straightforward: to follow the instructions in the task statement they will be given.
2. A, B, and C have different roles in the work process, each with its own style of communication. The work process will proceed as follows:
 - A reads the statement he/she is given and draws a picture (no words allowed) and passes it to B.
 - After reviewing the picture, B writes a statement and passes it to C.
 - C acts on the statement.

3. XYZ organization has a strong culture. The key elements of the culture are outlined:
 - No talking is allowed among A, B and C.
 - No talking or interaction is permitted across units. Each unit is self-contained.
 - A can only draw pictures.
 - B can only write sentences.
 - C can only act. If A and/or B see that C has not performed effectively, B can communicate (with words) with C.
 - Each unit should follow the chain of command, i.e. A communicates with B; B communicates with A or C; and C only communicates with B. Each person should be carefully to adhere to his/her communication style when interacting with their unit members.

During the briefing process, the professor can answer general questions about the role and process. However, we would discourage a detailed discussion; uncertainty and ambiguity are necessarily an integral part of the learning process. Once the groups are given their task statements, no further communication is allowed with the professor.

4. The professor notifies XYZ that they have two rounds of work to complete. Each round includes one task statement, and they will have 7 minutes to carry out the first task. The professor then gives an envelope, containing one task statement, to the “A” person in each group. When instructed, all of the As open the envelope and begin the work.
5. The professor calls time after 7 minutes. Typically, students will burst in to conversation, after remaining quiet as required during the first round. The professor then indicates that XYZ has undoubtedly learned from their experience in the first round and is thus expected to complete the second round in a more efficient manner. The second round will last 5 minutes. The professor hands an envelope to all of the As, and announces the beginning of the second round.
6. At the completion of the second round, allow a few moments for the students to talk, laugh and move around before beginning the debriefing.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

The debrief proceeds in two ways: first, we ask each XYZ group to consider the following questions. Each unit discusses the questions and records their answers on a flipchart. Each unit then reports out to the entire group.

- Did your unit accomplish the task? Asking this question first keeps the focus on the mission of XYZ. After two rounds, students are typically so filled with their thoughts and emotions about the process, they sometimes lose site of the mission. It is also a very objective measure – in contrast to the decidedly subjective assessments of their process.

- How satisfied were you with your performance? In some cases, students will be very achievement-oriented and will have a sense of urgency about completing the task – even though it is a simple task, with no adverse consequences for failure. Surprisingly, students are often very committed to completing the task, which can foster a sense of competition between units.

Some units are risk-takers, who proceed quite quickly; others move in a deliberate fashion. It is interesting for students to consider which most accurately describes their group and/or how the approach of one person in the unit impacts others.

- Describe your experience - what was frustrating, exhilarating, effective, ineffective, confusing, anxiety-provoking? There is typically an animated conversation as students discuss their reactions to the task. Most often, students talk about the challenges of communicating with someone who uses a different mode of communication. They also talk about “learning” from what was most efficient and effective in the first round. Typically, they emphasize the importance of communicating often, of asking lots of questions and of being patient. They experience frustration when trying to anticipate what their group member might think. Even in this straightforward exercise, they are faced with a number of decision dilemmas with little time to determine a course of action. They also talk about the entire exercise as anxiety-provoking because of the uncertainty of the task. Those who are still working on the task at the end of a round also struggle with the uncertainty of whether their task is identical or different from what they are witnessing from other units.

Participants are then asked to reconfigure themselves into groups by role, and to consider the following questions:

- What was it like to be an A/B/C? Students in the A role typically emphasize being under pressure, the high level of uncertainty (how do I interpret this task that has been given to me? What are the consequences of not doing this well? What’s at stake?) and their own level of competence (some view themselves as having a strong ability to envision the task; others struggle with translating the task statement into a picture. Some have strong drawing skills; others do not.), and a high level of responsibility (“I have to answer for this if we do not complete the task”).

