

The Dreaded Blue Envelope: An Exercise in Empowerment

Abstract

This experiential exercise provides a great opportunity for students to not just learn what empowerment is theoretically, but to appreciate what it means to feel empowered. The exercise is structured whereby students are given the opportunity to create their own assignment if they can convince their peers and the instructor of the merits of their approach. However, if they fail, they must accept a mystery assignment in a Blue Envelope which they are assured they will not enjoy. The fear of the Blue Envelope serves as a great motivator for students to take ownership over their own learning, resulting in heightened engagement in both the exercise, as well as the assignment that they create. The exercise has worked successfully on both undergraduate and graduate classes both in person and online in a synchronous format.

The Dreaded Blue Envelope: An Exercise in Empowerment

Students can understand OB concepts from discussions, but some concepts require students to get their hands dirty to internalize it. This exercise is structured to give students a chance to develop a team project idea, convince their classmates to adopt their idea, and then persuade the instructor as well. If they succeed, the instructor approves the project. If they fail, students must accept a mystery assignment, in a Blue Envelope, only revealed if their project is unacceptable. The fear of getting stuck with the dreaded Blue Envelope serves as a great motivator for students to rally their classmates around one good proposal. The result is that students empower themselves and take ownership over their idea and their learning. The exercise is a great way for students to really understand empowerment and is suitable for a variety of management courses,

and has been successful in undergraduate and graduate classrooms face-to-face, and online in a synchronous format. When a proposal is accepted, it becomes an actual assignment for the full class; the semi high-stakes nature of the exercise increases the potential for empowerment.

Theoretical Foundation and Teaching Implications

Instructors and managers alike work hard to create an environment where those who they are leading will feel empowered to take ownership over their projects and personal development. Psychological empowerment has been studied since the 1980s, with early work by Conger and Kanungo (1988), Thomas and Velthouse (1990), and Spreitzer (1995a, 1995b, 1996) and is focused on “the state or set of conditions that allow for employees or teams to believe that they have control over their work” (Maynard, Gilson, & Mathieu, 2012, p. 1235). To be empowered means that a person will be more intrinsically motivated and will experience higher job satisfaction (Seibert et al., 2011).

Although empowerment may initially seem straightforward, it can be difficult to understand because it’s multi-dimensional, is embraced differently by different people, and is not given to you; you must empower yourself. This makes it challenging to teach and to learn. Psychological empowerment was conceptualized to contain four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990). Meaning represents whether the person values the task. Competence characterizes people’s belief in how well they can perform the task. Self-determination denotes people’s sense of how much control they have over the task. Finally, impact signifies people’s sense that their contributions will make a difference. Research into psychological empowerment shows the effect that empowerment can have on individuals. For example, Seibert et al.’s (2011) meta-analysis found psychological empowerment positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, task

performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and innovation, and negatively related to turnover intentions and strain.

The concept of psychological empowerment is highly relevant to educators and management education, in particular, because instructors are constantly trying to find ways to make their curriculum more relevant and personal for students. If instructors can create the conditions that focus on getting students empowered to be active participants in their own educational journeys, they will become more intrinsically motivated; students will feel empowered to take ownership for their learning. Creating those conditions involves beginning with an environment that offers material, social, and psychological resources (Spreitzer, 1996) so that individuals feel accepted and valued by the organization and their peers (Seibert et al., 2011).

When students feel empowered, they are more engaged with learning concepts because they see value in it (meaning), they see themselves capable of acquiring needed skills (competence), they feel that they can develop the skills that are most important to them (self-determination), and they feel that they have some control over their fate (impact). Moreover, this exercise promotes procedural justice which, in my experience, increases their satisfaction regardless of which project is ultimately adopted.

Learning Objectives

After completing the exercise and discussion, students will:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the four dimensions of empowerment,
2. Describe what it feels like to be empowered,
3. Compare and contrast why they might feel empowered while others do not, and
4. Identify the challenge for managers in creating opportunities for empowerment.

Exercise Overview

The instructor invites team leaders to step outside the classroom. The leaders are given an opportunity to develop a proposal for the next project if they can successfully organize the class around one plan and then convince the instructor as well. If they are successful, the instructor will approve the project. If they are unsuccessful, teams will be required to do a mystery assignment located in a Blue Envelope. The exercise presents to students an important contradiction. If you regard the Blue Envelope as a form of punishment, students receive an extrinsic reward of not having to do the assignment in the Blue Envelope. At the same time, having their proposal accepted serves as an intrinsic reward, because you haven't just improved the context or work, but you've challenged them. In effect, the extrinsic reward encourages students to become intrinsically motivated. The second half of class is designed for students to reflect on the exercise.

Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1: The instructor meets with team leaders and provides exercise details. (10 minutes)

The exercise begins with instructors asking leaders to join for a private meeting. I've done the exercise with classes of up to 30 students composed of five 4-6 person teams. If the class is being delivered online in a synchronous format, this can be done in a breakout room. The instructor then shares the assignment with the leaders. The guidelines can be delivered orally, or in writing (Appendix A). The instructor should remain with the leaders to answer questions and inform them that after the meeting, the instructor will become a mute spectator. Questions usually pertain to what might be acceptable, such as:

- Does it have to be an oral presentation?
- What chapters/concepts need to be covered?

- Do all teams have to do the same project?
- Would you really accept our idea?

The goal is for students to succeed so it's important to give just enough information so that they'll develop an acceptable proposal. It's also recommended that the exercise take place during mid-late semester, after students have become familiar with previous assignments, and rubrics, in order for them to create an assignment that is of comparable scope and rigor.

Step 2: Team leaders organize their teams and the class to work on a proposal. (45 minutes)

How students use their 45 minutes is left totally up to them and I've seen many different iterations. Usually, the leaders spend the first five minutes developing a plan, they then go brainstorm with their teams, and then the leaders facilitate a class-wide discussion to iron out one proposal. But I've also seen the leaders take a more dominating role, seeking minimal input from their teams (which led to fascinating reflections later in the exercise on who ultimately was empowered). Proposals often involve merging ideas from different teams. If you feel that students are on the verge of creating an acceptable proposal, but are running out of time, you can consider granting them an extra five minutes. I've found that an unexpected extension can help save many good proposals.

Step 3: The proposal is made to the instructor. If successful, the project is approved. If unsuccessful, the assignment in the Blue Envelope is revealed. (5-15 minutes)

There will be a lot of nervous energy in the room as the students present their idea to you. As they are presenting the proposal, you may choose to ask clarifying questions – especially if clearing up uncertainties will help persuade you toward acceptance. The hope is that they will produce an acceptable assignment but that is not always the case. Periodically classes have pitched assignments that sounded fun but I determined that the potential for success was low.

Therefore, I made the unpopular decision of rejecting their assignment, where explaining my reasoning was critical. They know that you are the expert, so if you explain it well, they will accept that you were looking after their best interests. To bolster my credibility, I often report that the acceptance rate is about 75% so they know that I was serious about considering their proposal. (Reporting this statistic also makes classes whose proposal was accepted feel good as there was a legitimate possibility of failure.) You then need to open up the Blue Envelope and share the assignment that they had dreaded receiving.

You can either then proceed right into Step 4, or alternatively, this is a good opportunity for a class break.

Step 4: Teams are given a reflection assignment and meet separately to prepare answers. (30 minutes)

Step 4 involves students working in their teams to reflect on the exercise. Different questions are provided in the Appendices depending if the class was successful in getting their project approved.

Step 5: The instructor facilitates a class-wide discussion asking teams to share their responses to the reflection questions. (30-45 minutes)

After teams have finished reflecting privately, the last part of the exercise involves you facilitating a class-wide reflection of the exercise. It's important here to point out when teams disagree as it helps reinforce how people have diverse feelings about empowerment. It's also interesting to hear students' perceptions about the empowerment dimensions as you will see a range of answers as to whether their sense of empowerment increased, decreased, or remained constant.

It is one thing reading about the dimensions of empowerment; it is another to participate in an activity where they can reflect on how their own attitudes may have shifted. Consequently,

students often have an emotional reaction to the assignment. From the instructor's standpoint, the exercise represents low risk and high reward. If you accept the students' proposal, they will be more engaged carrying out the project, which will lead to them doing a better job and learning more. They also will hold you and your class in higher regard because you gave them this opportunity. This heightened sense of satisfaction with you and the class will only make them more engaged with the class in subsequent weeks. If you reject the students' proposal, as long as you explain your reasoning well, students will understand that you rejected it in their best interests. More often than not, they will not blame you for rejecting it; they will blame themselves for not producing a more acceptable proposal.

One of the really fun moments in conducting the exercise is seeing when different students figure out that in addition to avoiding the Blue Envelope, the purpose of the exercise is for them to experience empowerment. Some astute leaders will figure it out at the beginning, some students figure it out during deliberations, but many don't realize it until they are answering the reflection questions. But regardless of when it hits them, it creates such an A-HA moment, that it is truly rewarding to see.

MOBTS Session Description

A 60-minute session block is requested, justified as follows:

10 minutes	Introduction of the context of the class (e.g., the moment in the class when the exercise takes place, background/previous assignments).
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35 minutes	<p>Participants are divided into groups and the exercise begins as described above. Participants will be encouraged to play the role of students but to also draw on their experiences with effective projects to stimulate discussion and make the consensus more difficult (i.e., propose and defend their projects). Time allocation per step is modified as follows:</p> <p>Step 1: 5 minutes</p> <p>Step 2: 25 minutes (plus or minus 5 minutes based on engagement/group size)</p> <p>Step 3: 5 minutes</p>
15 minutes	General discussion and Debrief

In this session, participants will “experience” the dreaded Blue Envelope. After an overview of the assignment, the exercise will be conducted with the participants playing the role of the students. While a 60 minute block is requested, the nature of this exercise and proposed session structure can easily accommodate a change in length. Therefore, a 45 or 75 minute block can be accommodated for programming purposes.

