Harnessing our Heritage with a (not so simple) activity: Experiencing Bolman & Deal’s Power Simulation

**Abstract (100 words)**

In 2017, the *Journal of Management Education*’s Lasting Impact Award recognized Bolman and Deal (1979) “A simple—but powerful—power simulation” as one of two articles that continue to impact student learning. The simulation creates an environment designed to draw out role-based power and influence behaviors including managerial capacity to influence action, how managers may behave when given budget-based authority, and where communication breaks down among organizational levels. A train-the-trainer session, we’ll run the Power Simulation as if it were a class, allowing MOBTS participants to experience the activity and prepare to run it themselves for their own students.

**Key words**

Power, influence, simulation

**Introduction**

In 2017, the *Journal of Management Education*’s Lasting Impact Award recognized Bolman and Deal (1979) “A simple—but powerful—power simulation” as one of two articles that have continued to demonstrably impact student learning opportunities since its publication. The simulation, run for decades by management and business faculty around the world, is an affectively-heightened role-based experience that simulates an organizational structure within a class and charges “executive management” with completing an ambiguous task through “middle managers” and “workers” represented in the class. Although certainly not the only experiential opportunity through which students may be immersed in an environment designed to draw out role-based power and influence behaviors (e.g., Hill & Judge, 2010; the StarPower simulation), the Power Simulation enables outcomes that can be unmatched in terms of bringing real-life lessons to students about managerial capacity to influence action, how managers may behave when given budget-based authority, and where communication breaks down among organizational levels. In a train-the-trainer fashion, this session will feature running the Power Simulation for participants as if it were a class, allowing MOBTS participants to experience the activity in order to be prepared to run it themselves for their own students. There continues to be strong interest in Bolman and Deal’s power simulation; the 2017 OBTC Teaching Conference for Management Educators program alone included three sessions related to it.

Two of the core strengths of the simulation—reasons why it ‘works’ so well—are also potential barriers to effectively running it. First, the ambiguity of the set-up and task to be completed can be difficult to visualize, and, second, the emotional engagement of the students can be daunting for instructors who have never seen it being enacted to manage. The debrief conversation, for example, takes on urgent importance for an activity that can be so destabilizing to current student relationships that have formed, and the ethical issues around using deception in student activities are required conversation points for running the simulation with integrity (e.g., Taras & Steele, 2007; Lund Dean & Wright, 2017). Because we have been trained on its use by Bolman, and have been running it ourselves for decades, we want to share best practices in both running the simulation itself and providing a debrief that maximizes learning outcomes for students while engaging with the emotional aspect of the activity that can be difficult for students.

**Theoretical foundation & teaching implications**

Bolman and Deal’s Power Simulation is an award-winning and robust activity that has its roots among those who founded the MOBTS and who have been nurturing the Society for decades. The Power Simulation is appropriate for all business and management student levels and types, including undergraduate, graduate and executive. In our experience, too, the simulation has successfully achieved its learning objectives in both North American as well as non-North American student contexts, in mid-sized to even large classes of over 100 students.

Power and influence are standard topics in management curricula, mainly found in organizational behavior courses and texts. In their updated article commenting on the lasting influence of their simulation, Bolman and Deal (2017) reflected on the significant changes in how organizations run that have occurred since they published that original article, yet indicated that “…the fundamentals of human behavior, social interaction, and organizational dynamics have endured, as they have for centuries. This is especially true about power, a prevailing issue chock full of ripe paradoxical mysteries: its sources, uses, abuses, how to get it, and how to defend against its destructive consequences” (p. 627). Thus, the lessons of the Power Simulation continue to be compellingly relevant for our students who find themselves working in a much wider variety of organizations than were present in 1979.

As a general description of the simulation itself, students in a class are randomly divided up into three groups, approximating a (small) executive team, a (larger) middle management group, and a (still larger) worker group that has no supervisory authority. Each student brings $1 (or the rough equivalent in local currency), pooled by the instructor, and distributed inequitably, simulating relative budget control in an organization. Communication and contact rules among the three groups are tightly conscripted. The executive team is given a highly ambiguous ‘task’ to finish, the majority of the money, and complete control over the ongoing rules—including the rules about communication and contact. The simulation tends to enact several general outcomes when running it in almost any environment:

1. The executive group preserves their own power bases, and concentrates on the money, even though the nominal amount of money is very low;
2. The middle management group becomes frustrated and underutilized when the executive group refuses to share power and input;
3. The worker group is treated poorly, and often dictatorially, resulting in marginalization, disengagement, and mutual blaming for not getting the ‘task’ accomplished.
4. The entire class has first-hand experience in considering power bases (e.g., French & Raven’s (1959) typology, updated by Raven, 1992) other than Legitimate/Positional power in having influence in organizational settings.

As the MOBTS grows due to its investment in the Doctoral Institute, the Early Educator Institute, and continued engagement with mid-career instructors, the majority of newcomers to the MOBTS have perhaps heard of the Power Simulation but have never run it, seen it, or participated in it. For example, in one of the three 2017 OBTC sessions about the Power Simulation, among about 30 session participants, only two had ever run the simulation itself before. This session will allow participants who are interested in utilizing the Power Simulation in their own classes a chance to experience it as their students might, and an opportunity to discuss the potential emotional and ethical aspects of using immersive and deceptive activities in the classroom.

**Learning objectives**

1. Familiarize participants with the goals of the Power Simulation, helping them ascertain whether this simulation could be a good choice for their own students and learning goals.
2. Help our community of management educators gain experience in facilitating an impactful simulation about how the subject of power entails, “paradoxical mysteries: its sources, uses, abuses, how to get it, and how to defend against its destructive consequences” (op.cit.).
3. Share the ethical and emotional aspects of running the simulation, including discussion of destabilizing student relationships due to their different roles, managing student distress associated with unexpected self and peer behaviors.
4. Share possible variations and logistical preparation tips that we have gained over the course of many years, shortening up participants’ learning curve.
5. Share debrief materials and options for how to frame specific learning objectives for participants to consider.

**Exercise overview & session description**

In this 90 minute session, the facilitators will create a classroom experience using the power simulation with all participants, and begin the session as we would with students. Participants would hand over $1, and count off to be placed in one of the three groups. We direct the reviewers’ attention to the original article for more specifics as to the simulation’s steps beyond the brief summary outlined above in this proposal. After running the simulation itself, we will engage participants in a robust debrief with discussion questions that they might themselves use, and model what might happen during a debrief. The session will end with a participant question and answer period, and a discussion of ethical issues associated with facilitating an affectively significant experience with students who may have distressing outcomes and who need help making sense of the experience.

**Estimated time usage:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| General activity  | Time needed | Elapsed time |
| Facilitators introduce selves and set up simulation | 10 minutes | 10 minutes |
| Simulation facilitation itself | 30 minutes | 40 minutes |
| Debrief discussion* What happened?
* How did the experience meet learning objectives?
* How did simulated roles adhere to expected behaviors?
* How can we link this experience to power & influence taxonomies?
* How can we help students understand their power & influence options in organizations?
* What aspects of the simulation do session participants want to discuss?

This part includes sharing slides and other debrief handouts with participants | 30 minutes | 70 minutes |
| Ethical aspects of running the simulation* Deception in experiential activities
* Emotional engagement and possible distress
* Helping students learn within their discomfort and be able to move ahead
 | 15 minutes | 85 minutes |
| Final questions from participants and wrap up | 5 minutes | 90 minutes |

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