

**Block Talk: Leadership and Communication**

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## **Introduction**

The past year pushed faculty into trying new approaches to learning in ways no one could have imagined. Facilitators managing high-interaction classrooms aimed at developing interpersonal skills such as communication and leadership appear particularly impacted by the shift to tech-based (remote) learning. At the University of Central Missouri, seniors in management design, deliver, and evaluate content-appropriate learning activities as a way to build communication and leadership skills. “Block Talk” fosters a discussion about how traditional communication models can be used to assess effective communication in our brave, new, remote-work world. As a student-designed activity, young leaders develop their own skill sets to connect the old with the new, to address technology and its impact on work/learning, and to determine the communication skills needed for leaders to succeed in a remote leadership role.

## **Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications**

**Action Learning:** Block Talk was submitted in an upper-level class on leadership where students design and deliver action-oriented activities that clearly connect to course concepts. Students designing curriculum (influencing the content and activities in a course) is one of three meta-practices identified to positively influence student outcomes (Bright, et al, 2016) and is rooted in constructivist ideas, specifically in action learning. Marsick & O’Neill (1999) identify four main schools of action learning thought: Tacit, Scientific, Experiential, and Critical Reflection. The activity-based approach provides students with the opportunity to practice the experiential, scientific and (to a lesser degree) critical reflection schools of action learning as follows:

- 1) The scientific school of action learning is rooted in problem-solving, specifically in the Alpha (defining the problem), Beta (implementing a solution) and Gamma (managerial

pre-disposition) systems (Revans, 1970). When we ask student-facilitators to create, find, and deliver a learning exercise they must understand the system in which they are operating (alpha), deliver customized training (beta) to peers who are novice thinkers (gamma). Students developing activities represents a substantial problem for them since many have never taken part in both the design and delivery of learning.

- 2) The experiential school is based on the notion that action precedes reflection, theory and practice (Kolb, 1984). 'Block Talks' exposes most participants to action first since the student-facilitators run the exercise before they ask discussion questions (see below). Facilitators develop discussion questions that connect content to action.
- 3) The critical reflection school of action learning seeks to assess whether one's presuppositions are valid. Critical reflection is seen as a root-cause analysis of a problem or a point of view (O'Neil & Marsick, 1994). Student-facilitators create discussion questions that go beyond content application, they are required to lead a discussion on their efficacy as facilitators and how their peers expect to change based on the experience in the activity.

Block Talk is an application of communication theory in leading. It is a modern, high-tech twist on the "phone game". As students engage in the Block Talk activity, they practice their communication skills and see how the Shannon-Weaver (1949) communication model comes alive through this practice. At the end of the activity, the reflection questions heighten student awareness of the communication model and allow them to explore how communication skills and leadership skills are linked to their own experiences. Students are especially encouraged to think about the role of communication in a remote work environment.

**Content (Communication) Framework:** The action learning process in our major encourages students to find and develop their own learning approaches. As such, many of our classes are activity-based, however students are tasked to bridge course concepts into action oriented activities of their own choosing. Many theories have established a strong correlation between effective communication and effective leadership (Fairhurst & Counnaughton, 2014), yet the increasing use of technology has led to decline in communication skills among business students (Powless & Schafer, 2016). Block Talk allows students to practice communication skills while promoting reflexive thinking about this practice through the theoretical lens of classic communication theory. Block Talk amplifies many of the most important elements, the Mathematical model of communication, or the Shannon-Weaver model (1949). Elements of the Shannon-Weaver model explored in this activity include:

- The channel by which a message is relayed,
- The complex process of encoding and decoding messages, and
- The prevalence of noise interference (psychological, physical, physiological, semantic)

As students struggle through each phase of this activity, the connection between leadership and communication becomes apparent. Leaders who are most able to transmit a message effectively can build trust and cooperation with their followers (Burke, et al., 2007; Shockley-Zalabak, et al., 2010). Put another way, leaders send strong signals to bridge the trust gap (Kramer, 2009), they make sure to clearly communicate their trustworthiness to their constituents. ‘Great’ communication is, thus, an extension of trust and as leaders we ‘extend trust to build trust’ (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

## Learning Objectives

1. Connect communication skills with leadership skills and describe how the quality of a communication affects the abilities of a leader to ‘get the job done.’
2. Reflect on the remote work experience and how changing work channels (tech) demands a change in the way leaders must communicate and lead.
3. Engage fully with the Shannon-Weaver model of communication and explore how its components impact the clarity of communication.

