Illustrating and Demonstrating Path-Goal Leadership: A Golf Putting Activity

Abstract:

Session attendees will participate in a friendly golf putting activity that was designed to introduce Path-Goal Leadership theory to undergraduate leadership students. By participating in the activity, the concepts of this leadership theory are illustrated and demonstrated in an attempt to connect theory to practice.

Keywords: Leadership, Path-Goal Theory, Gamification

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Leadership theory can be abstract to students. When teaching leadership theory, it is common to illustrate theories by showing movie or TV clips. This helps students to better understand the theory from an illustrative point especially when they can connect theoretical concepts with a movie or TV show they have already seen.

While movies and TV shows are good ways to illustrate leadership theory, deeper learning and reflection can occur when students have hands-on personal experiences. In addition, I believe that the learning can be further enhanced and meaningful when students personally benefit from active participation (i.e. rewards). This paper will illustrate a classroom lesson I use to introduce, illustrate, and demonstrate concepts of Path-Goal leadership in an undergraduate leadership class through a golf putting activity.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

Path-goal leadership theory focuses on how a leader's behaviors can influence or motivate employees to attain goals. As indicated by House (1971): "the motivational function of the leader consists of increasing personal payoffs to subordinates for work-goal attainment and making the path to these payoffs easier to travel by clarifying it, reducing roadblocks and pitfalls, and increasing the opportunities for personal satisfaction en route" (p. 324). In order to make this happen, leaders should adopt a style of leadership behavior as a way to motivate employees. In Path-Goal theory, there are four main leadership behaviors: 1) directive, supportive, participative, and achievement oriented. Directive behaviors involve providing instructions and rules on completing a task. Supportive behaviors involve being friendly and approachable to the followers. Participative behaviors involve including followers in the decision making process. Achievement-oriented involves challenging subordinates to perform at

the highest level possible. A leader should choose the appropriate leadership behaviors while taking into consideration the followers and the nature of the task as a way to motivate followers toward goal productivity and effectiveness (Northouse, 2016).

This activity also incorporates elements of gamification. Gamification is a method that "uses game thinking and game design elements to improve learners' engagement and motivation" (Dicheva, Dichev, Agre, & Angelova, 2015). In this particular activity, Gee's (2007) learning principle of Situated Meaning is utilized, which refers to giving objects specific and unique meaning within the game in order to help students make connections. Incorporating gamification elements in course instruction has been shown to increase student engagement (Armier, Shepherd, & Skrabut, 2016; Gamification in Education and Libraries, (2015); Veltsos, 2017).

The main implication for this activity is that it increases the engagement level when studying and learning about leadership theory. First, since path-goal leadership focuses on motivation, students get the opportunity to experience it first hand in a meaningful way. Second, as a result of participation, students will observe a leader (or the teacher) applying the concepts of the theory. The result is to re-inforce and to demonstrate to students that leadership theory can be applied. Third, illustrating course concepts in this manner promotes active learning and can increase memory recall. For example, in this course, students were required to draft a personal leadership philosophy at the end of the semester. As part of the reflection process, most of the students in the course specifically mentioned and recalled this activity conducted in class.

Learning Objectives

There are several learning objectives for this activity:

1. Students will be introduced to the concepts of the path-goal leadership theory by participating in two rounds of a golf putting challenge.

2. Students will identify the obstacles to goal achievement in the putting challenge.

3. Students will identify elements of directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented behavior demonstrated by the teacher (leader) in the golf putting challenge.

4. Students will articulate practical steps, based on Path-Goal theory, which can be used by leaders to increase goal effectiveness and productivity.

Exercise Overview

In this exercise, Path-Goal leadership will be illustrated through a golf putting challenge. The activity can be completed in a typical class period (i.e. 75 minutes) with a small class of students (i.e. 10-15 students) which would allow everyone to participate. In larger classes, a variation of only allowing a select number of students or volunteers to play might suffice.

The putting challenge works this way. The teacher divides the students into small groups (4-5 students per group). The goal is for each group to make as many putts as possible. Each student gets two putts. However, the students are not told what the compensation is for each putt made. After presenting the basic rules of the competition, the teacher then strategically places obstacles (i.e. chairs) between the golf ball and the golf hole to make the putt more challenging but not impossible to make. After the completion of round 1, the scores are tabulated. And at that point, the teacher tells the students the compensation for each putt they made, and that points will be awarded based on the performance of their small group. As part of my course, I typically

offer a small number of bonus points that would be added to their daily attendance and engagement grade.

