

## **Teaching Compassionate Reframing:**

### **Building Relational Bridges in the Classroom with Unconditional Positive Regard**

#### **Abstract**

Unconditional Positive Regard is an essential condition for fostering helping relationships, as conceived by Carl Rogers, the noted psychotherapist (Rogers, 1961, p. 62). However, the beliefs and attributions that students, and even we as faculty, hold about others are sometimes quite negative, rather than unconditionally positive. The ability to become aware of and reframe beliefs and attributions about others from negative to positive is an important component of education involving spirit (Karakas, 2011) (Harlos, 2000).

I'll discuss an approach implemented across our undergraduate curriculum that helps students learn this practice. A brief practice session will provide a sense of the process.

#### **Keywords**

Compassion, unconditional positive regard, reframing

#### **Time Requested:**

60 Minutes (*Activity/Exercise*)

#### **Introduction.**

This session has the purpose of creating reflective conversations about the development of learning “compassionate reframing”, that is, the use of reflection on a “ladder of inference” to

develop inferences that exhibit “unconditional positive regard”, in our courses. Learning objectives include:

- Awareness of the potential for using the “ladder of inference” to develop “unconditional positive regard” and the potential to develop student praxis in this skill.
- Understanding of key components in designing course components to address the practice.
- Analysis and potential application of compassionate reframing to one’s own courses.

The questions “How might we embed activities in a course that develops compassionate reframing as a way to improve students’ managerial praxis?” and “What potential issues might arise during the course?” will be discussed during the roundtable.

The target audience is faculty interested in developing compassionate reframing skills among their students as a method to help students build relational bridges.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This work mainly draws from two different theoretical arenas: the approach of reframing developed by Chris Argyris using the “Ladder of Inference,” and Carl Rogers’ description of “Unconditional Positive Regard”. These are combined in an approach which it is hoped may enact a type of spiritual / moral education that has been seen as lacking (see, for example, Burton, et al, 2021).

The “Ladder of Inference” is a model of how individuals reach conclusions and determine action based on their experiences. As Argyris, et al, write (1985, p. 342): “Once students learn the ladder of inference, they can use it to discover the kinds of inferences they are making, the connections or lack thereof between inferences, the data on which they are based, and the conclusions they lead to. It can be used to highlight patterns in the way individuals reason and act and can also be used to design an alternative set of patterns.” Documenting how one reaches a specific conclusion based on observable experience allows them to consciously postulate alternative conclusions, and to question which might be more accurate, just, and compassionate. Argyris et al (1985, pp. 84-98) proposed that governing values guide the conclusions and actions individuals design from their experiences in the world and proposed three specific values to provide more effective action. They are 1) Valid information, 2) Free and informed choice, and 3) Internal commitment. Later versions (e.g., Schwarz, 2002) of his governing values included the addition of 4) Compassion, which acknowledges the emotion-laden aspects of social action and provides guidance to craft those actions in ways that might create less counter-productive reactions.

Since the idea of compassion may be easily misunderstood, and even misapplied (for example, individuals often withhold negative reactions to others’ behaviors in the name of compassion), in my courses I generally equate compassion with Carl Rogers’ (1961, p. 62) conception of “unconditional positive regard” (UPR). Rogers associated UPR with caring: “It is impossible to accurately sense the perceptual world of another person unless you value that person and his or her world – unless you in some sense, care” (Rogers, 1980, pp. 152-3). This entails viewing others’ behaviors in ways that are non-judgmental, seeking understanding rather than blaming. This does not mean that all behaviors are acceptable, but as Barrett-Lennard puts it (1998, p.

100): ‘To be unconditionally responsive to the experiencing person does not mean accepting all their behaviour ... It is not the other’s actions but their self or personhood that I ... prize’.

As I explain to the students, the goal is to understand how, if you were in another’s situation, with their experience and context, you might be likely to do the same thing that they did, regardless of how annoying, unacceptable or even immoral you might find it. It is this empathy for another that I seek to create in students, so that they can compassionately reframe their own inferences about others’ actions.

### **Teaching Approach and Implications**

This session will provide a brief description of how these ideas have been integrated into our undergraduate course sequence, as well as provide for more in-depth description of specific examples of the process.

The undergraduate course sequence provides three opportunities for students to gain experience in compassionate reframing, an Integrated Business Experience (IBE), a course in Organizational Behavior, and a senior-level Organizational Development course. In each of these courses there are exercises and activities to address the concept, with greater emphasis during the Organizational Development course.

The IBE course has a single exercise that asks students to think of something a fellow student did that they reacted to negatively, then develop a Ladder of Inference that described their reasoning about the situation. Then they are asked to redesign the Ladder of Inference with conclusions at the top of the ladder that is not negative but is understanding and empathetic.

The Organizational Behavior course has a similar assignment, but also provides individual coaching from the instructor. For example, one student related an experience with another student that she perceived as proving that the other student was incompetent. Her initial reaction was, “This student asked us to complete a task that we saw as not being valuable, therefore they are incompetent, I will not work with them”. After coaching and reframing, the reaction was, “This student asked us to complete a task that we saw as not being valuable. However, the student is still learning how to be effective and this is an opportunity for them to grow through feedback and working with others. I will work with them and I will provide support for their growth.”

The Organization Development course goes deeper and provides at least one example per week (either demonstrated during classroom discussion or written student activity) in compassionate reframing. Self-compassion is also emphasized and modeled. For example, one student said, “I have a big ego, so when I get direct feedback I tend to be offended.” As part of the course discussion, the professor noted that “you have a big ego” is likely to be considered judgmental and evaluative if you were to say it to someone else, and proposed alternative self-talk. “I have been in situations where people have provided feedback that I perceived as unfair and threatening, and to protect myself I pushed them away by being offended. If this happens in this classroom I will try to make my reactions known so we as a group can reflect on it.” This was not seen by the student or the class as judgmental and evaluative and was perceived as the kind of reasoning that could be shared with others. Through several written assignments and group activities students are required to reflect on and redesign their own inferences to be more compassionate.

After presenting and clarifying the process of compassionate reframing, most of the session will be spent in roundtables reflecting on and discussing questions such as “How might aspects of this be integrated in our curricula? What issues or weaknesses might prevent implementation or arise during it?” This session will contribute to effective teaching and learning in the field of management by promoting reflection and reassessment of the approaches we faculty use to provoke learning. It promotes “building relational bridges” by giving students learning and practice implementing skills and abilities they will need to develop strong and effective relationships among those they will lead and work with.

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