

How to Hook Your OB Students Early with a “What’s in it for me?” Opener

Abstract

Organizational Behavior (OB) students often have difficulty understanding how individual-, group-, and organization-level OB concepts interact to influence employee behavior in the workplace. As a result, students may disengage from the class. Yet, the simple prompt of asking students, “How do you get promoted?”, serves as an effective engagement trigger that helps students link course objectives to valued outcomes. The purpose of this session is to demonstrate how this activity can increase in-class participation, help students understand the basics of what OB represents, and provide students with a conceptual roadmap for the semester. Relevant materials will also be provided.

Keywords

Organizational Behavior, Engagement Trigger, In-class Activity

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Introduction

If your Organizational Behavior (OB) classes are anything like mine, you know that three of the most difficult challenges at the start of the semester are facilitating in-class participation, helping students understand the basics of what organizational behavior represents, and preparing students for what's ahead in the semester. To overcome these challenges, I use an activity known as “How to Get Promoted 101” at the beginning of the semester to introduce my students to everything OB has to offer. After initial introductions and icebreakers, I then ask my students, “What does it take to get promoted?” It is a simple question with an extremely complex answer, and yet, it primes students to see how everything they will learn this semester fits together. As explained below, I write all student responses on the board and after relating each one back to a course concept, students then have a conceptual roadmap of what OB entails and a sense of the value OB can provide. Based on my experience, this activity has a significant impact on students because many take pictures of the completed board and reference it throughout the semester. As an added bonus, I often repeat this activity at the end of the semester to help students review for a final exam or paper.

Because of the quick-paced, interactive nature of this activity, as well as its focus on introducing students to concepts within OB, it is intended for a traditional classroom and for undergraduate students that are learning about organizational behavior for the first time. Further, the activity is suitable for any teacher regardless of their career stage – it can keep even the most seasoned of teachers on their toes due to the spontaneity and variety of student responses.

Theoretical Foundation & Teaching Implications

This activity is based on the premise that in order for students to pay attention and retain material learned in class, teachers should try to include an “engagement trigger” at the beginning of class and/or the semester (Bain, 2004; Nilson, 2010). For example, to trigger or activate initial student engagement with the material, it helps if one starts off the semester with a question that is relevant and important to the students’ lives (Borton, 1970; Chase, et al., 2001; Sousa, 2011). My activity, “How to Get Promoted 101,” provides students with a highly relatable topic that serves as the framework by which they can initially learn OB theories and concepts. In other words, this question hooks students early in the semester, and enables them to see how all the many OB concepts relate to each other and influence human behavior. My students typically associate promotions with many powerful external motivators, such as status, success, money, and security, which is key to this activity grabbing their attention. However, by previewing everything they will learn in the class and how the skills and tools they gain will help them earn a promotion, this activity also taps into a student’s intrinsic motivation rooted in achievement, mastery, and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

Based on my experiences, students often have difficulty understanding the different “levels of analysis” used in OB (i.e., Individual, Group, and Organization), and how each level can have a profound influence on an individual’s decision-making, behavior, and ultimately, career progression. This lack of understanding often limits students from seeing the big picture and appreciating how all of these wide-ranging concepts fit together. Furthermore, students may fail to see the relevancy of how these concepts apply to their own lives. This activity is intended to help students achieve that “a-ha!” moment, to see and understand how all of the OB concepts covered during the semester apply to an extremely relevant and motivating objective: how to get

promoted. In addition, re-visiting this activity again at the end of the semester enables students to see a visual depiction of how far they have come and recognize how OB-related material can increase the likelihood of their success in nearly any future workplace endeavor.

Learning Objectives

This activity has three key objectives. First, it encourages student engagement and participation right from the start of the semester while introducing students to all of the general concepts they will learn in OB. Second, it helps students appreciate the different levels of analysis within OB (i.e., to consider how the characteristics of an individual, the group, and the organization combine to influence individual behavior within an organization). Third, by repeating this activity at the end of the semester, it enables students to recognize more easily the utility of all the concepts and theories they have learned by considering how they apply to a relatable situation (i.e., how to earn a promotion).

Activity Overview

Logistics

As previously mentioned, this activity should be used at the very beginning and end of the semester. On average, it typically takes about 20-30 minutes. The only materials necessary for this activity are a large dry-erase board or chalkboard and something to write with (e.g., marker or chalk). This activity can be used for any size class, although I personally have used it for class sizes of 10-35 students.

Flow

During the first week of class, when I explain what organizational behavior is and why it should matter to each student, I ask the class: “How do you get promoted?” This intentionally open-ended question encourages students to think both practically (“work harder!”) and creatively (“blackmail your boss!”). Most answers, even the more creative ones, can usually be steered back into an OB concept. Therefore, nearly all answers will fall under one of the three levels of analysis (Individual, Group/Others, or the Organization) (See Table 1).

As students explain their answers, I write them on the board while making sure to separate them into three distinct columns, with answers related to Individuals on the left, Groups (e.g., Interacting with Others) in the middle, and the Organization on the right. But the trick is: I DO NOT fill-in the columns headers! By not naming the columns and not telling the students what I am doing, it at first appears that there is no rhyme or reason to where their answers are ending up on the board.

