The Blindfolded Obstacle Course in a Blended Zoom and Bricks & Mortar (Hybrid) Classroom

Introduction

The class-related changes due to COVID-19 have left faculty looking for meaningful use of technology to support student interaction. In particular, it seems logical that courses designed to improve the interaction skills of learners are struggling to incorporate live-contact online members (Zoomers) with bricks & mortar classmates. In Fall 2020, students in the University of Central Missouri's (UCM) MGT 4320 Leadership class developed and delivered a blindfolded obstacle course activity that hinged on online members guiding their in-class partners remotely through a complex obstacle course. The pursuant discussion focused on leadership topics including: obligations of remote employees, leading in a remote environment, and enabling others to act by fostering collaboration and strengthening others. The activity is pertinent for any course addressing the above topics, but discussion questions are easily customizable based on instructor need.

Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications

Teaching Implications

Zoom-Based Blindfolded Obstacle Course is a learning activity based on Kouzes and Posner's idea of Enabling Others to Act. James Kouzes and Barry Posner (2017) have been involved in leadership research for over 40 years resulting in a set of leadership practices centered on "what leaders do and what constituents expect (p. 1)." Enabling Others to Act is one of the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership that Kouzes and Posner (2017) have identified as being key behaviors (actions) of every-day leaders in today's work world. To enable others to act, leaders must make two commitments: Foster Collaboration and Strengthen Others. The content covered by "Blindfolded Obstacle Course" includes, but is not limited to what is shown on Table 1. At UCM, we ask students to co-create activities as a learning meta-practice to drive engagement and content knowledge (Bright, et al, 2016).

Theoretical Foundations

The Management faculty at UCM believe that learning leadership happens most deeply when learners internalize material by experiencing the content in some "live" setting. Our belief in the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) has been challenged during COVID. Like many educators, we have found ourselves adapting, looking for new avenues and approaches to tech-based "live" activities which result in the reflective cycle of briefing, doing and debriefing (Christian, McCarty, & Brown, 2020). The Zoom-Based Blindfolded Obstacle Course was developed and delivered by a team of four student facilitators in September, 2020. The activity was run again in a leadership training workshop put on for 1st-year students in a Business Orientation class in late-October.

In MGT 4320 Leadership, the facilitation team (students) find, design, deliver and evaluate training activities that connect the content of "The Leadership Challenge" to the work world. To prepare facilitators, we ask them to answer three questions in their preparatory materials (Leigh & Kinder, 1999): 1) Why do you want to present your materials in this way? 2) What do you actually want to achieve? and 3) Why do you want to do that way? To address question 2, facilitators clearly state the content to be covered in the workshop or both facilitators and participants will struggle; for example,

the content list shown in the right column of Table 1 was generated by facilitators prior to their Fall 2020 workshop.

As a form of peer teaching (Whitman, 1988), the workshops are an example of Joseph Joubert's idea that "to teach is to learn twice." (Joubert, J., & Auster, P., 2005). Participants respond to a set of stimuli that facilitators designed to foster discussion around a specific leadership topic while facilitators are still very much learning about the content as they prepare the workshops. As such, the workshops are an overt attempt on the part of UCM's leadership instructors to create double loop learning (Cartwright, 2002).

In our 15 years of experience, very few teams will embarrass themselves by putting on a "poor" workshop, rather many teams feel that they owe it to their classmates to create a truly memorable, hands-on (minds-on) learning experience. We agree with Finkelstein (2018) who argues that good leaders are good teachers, so the workshop format serves as a practice ground for students to learn about teaching (and coaching). As a result, all of our workshops have two underlying learning objectives: objectives for the participants and objectives for the facilitators (Table 1 - Leadership Practice).

Learning Objectives

1. Realize the future path is unknown, show that leaders providing choice strengthens others.
2. Seek feedback from others, to foster self-confidence when the future is unknown.
3. Determine the responsibilities and obligations of remote leaders and followers.
4. Build leadership skills by fostering collaboration, to gain the trust of others.

