

1) Title of Proposal:

Discomfort as andragogy: Elevating critical thinking in leaders

2) Abstract:

This session will demonstrate a learning immersion that creates conditions constructive for developing and elevating critical thinking in leaders. This approach is used with military officers and special forces operators; and has been applied in several executive MBA courses. For military leaders, in particular, “thinking outside the box” runs counter to the ingrained, disciplined thinking essential for performing their duties. This learning technique – subsequently paired with other teaching methods – opens the aperture for learning as well as students’ desire to be challenged; while enabling the further development of critical thinking abilities.

3) Keywords:

Critical Thinking Leaders

4) Format

- Activity or exercise
 General discussion session

5) Time Requested:

- 20 Minutes
 30 Minutes
 60 Minutes

6) Planning Details:

Does your session have any special requirements for space or materials?

Handouts. Small group tables (4-6 people)

7) Learning Objectives or Goals for the Session:

What are 2-4 specific learning outcomes that participants will get from your session?

- Discomfort as an effective learning tool
- Enhanced self-awareness for learning
- Impact of normative expectations on thinking abilities

8) Management or Teaching Topics:

Describe what management and/or teaching topics are relevant to your session, and why. Please include theoretical, disciplinary, or theoretical foundations that will help reviewers understand how your ideas fit within the broader field of management.

The technique of creating discomfort as a learning immersion can be applied within various management courses/curricula – particular those aimed at higher-order leadership (e.g., Strategic Management) and those geared toward skill development (e.g., Innovation and Creative Thinking). Presently, the application of this technique serves as the opening for a Critical Thinking for Adaptive Leaders course as well as individual class sessions on critical thinking.

We have found critical thinking to be an integral component of teaching leadership, especially at the graduate and executive levels. We make a distinction between teaching *about* critical thinking and teaching to *develop* critical thinking. The learning technique that will be demonstrated targets the latter by deliberately creating cognitive discomfort as the stage-setter for broadening individual mindsets. [Please note: As will be described below, the method does not involve activities that would cause psychological harm.]

Three theories form the foundation for utilizing this technique: (1) Kegan's Constructive Development Theory, (2) Knowles' Theory of Adult Learning, and (3) Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory.

Kegan's theory indicates that mental complexity in adults (i.e., how one construes and makes sense of reality) develops progressively and in stages – specifically, from *socialized mind* to *self-authorized mind* to *self-transforming mind* (Kegan & Lahey, 2010). Transformation from one stage to the next does not necessarily happen automatically, and may require deliberate development. From a higher-order leadership perspective, then, teaching to develop critical thinking is particularly relevant for evolving

from a *self-authorized* mind to a *self-transforming* mind, which represents the highest degree of mental complexity.

Knowles posits that adult learners differ from non-adults in that adults need to: (1) know why they need to learn something (2) have a sense of being self-directed (3) incorporate their experiences in learning, (4) approach learning as problem-solving, (5) know the immediate value of the topic (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). The proposed learning immersion tackles each of these assumptions.

Kolb's experiential learning theory involves four components: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The application of the discomfort learning immersion engages all four components of Kolb's model by intentionally pushing students out of their leading and learning comfort zones. Students are immediately immersed in an intense and discomforting experience, then given the opportunity for personal reflection on that experience, followed by discussion on new insights derived from the experience; thereby opening the door for application of the experiential learning in subsequent interactions.

9) Session Description and Plan:

What will you actually do in this session? What activities will you facilitate, how long will they take, and how will participants be involved? Reviewers will be evaluating how well the time request matches the activities you'd like to do, and the extent you can reasonably accomplish the session's goals. Reviewers will also be looking for how you are engaging the participants in the session. Include a timeline for your session.

Materials and preparation

- Short reading: "The man who hunted Osama Bin Laden"
<http://news.yahoo.com/ap-enterprise-man-hunted-osama-bin-laden-040627805.html>
[Note: Typically, students receive this news article as a read-ahead prior to class. For the conference, a shortened version will be prepared that can be read at the opening of the session.]
- Handouts of a 12-question set, with select questions highlighted differently for individual groups [See Question #10]

Set-up

- Room is set up for groups of 4-6
- Each group table is numbered

Engagement

- Without preamble or introduction, the teacher enters the classroom, quietly and without comment, placing a set of group-specified questions at each table (one for each person) **[1 min]**
- Teacher then provides instructions: *“Each table has a set of questions that relate to your reading. I will give you a few minutes to discuss among yourselves and then we will get to work. Please be sure to support your responses based on the article. Let’s be clear, I am not interested in your personal opinion.”*
- Any questions from students/participants are either addressed tersely (*“You have your instructions”*) or ignored. **[1 min]**
- Teacher exits the room and waits outside **[6-8 min]**
- Teacher, then, re-enters the room and begins “firing on all cylinders” – pointedly asking questions, cutting off responses that are opinion-driven, asking questions out of order, asking highlighted questions of different groups, etc. **[10 min]**
- At the point of class exasperation, the teacher stops and asks, *“What just happened?”* . . . allowing for a “recovery pause” from the intensity.

For example: A favorite response from a combat-experienced Marine Colonel: *“I don’t know what just happened, but I think I need to get the heck out of here!!! 😊*
 . . . Followed by laughter]

[PLEASE NOTE: Participants MUST NOT be aware of ANY aspects of the session beforehand. The goal is to create discomfort by surfacing subconscious normative expectations through unexpected engagement and interaction.]