Most answers tend to revolve around some type of knowledge, skill, or ability, in which case, I add it to the Individual column. Sometimes, students may need a little push, so I prompt them to think of ways to get promoted based on general OB concepts or chapter titles (e.g., leadership skills or motivation). For example, I often ask questions like, “Do you think that flattering your boss, or being in control of your emotions will help you get promoted?” I almost always need to use these types of prompts when filling in the Organization column since most students do not consider the impact that an organization’s structure or culture has on individual behavior. For this column, I usually ask, “Are you more likely to be promoted if you work at an organization that values employee autonomy (i.e., discretion, choice, and freedom)? Would that be a good fit for you?”

Also, some student responses may be too complicated or complex, or do not align with a specific OB theory/concept. If that is the case, I ask the student to explain the situation they are imagining. This usually leads to something I can identify as an OB concept. For example, if a student says “work harder,” I will ask a follow-up question like, “What do you mean? How would working harder lead to a promotion?” This clarification typically connects to a range of OB-related concepts, such as organizational citizenship behavior, conscientiousness, commitment, or even power.

After filling in the columns a bit, I ask the students to guess what the entries in the left-side column each have in common. I then draw a line at the top of each column to serve as blank column headers and wait for the students to realize that the left-side is for Individuals, the middle is for Groups, and the right-side is for the Organization. Once they identify each header correctly, I encourage students to keep providing answers to the original promotion question until time is up. At that time, I fill-in the remaining concepts that the class was unable to identify. I then tell them that all of these concepts represent an overview (i.e., roadmap) of the entire semester ahead. At this point, once students understand that this activity will help their performance in the course, they usually start scrambling to write everything down. To aid them in retaining this information, I allow them to take pictures of the board before moving on.

Finally, during the last class of the semester, I repeat the entire process. It sometimes takes certain students a while to remember that they have done this activity before. But overall, it is much more fun and lively the second time around because students see how they can apply all that they have learned and appreciate how OB can help them!

Debriefing Guidelines

Once again, this activity is designed for use during the first and last week of class, before and after all the material has been covered, respectively. Therefore, since the activity is divided into two parts, there are two debriefs:

During the first week, after the activity is completed, I tell the students that all the concepts on the board represent a roadmap for the entire semester; that this constitutes all that they will learn in OB. Furthermore, I ask students to reference their syllabus and see that, like the board, the course is divided into three sections – one for each level of analysis. This often helps students see the big picture and makes the material more relatable due to its specific application (i.e., earning a promotion). Since some students are visual learners, I then usually give students an opportunity to take a picture of the board before transitioning to the next topic.

During the last week, after we finish the activity, I step back and show the students how much they have learned. I explain that the important takeaway is that each of these concepts can serve a specific and tangible purpose, which can help the students as they navigate through their current or future jobs. Finally, I emphasize that although each of these concepts may not necessarily lead to, or guarantee a promotion, one is far more likely to obtain a promotion when one is aware of, and can correctly apply these concepts in the workplace.

Session Description

Overview

After welcoming everyone to the session and distributing the handout (see Table 1), I will briefly describe the activity (“How to Get Promoted 101”) and explain how it helps trigger student engagement early in the semester. I will then identify the relevant learning objectives of

this activity and demonstrate its use in an OB classroom. Due to the activity's highly interactive nature, the majority of the session will be devoted to this demonstration, during which audience members will pretend to be the students who are generating the ideas that fill the board. After building sufficient momentum, I will encourage volunteers to take over as the lead facilitator to give them a chance to interact with the audience and try implementing the activity. At the end, I will reserve time for Q&A so that everyone can share their suggestions and I can address any questions or concerns.

Timeline

Activity	Duration for 60-minute program
Welcome, introductions, and distribute handout	10
Explanation of activity (theoretical foundation and learning objectives)	10
Interactive, step-by-step demonstration of activity	10
Opportunity for multiple volunteers to lead the activity (i.e., audience members take over lead role to facilitate suggestions and write on the board)	20
Q&A and sharing of tips and best practices to ensure the activity is a success	10
TOTAL	60

Table 1. Handout of key Organizational Behavior concepts, organized by column (i.e., level of analysis).

Individual	Group/Other (Manager)	Organization
<u>Attitude</u> : job satisfaction, commitment, engagement	<u>Group Properties</u> : roles, norms, conformity, status; avoiding social loafing, groupthink; being a team player	<u>Structure</u> : (in)formal, (de)centralized, adaptive vs mechanistic/bureaucratic, etc.
<u>Emotions/Moods</u> : emotional intelligence	<u>Communication (could go in between Individual and Group columns)</u> : written, oral, nonverbal skills	<u>Culture</u> : Fit (see Individual-Personality/Values)
<u>Personality/Values</u> : Big 5, proactivity, Type-A, fit (see Organization-Culture)	<u>Leadership</u> : transformational vs transactional, LMX, charismatic, etc.	
<u>Perception</u> : avoiding stereotypes	<u>Power</u> : coercion, expert knowledge, dependency, blackmail?; <u>Impression Management</u> : rational persuasion, flattery, etc.	
<u>Decision-making</u> : intuition, avoiding biases (e.g., confirmation, anchoring, availability, hindsight, etc.)	<u>Negotiation</u> : integrative bargaining, managing conflict	
<u>KSAs</u> : Knowledge, Skills, Abilities (and creativity)		
<u>Motivation</u> : expectancy theory, etc.		

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