At the conclusion of round 1, the teacher does a brief lesson via PowerPoint on Path-Goal leadership. By showing a visual model of the theory on the screen, the teacher asks the students various questions reflecting on their experience with the first round of the putting challenge in relation to the Path-Goal lecture. After debriefing round 1 in light of the lesson, the teacher begins to set up round 2.

Before the start of round 2, the teacher will take specific steps to implement key aspects of Path-Goal theory as a way to improve the students' performance in the next round of the putting challenge. These steps include removing the obstacles (i.e. chairs), giving the students a short golf putting lesson, stating in advance the compensation for each putt made, removing the group competition component (i.e. all students will benefit from putts made irrespective of their small group), and giving the students a choice in determining one of the rules for round 2. After the completion of round 2, the scores are tabulated. At the conclusion of the activity, students are debriefed and asked questions as it pertains to the concepts of Path-Goal leadership theory and the actions taken by the instruction to apply the theory to the activity. Detailed instructions of the putting challenge activity can be found in the Appendix.

Session Description

In this session, participants will experience the putting challenge activity as if they were students in the class. The activity will be modified from its original format (as indicated in the Appendix) to fit a 1 hour time slot if this session is selected to be conducted at the conference. The anticipated timeline is indicated below:

- 5 minutes: **<u>Introduction / Overview of Activity</u>**

- 15 minutes: **<u>Round 1</u>**

- 5 minutes: **<u>Path-Goal Theory Lesson</u>**. *(Debriefing from Round 1; set up for Round 2).*

- 20 minutes: **<u>Round 2</u>**

- 10 minutes: **<u>Round 2 Debriefing</u>**

- 5 minutes: **<u>Q&A</u>**. *(The focus of the Q/A will be to encourage participants to think of ways to illustrate theoretical concepts they teach in their classes).*

References

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Appendix
Golf Putting Exercise - Lesson Plan and Instructions

Materials Needed

- Golf Putter
- 2 golf balls
- Indoor Golf Putting Hole. *(If you don't have an Indoor Golf Putting Hole, a coffee mug laid on its side will work).*
- Two classroom chairs

A. Set Up – Round 1

1. Put the students into small groups

2. Say the following to the students: *"We are going to participate in a golf putting challenge. Your goal as a group is to make as many putts as you can. Each person in your group will get two putts. There will be a reward for each putt made, and that reward will be given to each member of the small group."* (Note: The instructor should pre-determine what the reward would be, but should not tell the students at this point. In my course, I give 10 bonus points for each put made).

3. At this point, the teacher should re-arrange the classroom or go to an area where there is a relatively flat, even, and carpeted space. Clearly establish the putting line and the golf putting hole. The length of the putt should be between 8-15 feet long.

4. Before allowing the students to putt, place two chairs in the path of where the golf ball would need to travel to go directly in the hole. Note: The goal is to place the chairs in a manner that doesn't make the putt impossible to make, but makes it rather challenging. If you have every played miniature golf before, think about how the putt is made challenging but not impossible by the design of the course.

B. Round 1 - *(Note: Either the teacher or a student should write on the board or keep a count of putts made for each group).*

C. Debriefing – Round 1

1. After the round is done, tell them what each made putt counted for. Say the following: *"Each putt made was worth 10 bonus points for the members in your small group. The total number of bonus points will be applied to each student in your small group. For example, if as a group you made a total of 3 putts, each student in your group would earn 30 bonus points."*

D. Path-Goal Leadership Theory Lesson and Overview
(Note: For my leadership class, I use the Northouse (2016) textbook. Thus, my lesson plan/outline below will be based on that).