Discussion

The facilitated discussion that follows the engagement centers on why the discomfort occurred; with a drive toward understanding the cognitive impact of normative expectations. **[15 min]**

- *“What didn’t happen that you expected to happen?”* (e.g., Introductions, description of the session, agenda, etc.)
- *“What happened that you didn’t expect to happen?”* (e.g., assertive facilitation, opinion disregarded, ambiguity of follow-on questions, tense atmosphere, etc.)
- *“Describe how you felt?” “Why did you feel this way?”*
- *“What do you learn about yourself with respect to how you respond to unmet expectations?”* (e.g., shut down; elevated determination to “get the right answer”, etc.)
- *“What does this tell you about yourself with respect to your comfort zones?”* (e.g., How easily discomfort is generated by unmet expectations; what “getting out of your comfort zone” really feels like; why it is so hard, etc.)
- *“What impact might met/unmet expectations have on your ability to think through complex problems and decision making?”* (hinder objectivity, influence of emotion, blind spots, etc.)

Key Points for Teaching and Learning

The discussion will then shift to the andragogy from the teacher's perspective; emphasizing two key learning points. **[15 min]**

1. Identifying comfort zones by experiencing deliberate discomfort

We often tell people to “get out of their comfort zone”, with the assumption that one can easily step outside of innate defaults and preferences. Such assumptions are particularly limiting when it comes to critical thinking. Normative expectations are deeply embedded in our cognitive frames. This learning immersion allows students to tangibly experience those boundaries, while providing important self-awareness.

2. Establishing the impact of normative expectations on the ability to think critically

Simply beginning class differently than expected – and the resulting discomfort – demonstrates how deeply embedded are our normative expectations. Surfacing the wall of normative expectations (cognitively) opens the door for developing and elevating mental agility. What tends to happen afterwards is that students have a heightened sense of self-awareness, and begin to both self-regulate and challenge themselves to learn.

Discussion and Reflection

Session participants will spend the remaining time offering thoughts and inputs. **[10 min]**

Total Timeline

Participant Engagement	20 min
Participant Discussion	15 min
Teaching & Learning Application	15 min
Discussion & Reflection	<u>10 min</u>
TOTAL	60 min

10) For Activities and Exercises:

Attach any materials needed to run the activity and debriefing questions. Evidence for effectiveness may also be included.

Short article/Handout

“The man who hunted Osama Bin Laden

<http://news.yahoo.com/ap-enterprise-man-hunted-osama-bin-laden-040627805.html>

Question Set

1. What are the limits of conventional wisdom?
2. What makes a seemingly insignificant detail significant?
3. Why are we so wedded to using traditional methods and models in our decision making?
4. What role does risk play in critical thinking?
5. How do failed decisions influence subsequent decisions?
6. What contributes to our tendency to get locked into our assumptions?
7. Is it ever okay to guess?
8. How can we have confidence in a decision made in a V.U.C.A. environment (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous)?
9. When is conventional wisdom necessary?
10. Why do some of us overlook relevant details, while others recognize their importance?
11. How do we determine whether the depth of our questions (e.g., when analyzing a situation) is sufficient?
12. How do we translate disparate details into broader implications?

Evidence of effectiveness

This technique of deliberate discomfort has proven effective at various levels of learning – from young leaders (e.g., junior officers/early to mid-20's, grad students) to senior leaders (e.g., corporate executives, business entrepreneurs, and 3-star admirals).

Session feedback from Executive MBA course:

“The response was overwhelmingly positive. Immediately there were thumbs-up around the room and a number of students expressed their appreciation for your effectiveness at taking them out of their comfort zones. They mentioned how much rhetoric there is about operating outside their comfort zones, yet how rarely (if ever) we are successful in getting them to that space. The consensus was that your session was among the strongest of the programming they have experience [sic] in my course, and perhaps relative to the 11-month program overall.”

Session feedback from 1-week Army Special Forces Operators' leadership course:

“Your session truly made an impact on the group as they referenced it and spoke about it multiple times throughout the week.”

Graduate student feedback from the Critical Thinking Course:

“That was FUN!!! . . . Really . . . the most enjoyable session I've had here [at the College] yet. And no . . . I'm not a glutton for punishment.”

11) Implications for Teaching or for Teachers:

What is the contribution of your session?

This deliberate discomfort technique falls within the realm of crucible experiences as a learning and leader development tool (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). However, rather than a significant life event or a time intensive immersion, the learning effect can be achieved in 15-20 minutes. Importantly, the technique sets the stage and creates the learning conditions – both with the student and within the classroom environment – that elevate learning expectations. Our experience is that students become emboldened to learn, and they begin to “check themselves” for reverting to their learning and thinking comfort zones. This enables the teacher to push students beyond a base level of learning.

Because the discomfort experience and self-reflection tends to engender in students an openness to being challenged, the teacher-student contract shifts from “teach me something” to “game on!” As such, the teacher garners greater leeway to feed the thirst for being challenged with continuously elevated and broadening student-teacher engagement.

12) Application to Conference Theme:

How does your session fit with the overall IOBTC theme of Elevating Aspirations?

This session demonstrates a method that elevates aspirations in students to learn – thereby also elevating the joy of teaching. The intensity and fun of the overall experience appears to tap into an intrinsic drive to be challenged – and students’ determination to meet that challenge.

13) Unique Contribution to IOBTC:

Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the IOBTC conference?

This proposal is not currently under review; nor has the work been presented elsewhere.

This proposal draws upon and integrates organizational behavior – particularly the understanding of human behavior in context. Perhaps a unique contribution to IOBTC is that the proposal demonstrates the application of management teaching and learning methodologies for military leaders as well as business students and professionals.

14) References and/or Additional Materials:

References

Bennis, W. G., & Thomas, R. J. (2002). Crucibles of leadership. *Harvard Business Review*, 80(9), 39-42.

Kegan, R., & Lahey, L. (2010). Adult development and organizational leadership. *Handbook of leadership theory and practice*, 3-27.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). The adult learner: The definitive class in adult education and human resource development.

Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of management learning & education*, 4(2), 193-212.