References

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Appendix A: Instructions for Team Leaders

1. As you know from the syllabus, you have another team assignment to complete. I already have a project created that is rigorous, exhaustive, and a good test of your knowledge of the course material and your critical thinking and it's located right here in this Blue Envelope. But there's one thing that it's not: fun. It's not fun at all. You really won't like it. So, I want to give you an opportunity to come up with your own project. Here are the details:
2. You have 45 minutes to use the time as you see fit. Your task is to organize yourselves and your teams to discuss various ideas and see if you can come up with a good alternative proposal for the assignment.
3. When the time is up, you will present the idea to me in front of the class. If I like the idea, I will approve it. If I don't like the idea, I will reject it. There will be no negotiations. It will be a thumbs up or thumbs down from me. Of course, you could also decide to just go with my default assignment idea (without even knowing what it is).
4. Since I have to approve the idea, you need to make sure that you are selecting a project that I will determine to be 1) rigorous, 2) demonstrates critical thinking, and 3) grade-able. The last part is really important. If it sounds like a cool project, but grading would be so subjective that it could be seen as unfair, I surely will reject the proposal. So, you should include a rubric to help convince me. You can use the rubric from one of our previous assignments as a model.
5. On the syllabus, it says when the assignment is due, and how many points the assignment is worth. So, you should design an assignment commensurate with how much time you have to complete it and how much it is worth toward your course grade.
6. You may now ask me any questions that you have. Once I start the timer, I will be a mute spectator in the classroom.

Appendix B: Reflection Questions for Classes Whose Proposals Were Accepted

Introduction

Think back on the assignment and consider the following questions. It is not necessary for your team to come to an agreement on all the questions, but be sure to share with the class where you had differences of opinions.

1. Reflect on the concept of empowerment that you read about this week. To what extent do you think the exercise that you just completed impacted your sense of empowerment in this class? Cite particular events from the exercise that led you to make your decision. For example, what role did the leaders play in increasing or decreasing your empowerment?
2. For each dimension of empowerment, describe what it feels like, and whether it increased, decreased, or stayed the same for your different team members.
 - a. Meaning
 - b. Competence
 - c. Self-determination
 - d. Impact
3. If [your instructor] had rejected your proposal, how do you think your responses would have been different?
4. Based on your experience from this exercise, what do you think are the positive and potential negative implications of empowerment? Answer the question from the perspective of both the manager [your instructor] and subordinate (you).
5. For what type of tasks do you think empowerment would be a mistake?
6. How difficult do you think it is for leaders to make their views known without creating cynicism about whether there really is a potential to become empowered?
7. Did the fact that [your instructor] had to approve your project decrease the empowerment potential?
8. Were you skeptical that [your instructor] was serious about accepting your proposal? How do you think leaders overcome skepticism and mistrust about empowerment without abdicating responsibility for the outcomes?

Appendix C: Reflection Questions for Classes Who Received the Blue Envelope

Introduction

Think back on the assignment and consider the following questions. It is not necessary for your team to come to an agreement on all the questions, but be sure to share with the class where you had differences of opinions.

1. Even though your proposal was not accepted, this assignment gave you the opportunity to try and create an acceptable alternative to the Blue Envelope. Reflect on the concept of empowerment that you read about this week. To what extent do you think the exercise that you just completed impacted your sense of empowerment in this class? Cite particular events from the exercise that led you to make your decision. For example, what role did the leaders play in increasing or decreasing your empowerment? (It will be interesting to see how empowerment was affected given the fact that your proposal was rejected.)
2. For each dimension of empowerment, describe what it feels like, and whether it increased, decreased, or stayed the same for your different team members.
 - a. Meaning
 - b. Competence
 - c. Self-determination
 - d. Impact
3. If [your instructor] had accepted your proposal, how do you think your responses would have been different?
4. Based on your experience from this exercise, what do you think are the positive and negative implications of empowerment? Answer the question from the perspective of both the manager [your instructor] and subordinate (you).
5. For what type of tasks do you think empowerment is a mistake? Given the result, do you think it was a mistake for this task?
6. Did the fact that [your instructor] had to approve your project decrease the empowerment potential?
7. Were you skeptical that [your instructor] was serious about accepting your proposal? How do you think leaders overcome skepticism and mistrust about empowerment without abdicating responsibility for the outcomes?
8. Given the fact that your proposal was not accepted, does this experience make you more distrustful of leaders doing what they say they will?