Students in the B role typically describe feeling pulled in two directions with little sense of what either interaction will yield. They also feel responsible for interpreting the picture from A in an accurate manner. They sometimes feel uncertain about how best to utilize their time – particularly when they are waiting to receive instructions from A. They often find it difficult to interpret the picture, which leads to comments like, “I had no idea what A was trying to say.” They are not sure whether to begin speaking with C (What would we talk about since we haven’t received our directions yet?) or to make an inquiry with A (What is taking so long? Is there some way I can help to move this along?).

Students in the C role are often filled with anticipation. They wait and wait, with several minutes feeling like hours, for someone to tell them what to do. In some cases, C never receives instructions – B has not received clear direction to give to C.

Often the C role is bored, and they may be distracted and engage in other activities while they sit and wait. They also feel frustration (What is taking them so long? Just give me *something* to do!) - and they fear they will be held responsible for not carrying out the task, even if it is given to them “at the last minute.” They are also the most visible group member since they will act out the task – and they are unsure about having to rely on direction from A and B, especially when the bulk of the time is spent devising the directions. They report feeling very vulnerable – disconnected from A and B but nonetheless expected to respond to their instructions.

- What did you think about the other members of your group? It is very interesting to hear the group members describe their thoughts and attributions about others. Those attributions are shaped in large part by the performance of the group. They quickly make attributions about the other roles. For example, persons in position A are viewed as incompetent, out of touch, and not really doing any work. Conversely, if the group completes its task, persons in position A are seen as visionary, even inspirational, and as communicating confidence to others in the group. Those in B are often described as confused, having the appearance of not knowing which way to go, and expendable. Alternatively, they are viewed as excellent communicators who are adept at articulating what the A person wants to see happen. Persons in the C role are often seen as easily distracted, even lazy, and uninterested in working – or alternatively, as eager to work, patient and able to follow directions easily.

Conclude the debrief by reconvening the entire group of participants and asking:

- How does this remind you of communicating on the job? Typically, this exercise surfaces many thoughts and feelings connected to the work environment. The professor can help students make the connections between what they experienced here and their roles in other parts of their lives. Sometimes the dynamics feel so “real” to participants that they firmly hold to attributions about themselves and others. Typically, they also experience themselves acting in ways (or making comments, expressing opinions) that are unexpected. However, we remind them that the exercise addresses structure – and that what they are viewing is connected to, but not wholly, individual characteristics.

As the professor observes the participants in action, he/she can make note the group process, noting behaviors that may have helped or hindered the units. The professor may look for the following:

- Coordination attempts – actions taken to organize and facilitate the work process
- Influence attempts – both the direction and the type of influence exerted
- Decision-making – who decides whether or not the task has been carried out
- Stress – how each role reacts to the time pressure, uncertainty and ambiguity
- Level of engagement - how much energy each role and/or unit brings to the task
- Authority dynamics – the degree to which each role and/or unit relies on, accepts or resists authority
- Results-orientation – the level of commitment to completing the task

- Customer service orientation – the level of commitment to accuracy in completing the task

Professors can help by commenting on aspects of culture across the groups that may emerge. Cheating is common since it is very difficult for people/groups to remain silent during the exercise. In addition, some persons are tempted to violate the chain of command and peek at communications between others in the group. Most often, it is the A person who violates the norm by viewing at communication between B and C. In these instances, name the cheating for the entire organization so that groups can (or cannot) attend to it.

Professors will want to be ready for (a) managing their own anxiety as they state the rigid instructions to the group, and (b) challenges to their authority. It is not uncommon for the entire XYZ Organization to “blame” their inability to complete the task on the authority figure, i.e. lack of clear direction from the professor.