## Exercise Overview

**Name of the Activity:** Block Talk

**Activity Objective:** Evaluate the role that communication plays in leading others.

Utilize the values each leader shares and the characteristics that build a positive work environment.

**Materials:** Jenga blocks or Legos, depending on what you have available.

## Directions:

**One person will be the primary sender** (if someone in your group is online, this will be them)

- This person will be asked to leave the room
- This person will have the instructions for the block structure to be built
- **One person will be the intermediary**
  - This person will be blindfolded if they are in the same room as the receiver/builder(s)
  - Can not touch the blocks/may or may not be in the room with the receiver/builder
- **The rest of the team will be the receiver/builder(s)**
- The primary sender and intermediary will be on the phone with each other

- The primary sender will need to explain the pictures to the intermediary; the intermediary will then explain to the receivers how to build the object
- If both the intermediary and sender are remote, then the receiver/builder(s) will communicate via phone
- Facilitator emails primary sender a picture of the object to be built
  - Primary sender communicates with intermediary, intermediary with receiver/builder(s)
  - It is best if the intermediary can not see the primary sender
  - All teams use the same building materials to build the same object

**Intended Learning Purpose/Application of Ideas:**

The purpose of this activity is to take all the knowledge you have gained from previous class activities, readings on leadership, and put them into practice. The overall intent is for leaders to understand how communication affects their ability to lead a team and how to work together using the values shared between one another.

**Discussion Questions:**

- What was the most difficult part of this activity?
- How did that noise affect your ability to complete the activity? How do these noise issues relate to your own experience in the workplace?
- As someone who was responsible for delivering part of the message, what were some of your considerations when creating the message? Do you feel that these considerations helped your message make sense to receiver(s)? What are some experiences from your life when you did not have sufficient information about your audience to help a message make sense?

- As a receiver of the message, what were some of your considerations when working to understand the message? Do you feel that you had sufficient context to properly understand the message? What are some experiences from your life when you did not have sufficient context to make meaning out of a message?
- Explain the concept of communication channels more deeply as it pertains to this activity?
- What did you see that is particularly complex as far as channel transmission?
- Give me examples of how channel selection has been important for giving or receiving workplace messages
- What does this activity say about communication in a remote-work environment?
- What are the communication responsibilities of the leader?
- How about the communication responsibilities of the follower(s)?
- What would you have done differently if you were the FACILITATORS setting up this activity?
- What would you have done differently if you participated in this activity again?

Facilitator needs to review the Shannon-Weaver Model if the model is not common to the class applying Block Talk. Excluding the Action Learning column, Table 1(below) is representative of what student facilitators submit in preparation for running activities like Block Talk.

Table 1: Activity Write-Up: BLOCK TALK

<i>SCHOOL</i>	<i>DISCUSSION QUESTION</i>	<i>LEADERSHIP SKILL</i>	<i>CONCEPTS</i>
Primary: Critical Reflection Secondary: Scientific School (Defining the problem)	What was the most difficult part of this activity?	Leaders must understand the noise issues that make communication challenging	Identify 4 categories of noise and effect on the activity (Shannon-Weaver, 1949)
Primary: Experiential School Secondary: Critical Reflection	How did that noise affect your ability to complete the activity? How do these noise issues relate to your own experience in the workplace?	Leaders must understand that they cannot control all noise issues and must be aware of the potential for noise to affect communication.	Identify the effect of noise on broader communication and workplace context. (Shannon-Weaver, 1949)
Primary: Experiential School Secondary: Critical Reflection	As someone who was responsible for delivering part of the message, what were some of your considerations when creating the message? Do you feel that these considerations helped your message make sense to receiver(s)? What are some experiences from your life when you did not have sufficient information about your audience to help a message make sense.	Leaders must create planful communication. Taking into account knowledge, attitude, skills, and experiences of the intended audience will aid in creating a strong communication.	Encoding. How do we plan a message in a way that it makes sense to our intended audience? (Shannon-Weaver, 1949)



