

Team Reflection Exercise

Abstract:

Functioning well in a team is no longer a “nice to have”, but rather “must have” ability. This interactive session will present a team reflection activity used in our management classes. The activity allows students to experience team struggles and be challenged to encapsulate them into broad themes. More specifically, the exercise targets students’ ability to empathize with those struggles and determine ways to increase success moving forward.

Our goal for this session is to demonstrate the activity as a self-reflection tool, and encourage MOBTS participants to share their experiences as well as to employ these ideas in their classroom.

Keywords: team, self-reflection, experiential learning

Activity/Exercise General Details:

This 30-minute activity session aims at demonstrating how instructors can encourage students to reflect on their team interactions. The proposed activity is applicable for face-to-face and online classrooms and is suitable for both undergraduate and graduate courses. We believe that the tools presented in this session could successfully be used in classes such as Organizational Behavior, Entrepreneurship, HR, Organizational Theory, Strategy, Introduction to Management, and Organization Development.

Introduction:

Life is a team effort! Some jobs, such as jury duties and orchestra concerts, cannot even be performed without collective efforts. In the workplace, well-managed teams can be highly effective and help organizations stay profitable and competitive. Studies have found that organizations that use team-based strategies have higher performance, less absenteeism, reduced turnover, and better product quality than companies that don't use teams (Cohen, Ledford, & Spreitzer, 1996; Wisner & Feist, 2001).

Yet often times we -- as instructors who use teams -- hear "My team didn't include me", "John did not contribute", "Sally kept pushing her ideas", "I hate team projects", "We did not have time". Occasionally, we stumble upon "The best team ever", "Very pleasant experience", "So sad the project is over, love my teammates". After a prolonged and constant hearing and reading of such comments, we started to wonder why such disparity; why do some students love and why some of them hate work in collective settings? Further, can students themselves assess what went wrong and how things could improve in future teamwork? The end goal for us was to allow students to take charge and create an understanding of positive collective experience. With

these considerations in mind, we saw the need to create a team self-reflection activity as an integral part of the learning experience.

Learning Objectives:

The team experience reflection activity was guided by a few objectives in mind.

Objective 1: To allow students to be more empathetic and observant of others and their environment.

Objective 2: To encourage students to communicate more effectively with others.

Objective 3: To allow students to become effective team members. This objective will also help students realize approaches to working with or managing persons different from themselves.

We also had three Goals in mind for this session:

Goal A: To provide participants with ideas how to accomplish the above goals.

Goal B: To allow participants, who would use the activity presented in the session, to actually experience what students in the classroom might, such as the challenges, the revelations, and the learning moments.

Goal C: To receive feedback as to how the class experience and application could be improved along with addressing questions that participants might have in relation to the presentation.

Exercise Overview:

The course, in which the activity is used, includes a team project with multiple deliverables during the term. After their first major written deliverable as a team, we ask students to email their instructor a word file with two pages. On one of the pages, students write in green font a positive descriptor of their experience with the team. On the second page, students write, in red, one negative descriptor. Following the email submissions, the instructor prints, cuts, and groups the comments together in the respective red and green groups. The

following session, these groups are visually displayed for all to see. Students are then asked to reflect and synthesize what they see (see Appendix A for a detailed description of the activity).

Session Overview:

After a brief introduction, the bulk of this session will involve engaging participants in a demonstration and discussion of the activity. To get the feel of the experience from the student's perspective, participants will work through the activity individually.

The session will close with a dialogue regarding participants' thoughts, reactions, modifications (i.e. face-to-face versus online versions of the activity), and questions. Conference participants will be encouraged to share their own experiences as well. This dialogue is important for many reasons. Specifically, participants will have the opportunity to leaf through the resources they can use in the classroom and digest the benefits and challenges of using the presented activity in their own classroom.

Session Description:

Our presentation will be in the following format:

Introduction (purpose of session and set up)	2 minutes
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Presentation and Session Activities:

Conference participants engage in the activity (Appendix A) (Goals A and B)	10 minutes
Presentation of student examples (Appendix B) (Goal A)	3 minutes

Dialogue:

Conference participants share their impressions of the activity (Goal C)	5 minutes
Conference participants suggest improvements/alternative use (Goal C)	5 minutes
Conference participants share their own experiences (Goal C)	5 minutes

Application to Conference theme:

As pointed earlier, we saw the need to allow students to reflect on their team experiences as a vital part of the learning process. The end goal was to empower our students to become better team players and, perhaps, even better corporate citizens. This goal, we believe, fits squarely with the conference theme of “Teaching Agents for Positive Change”.

Unique Contribution:

This presentation is unique and novel and have not been presented or considered for publication elsewhere.

References

- Cohen, S., Ledford, G., & Spreitzer, G. (1996). A predictive model of self-managing work team effectiveness. *Human Relations*, 49, 643-676.
- Wisner, P., & Feist, H. (2001). Does teaming pay off? *Strategic Finance*, 82, 58-64.

Appendix A: Activity Description

1. Instructions to students given the class session **prior to running the activity**:

Email the instructor a two-page word document. One of those pages will have one word that describes your team's biggest strength (in large green font). The other page of paper will have one word that describes your team's biggest weakness (in large red font). Do not include your name or other identifying information on the document.

2. **On the day of the activity** presentation, all words are printed in color, cut out (as sent), and randomly arranged on large sheets of paper in their respective group (red and green) (see Appendix B). The sheets are hung in the classroom prior to the arrival of students.

3. After allowing **students to get situated** and read the words, we instruct students to **reflect and synthesize**:

You have been part of a team. Reflect on how you have performed as part of that team and how your teammates have performed together. What do you take away from what you see around the room?

These reflection prompts are a regular part of the course, but this is the first one of the term that has students react to something they have turned in. Students stand by the sheets and read the comments, but are told to not try and guess who wrote what.

When they return to their seats, the conversation that follows has some common trends each term. Students start by noticing superficial things like not everyone following the instructions (some words are too small to read, others might be multiple words, occasionally they

are not in the requested color). As the conversation continues, students notice words that are in both red and green. Usually without prompting they identify that the word “communication” or some derivation of it occurs the most. In five years of this exercise, that word is always the most commonly used in this exercise and it is always in both red and green (the ratio of red to green seems to depend on how much time we can provide in class for teams to work on their project).

The conversation continues by asking students to think about the types of words that are in green. These tend to be terms that relate to culture or organizational behaviors (diverse, motivated, dependable, hardworking). The instructor asks how teams have developed those characteristics. Students come to the realization that those strengths often come by random chance and were not something that was formally encouraged or planned. They also admit that those things would not be easy to change even if they class lasted longer than a single term.

Similarly, students are probed about the words in red. These tend to be terms that relate to actions or activities (availability, participation, indecision, organization). Students recognize that these are issues that can be managed, even in the remaining few weeks of a term. They are asked to offer suggestions for mitigating some of the weaknesses and how to improve the performance of teams with those problems.

The conversation wraps with an understanding that most of the teams are having some form of struggles that are correctable. Many students will point out that even if communication was a green word, it is often something that could improve the weakness identified in red.

Appendix B: Student Examples