Exercise Overview

<u>**Instructions**</u>

- The room needs to be set up like a maze/obstacle course (you can use any materials or objects to construct this to your liking)
    - Paths can go in any direction, as long as there is an end goal
- Individuals in-person will take turns being blindfolded
- Zoomers will either be assigned as a navigator or a distractor
    - Navigator-This person will be responsible for assisting your blindfolded teammate
    - Distractor-This person will be responsible for distracting the blindfolded teammate
- The blindfolded individual will need to hold their phone up to their forehead, so that the Zoomer they are assigned with can see the maze
- A designated route will be on the floor and it is up to the navigators and distractors to either help them on the path or distract them depending on their role
    - Be sure the end goal is clear to both the Navigator and Distractor
- The host/facilitator will get into contact with the Zoomers to assign them their role and a blindfolded teammate
- Zoomers will begin their assigned tasks to either distract or navigate
- Multiple teams can be on the course at once
- After everyone has completed the activity, debrief can begin
    - Be sure debriefs take place with the full team together

Table 1 – Mapping discussion questions to content

Discussion Question	Relation	Leadership Practice
How do you think this virtual activity would be different in-person?	Leaders Seek Feedback	Foster Self-Confidence in Facilitator
What was it like to have various choices in a path?	Strengthen Others - With choice, people tend to feel they are provided more freedom and respected by those who provide the options	Provide Choices
Did you feel in control or not and explain?	Strengthen Others - For others to feel in control, individuals must be able to use their own judgement, get out of their shell, and choose how they work Foster Collaboration- Extend trust to gain trust	Structure jobs to offer latitude

You may have lacked confidence in this activity. Did the navigator boost your confidence and why or why not?
 	
    Who is your "navigator" at work? (or other team)
 	
    Describe what this person does.
 	
    For who do you serve as a navigator? How did this develop?
	Strengthen Others - Having confidence instilled into you by another can help you better accomplish tasks	Foster self confidence

Think of a time when you were a coach or leader. Did you think you were a good leader or poor leader? Why or why not?	Strengthen Others - When we are coaches, we tend to provide the needed feedback to continue reaching the goals we set for ourselves.	Coach Ask questions, stop giving answers
What are the responsibilities of a remote employee to engage in their work culture?	Foster Collaboration – Extend trust to gain trust.	Foster Self-Confidence

How do remote managers best lead their constituents?	Foster Collaboration – Be the first to trust	Listen, listen, and listen some more
As leaders, how can we create an environment of trust in this tech-based and/or COVID world?	Foster Collaboration – Share knowledge and information	Find ways to get people together face to face
How can we use the technology to foster relationship building?	Foster Collaboration – Facilitate relationships by structuring projects to promote joint effort	The obstacle course is designed for joint effort
Was this activity enjoyable for you and what made it enjoyable or not enjoyable?	Leaders Seek Feedback	Foster Self-Confidence in the Facilitator
Why do you think people turn their camera off on virtual calls? What can you do to help promote engagement virtually in zoom or other video programs?	Foster Collaboration- Extend trust to gain trust & Share knowledge and information	Find ways to get people together face to face
How do you think this type of "remote" communication will work in your career field?	Leaders Seek Feedback	General look to the future and career expecations

Session Description

What's it like to give up control? Guide a real-life student through an obstacle course with your smart phone! Come take part in an experiential leadership exercise as: 1) a "Zoomer" who will act as Navigator or Distractor for a live-contact student or faculty member located at the University of Central Missouri (or Canterbury); 2) a discussant examining what it means to lead in a hybrid, online world; and 3) a co-creator sharing your experiences on highly effective applications of tech-based activities focused on building interaction skills and student engagement.

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.

The 60 minute session breaks into 4 components:

1) Hello and Login
    a. Led by Eric Nelson
    b. Introduction of where the Exercise originated
    c. Attendees send/enter email addresses and contact information for video chat connection
    d. 5 minutes **or less**
2) Running the obstacle course exercise (see Exercise Overview)
    a. Joe West & Jessica Howe
    b. 5 minutes to connect with partner
        i. Joe & Jessica separate Navigators/Distractors
        ii. Tech Support – Andrea Dieckman & Eric Nelson
    c. 10 minutes to complete obstacle course
        i. It's probably less, but we want people to talk to each other, as well
3) Discussing/debriefing with leadership content (see Table 1)
    a. 5 Minutes to return to Conference Zoom and emote on having fun
    b. 15 Minutes in three or four Zoom Break Out Rooms depending on group size
        i. Room 1: Joe West – activity designer
        ii. Room 2: Andrea Dieckman – instructor
        iii. Room 3: Jessica Howe – student and writer
        iv. Room 4: Eric Nelson - primary instructor
4) Co-Creating Ideas with participants on effective interaction-building exercises using technology
    a. 15 Minutes
        i. Eric asks questions and digs for success stories
            1. What have you seen come into your classes that was highly effective in building engagement? What have you designed? Tried?
            2. Collect 3 to 6 stories and share notes with attendees
        ii. Andi types ideas into Google Drive while Eric gathers ideas
            1. Share notes with attendees post-conference
        iii. Joe & Jessica field questions on activity and class if there are any

References

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