In ending the debriefing, students are asked to think about how they can change the dynamics – what could they do differently to help the group accomplish its work? Students typically mention patience and the importance of checking and rechecking communication as priorities at work. They acknowledge the speed with which they form opinions about the intentions of others. For those who occupy a position that is not in alignment with their work position, they realize (or remember) the thoughts and feelings associated with occupying that position. For example, a manager (or student in a leadership role) who occupies a C role in the exercise will remember the sense of vulnerability he/she felt as a subordinate in the organization/group. Alternatively, a person who is a subordinate in their real life may enjoy the challenge of creating a vision for XYZ. In either case, the students begin to reflect on ways to reshape their interactions in order to empathize with those in other positions.

VARIATIONS OF THE EXERCISE

The exercise can easily be adapted in a number of ways to fit different goals, topics or to elicit more complicated dynamics. For example, in larger groups, rather than have a large number of 3 person organizations, we might increase the size of the groups and simulate a hierarchy. For example, a class of 60 might be divided into 6 groups of 10, with 1 A, 3 B, and 6 C. This adds considerable responsibility to the A position, along with intragroup complexity within the B and C positions.

Those in the A position typically feel more intense sense of responsibility tied to the uncertainty of meeting the “customer’s” expectations. Those in role B struggle to stay connected to one another while sorting out the timing of interacting with A and C – as well as which Bs will undertake the interaction. C behaviors can be exaggerated as well in that they may become distracted, even silly as they wait with no work to do; we have even seen Cs scatter and wander off, having no sense of when they might be called upon to carrying out the organization’s task.

Additional variations include:

- Assigning students to positions A, B and C, according to some criteria, e.g. classification, gender or major. We have chosen not to do this since the basic

version of the exercise typically generates sufficient dynamics to be debriefed in a one-hour session.

- Adding more complex tasks.
- Allowing interaction across units in order to foster learning throughout the XYZ.
- Introducing additional system-wide requirements, e.g. that half of the groups are expected to complete their tasks in the time allotted.
- Introducing incentives and/or penalties for each unit and/or the entire XYZ organization.
- Assigning several participants to an observer role in order to capture the group dynamics.

More complex versions should take place when a longer time period is available in order to allow for a thorough debriefing.

STUDENT FEEDBACK

This exercise has been delivered to a wide range of participants, including both undergraduate and graduate students. The students end the exercise energized and ready to reflect upon the interaction. They report being able to understand how top managers, middle managers or employees think and feel, where their own frustrations and anxieties arise and how to manage through those challenges. Students typically request an extended debrief (no matter how long the initial debrief session) of the exercise in order to discuss the insights in depth. When conceptual material is presented related to leadership, communication, conflict or similar topics, students refer back to this exercise frequently as they examine and discuss the theories in class. Finally, most students find this to be a fun, engaging way to approach these types of topics.

CONCLUSION

This is a powerful yet straightforward exercise that generates dynamics similar to those experienced as people communicate in their everyday work lives. It has been effective, particularly as an introduction to conceptual frameworks and an in-depth discussion, with undergraduate and graduate students, as well as executive programs. In instances where people view group behavior as indecipherable, this exercise sheds light on both the dynamics and ways of actively managing them.

APPENDIX A

Examples of Task Statements

- Turn all of the chairs away from the table
- Sing the U.S. National Anthem
- Choose a person, put your hand over their eyes and lead them around the room in a circle
- Shake hands with 5 people who are not at this table
- Make a paper airplane

- Put all of your coins on the table, stacked by type
- Do 10 jumping jacks
- Line up all the pens and pencils on the table, from end to end

The tasks statement should involve an action that others in the room can witness. They statements are intentionally trivial; we discourage the use of any task that would have a meaning connected to the actual work of the students or participants. Task statements can be placed in envelopes marked “Round One” or “Round Two.”

APPENDIX B

A sample timeline for a 60-minute session with 15 people (5 units) is as follows:

- Introduction and instructions (10 minutes)
- Task 1/Round 1 (7 minutes)
- Task 2/Round 2 (5 minutes)
- Debriefing in units (10 minutes; 5 minutes within unit and 5 minutes to report out)
- Debriefing in roles (15 minutes; 10 minutes within role and 10 minutes to report out)
- Final Comments (13 minutes)

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