<p>Primary: Experiential School Secondary: Critical Reflection</p>	<p>As a receiver of the message, what were some of your considerations when working to understand the message? Do you feel that you had sufficient context to properly understand the message? What are some experiences from your life when you did not have sufficient context to make meaning out of a message?</p>	<p>Leaders must consider the experience of their followers. Hearing about how the followers applied their knowledge, attitude, skills and experiences when making meaning out of the communication will aid in creating stronger messages.</p> <p>The followers must be aware of their own knowledge, attitude, skills and experiences and how these elements affect their ability to receive communication.</p>	<p>Decoding: How does a receiver make meaning of the message we delivered? (Shannon-Weaver, 1949)</p>
<p>Primary: Experiential School Secondary: Critical Reflection</p>	<p>Explain the concept of communication channels more deeply as it pertains to this activity? What did you see that is particularly complex as far as channel transmission. Give me examples of how channel selection has been important for giving or receiving workplace messages</p>	<p>Leaders must understand communication channel selection can have a significant impact on the clarity of a communication.</p>	<p>Channel Selection: Understand channel selection and its impact on creating clear communication. (Shannon-Weaver, 1949)</p>
<p>Scientific School (Managerial Predisposition)</p>	<p>What does this activity say about communication in a remote-work environment?  What are the communication</p>	<p>Leaders must work to meet the needs of their constituents, enlist others into a shared vision, and create an environment that promotes trust.</p>	<p>Build Leader-Follower Trust Message Effectively to Build Trust and Cooperation (Burke, et al., 2007; Shockley-Zalabak, et al., 2010).</p>

	responsibilities of the leader?  How about the communication responsibilities of the follower(s)?		Extend trust to gain trust (Kouzes & Posner, 2017)
Primary: Scientific (defining problem/implementing solution/managerial predisposition) Secondary: Critical Reflection	What would you have done differently if you were the facilitators setting up this activity?	Participants prepare to understand how they would place themselves in a leadership position and how they would meet the objectives and intent of the activity for all leaders.	Clarify Values Find Your Voice Affirm Shared Values Live the Shared Values Teach Others to Model the Way (Kouzes & Posner, 2017)
Experiential School	What would you have done differently if you participated in this activity again?	Leaders capitalize on any opportunity to communicate with team members about how they would meet success from the previously shared values they had stated before, enabling growth and teamwork.	Leaders are self aware (Kouzes & Posner, 2017)

### Session Description (90 Minutes)

Feel like bossing someone around? Come explore the relationship between communication and leadership in our experiential activity “Block Talk.” Willing conference participants will have the opportunity to act as “primary senders” of information as they guide real-life student participants through a blind-folded block building activity. This activity encourages a reflection on the importance of communication in leadership and relies upon the classic Shannon-Weaver communication model to frame communication and leadership challenges in the remote work environment. Along with attending via Zoom on a computer,

attendees need to have a smart phone with the Google Meets app loaded; which assumes that you have a GMAIL account and access to Google Drive. We can work with other video chat apps (Skype, Facetime, Zoom, Facebook, etc), but need to know ahead of time to connect partners.

- 1) Hello and Login (10 Minutes)
  - a. Led by Eric Nelson
  - b. Introduction of where the activity originated
  - c. Attendees send/enter email addresses and contact information for video chat connection  
  
LINK to SHEET and names MEETS here  
  
(NELSON DO ZOOM if needed)
- 2) Running the Block Talk activity (25 minutes total & see activity Overview)
  - a. Keira - Shannon-Weaver recap sent via Meets invite (5 Minutes)
  - b. 5 minutes to connect with partners and strategize
  - c. 15 minutes to build
    - i. BUT, we want people to talk to each other, as well
- 3) Discussing/debriefing with leadership content (20 Minutes & see Table 1)
  - a. 5 Minutes to return to Conference Zoom and emote on having fun
  - b. 15 Minutes in three or four Zoom BreakOut Rooms depending on group size
- 4) Co-Creating Ideas with participants on effective interaction-building activity using technology (30 Minutes)
  - a. Keira asks questions and digs for success stories (10 Minutes)
  - b. What have you seen come into your classes that was highly effective in building engagement? What have you designed? Tried?

- c. Collect 3 to 6 stories and share notes with attendees
  - i. Eric types ideas into Google Drive while Keira gathers ideas (10 Minutes)
  - ii. Share notes with attendees post-conference
  - iii. Autumn fields questions on activity and class if there are any (10 Minutes)

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