1. Conduct a short overview of the Path-goal theory.
    a. Overview of Path-Goal Leadership Theory principles
    b. Based on two theories of work motivation:
        i. Goal-setting theory
        ii. Expectancy theory
    c. Display Figure 6.1 – "The Basic Idea Behind Path-Goal Theory" – p. 116
        i. Debriefing statement: *"According to the textbook and the principles of path-goal theory, the leader should do four things to help subordinates reach goals and be productive: a) define goals, b) clarify path, c) remove obstacles, and d) provide support.*
            1. Question 1: *In the golf putting challenge, which of these happened?* (Answers: Instructor defined goals and clarified the path).
            2. Question 2: *Which of these did not happen?* (Answers: Obstacles were not removed, and the reward or compensations was not stated in advance).
            3. Question 3: *If you knew in advance what the reward would be for each putt, how might that have changed your level of motivation?* (Answers: Will vary).

E. Set Up – Round 2

1. Say the following to the students: *"We are going to do a second round of the putting challenge. The points you earned during round 1 are yours to keep. But this time, I am going to do things that are an application of path-goal leadership theory. The changes are below:*
    a. *The two chairs will be completely removed.*
    b. *Each putt made is worth 20 bonus points.*
    c. *The group barrier is eliminated. You are all now one big group. All putts made will result in every student receiving bonus points. For example, if the total number of putts made in this round is 5, everyone would earn a total of 100 bonus points.*
    d. *Each person will get 2 practice putts (that don't count). After using their 2 practice putts, each person will get 2 live putts (that do count).*
    e. *Since you are all one group now, I am going to give you two options to choose from when it comes to how your class will allocate putts among your classmates. Below are the two options:*
        i. *Option 1: Each person will be responsible for using both their 2 practice putts and 2 live putts.*

ii.   *Option 2: A person can delegate their 2 practice putts and 2 live putts to someone else if you feel that they can perform the task better than you can."*

2.   The teacher should ask the class basic questions about their previous experience with putting. Example questions are below:
   a.   *How many of you have ever played miniature golf before Round 1?*
   b.   *How many of you are right handed? How many are left handed?*

3.   After the rules for Round 2 are established and based on the feedback received from students about their previous experience, the teacher should give the class a short lesson on how to putt. *(Note: If you are not a golfer, playing a short video in class on golf putting would suffice. Below are some YouTube videos that provide a quick lesson on how to putt):*
   a.   Golf putting Video #1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQTQhZ9OTMc
   b.   Golf putting Video #2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITRaVI6lDPE

F. **Round 2** - *(Note: Either the teacher or a student should write on the board or keep a count of putts made during this round).*

G. **Debriefing – Round 2**

1.   Display Figure 6.2 – "Major Components of Path-Goal Theory" – p. 117

2.   Debriefing Questions
   a.   *Which of the leadership behaviors did I exhibit during round 3?*
      i.   Answers: <u>Directive</u>: Putting lesson; <u>Participative</u>: Allowed the students to choose how to allocate the putts.
   b.   *What activity did I do to assess follower characteristics?*
      i.   Answers: When the instructor asked about students previous experience with putting before Round 1, the instructor was assessing the follower's self-perceived level of task ability
   c.   *What did I do in regard to task characteristics?*
      i.   Answers: To address formal authority, I removed the group barrier/competition. Instead of earning points based on the performance of your small group, the class earned points as a whole.
   d.   *Were there any changes to obstacles between the rounds? If so, what were they and how were they addressed?*
      i.   Answers: Chairs were removed. A golf putting lesson was provided. Students were given 2 practice putts before actually putting for real.
   e.   *Was there anything done differently in Round 2 that might have affected (increased) your motivation?*
      i.   Answers: Some students may mention that an increase in the number of points per made putt in Round 2 is a factor. Other students might

comment on how knowing the compensation in advance increased their motivation.

    f. *What do you think is the biggest takeaway that would be of benefit to you as a future leader?*
        i. Answers: Will vary among students.

    g. *Anyone have any experiences or examples to share in which you observed Path-Goal occurring either in your personal or work life?*
        i. Answers: Will vary among students.

    h. *Which components of Path-Goal leadership theory do you resonate with the most? Why?*
        i. Answers: Will vary among students.

3. Practical applications for leaders. (Note: These are final thoughts/lessons learned I share with the students as it relates to apply Path-Goal Leadership).
    a. Do your best to remove obstacles experienced by subordinates.
    b. Provide resources and/or instruction as it relates to specific skills needed by subordinates to complete a given task.
    c. Include subordinates in decision making as much as possible.
    d. Compensation or rewards for completed tasks should be stated up front.