

Exercises for Teaching Organizational Change

Leading change is an essential skill for managers. Instructors in management education must not only teach theories on effectively leading change but also convince students of the necessity of developing their change leadership skills. Students may not be able to intuitively grasp the difficulty, complexity and nuances of organizational change. Thus, 2 games have been designed to allow students to experience Lewin's three steps to successful organizational change.

These games simulate organic process of organizational change and can be conducted in face-to-face classes or online classes via zoom. After participants experience the 2 games, topics on leading change, following change, resistance to change and influence and power dynamics will be discussed.

Key words: experiential learning, leading change, organizational change

Introduction

Leading organizational change is a common topic taught in management classes. In practice, this important topic of leading change in organization may be difficult for students who may have limited managerial or workplace experience to grasp. One way to help future managers understand the challenges and frustrations of leading change in the workplace is to use experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) exercises or simulations.

Leading Organizational Change

Organizational researchers have examined the need for adaptive responses to an ever-changing environment (Leana & Barry, 2000). The downsides of not being able to adapt to change has been well documented (e.g., Kotter, 1996; Ring, Bigley, D'Aunno, & Khanna, 2005; Singh, Tucker, & House, 1986). However, even though the need to adapt to both short- and long-term changes are well documented, equally well documented, the fact is that individuals often resist change (Kotter & Schlesinger, 2008; Piderit, 2000). Especially frustrating for managers is that individuals may even resist beneficial change. Lewin's (1947) three-stage model argues that individuals must "unfreeze" or overcome inertia and barriers promoting the status quo before change can occur.

Lewin's Change Model suggests that organisational changes entail these steps:

- i) ***Unfreezing***. Given that people would naturally resist organisational changes, this step involves efforts to move them away from the status quo and towards a new end-state for the organisation. Two forces would be at work here. First, there is a need to strengthen the

driving forces of change, such as enhancing the desirability of the new state of being as compared to the organisation's current situation. Second, there is a need to reduce the restraining forces, such as people's preference for the comfort and perceived control of keeping to the status quo, and their fear of uncertainty.

ii) **Movement.** This step involves the organisation's actual transition into a new end-state.

This is an implementation step where its people, having been swayed by the driving forces and having overcome the restraining forces, act on matters to effect change. Over here, organisations would supplement the people's efforts with education, communication and support to smoothen the change process.

iii) **Refreezing.** This step involves reinforcing the new state after the change. Organisations usually demonstrate the benefits of the new state of being by recognising and rewarding the people's change efforts, to positively reinforce their preference for the new end-state. People, at this juncture, accept the changes to the organisation's goals, strategies, processes, systems and structures as the new norm.

Kotter's eight-step model (1995, 1996) emphasizes the importance of counteracting barriers to change through communicating not only the need for change but also the vision of what the change will accomplish. Kotter's model also highlights the role of the leader to share the reasons behind and potential benefits of change in order to create a feeling of urgency and necessity. These two approaches to leading change can provide a framework to allow students to understand and counteract the reasons individuals may resist change.

In the exercises designed for this session, participants will be able to experience the process of change.

Communication

To lead change effectively, leaders must not only understand the barriers to change; they must also communicate exceptionally well. Kotter (1995) argues that many change efforts fail because the leaders drastically underestimate the amount of communication required. Unfortunately, just increasing amount of messages does not necessarily improve the quality of the communication.

In the exercise designed (see details in upcoming session) where participants have to do the same body movement as a group, and change the body movement synchronously, participants will be able to get a sense of how to communicate change, and who will tend to lead change, who will tend to be followed.

Power

According to Kotter's (1995) model for leading change, another crucial element to leading change involves an understanding of power. The second step for successfully leading change involves gathering a coalition with sufficient power (Kotter, 1995). This can be highlighted in the exercise where participants have to all do the same body movement. Often, people will enact the body movement when enough people are doing the same movement. This parallels the learning point from Kotter's (1995) model that change will occur when enough people agree or adopt the change.

A common approach to discussing power in management classes involves French and Raven's (1959) bases of power. These bases of power include power based on outcomes one can control (i.e., reward and coercive power), individual aspects of the leader such as skills or charisma (i.e., referent and expert power), and power based on the position one holds in the organization (i.e., legitimate power). After the exercise, participants will discuss who they

focused their attention on when trying to follow change, and who was more comfortable initiating change. There will also be discussion of power and group dynamics.

Teaching Objectives

- Understand the processes of organizational change
- Experience the initial resistance to change
- Experience overcoming psychological barriers to initiate or follow change
- Understand group dynamics that underpin who will tend to lead change and who will follow

Exercise Overview

The proposed session comprises of two exercises.

Exercise 1: Follow the Follower:

Goal of Exercise: Participation in Spontaneous Change Processes

Face-to-Face Version

A group of individuals sit in a circle facing each other. On a facilitator's cue, each person starts making sounds and movements. However, at the same time, each one is also to mimic the sounds and movements of others. No one leads, and no one follows—everyone in the group is constantly shifting their attention to see what the other group members are doing. If one person shakes his/her head, everyone else has to shake their heads. When done right, an outsider would not be able to identify the original head-shaker. It's as though the group is able to anticipate the slightest change in direction with the precision and instantaneity of a school of fish. The exercise requires intense focus and listening. Participants have to remain in the moment and be acutely

aware of what everyone else is doing. Sometimes the result borders on chaos; sometimes the group becomes one smoothly working organism. More often than not, the group will develop a pattern of coordinated movement and sound.

Zoom Version

5 to 6 individuals will be invited to on their video on Zoom, while the rest of the group off their video. This will allow the zoom page to display those who have turned on their video. Similar to the face-to-face version, on the group will need to mimic the movements of others. No one leads, and no one follows – everyone in the group is constantly shifting their attention to see what the other group members are doing.

Exercise 2: Alphabet Game

Goal of Exercise: Going with the Flow

Face-To-Face and Zoom Version

The alphabet game requires the entire group of participants to create a story one sentence at a time by taking turns to contribute a sentence. The constraint is the first sentence has to start with “a”, the second sentence has to start with “b”, the third sentence has to start with “c” and so forth. This exercise can shed some light on the resistance to partake in change, when other people’s sentences make the story go in a direction that was unexpected, or not what one has desired. It also allows participants to experience going with the flow.

Session Details

<u>Agenda</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Time</u> <u>Allocated</u> <u>Total time</u> <u>required (1</u> <u>hour)</u>
Introduction to Organizational Change	Facilitator will give a brief introduction on the concept and necessity of organizational change	5 minutes
Exercise 1: Follow the Follower	Participants will engage in exercise 1 to experience first hand spontaneous change occurring in their groups.	10 minutes
Reflection on Exercise 1	Participants to share with their groups what they have experienced and learned from the exercise. Reflection questions are provided in handout (see appendix A).	10 minutes
Debrief on Exercise 1	Facilitator will debrief exercise 1 to highlight key learning points on spontaneous shared leadership	10 minutes
Exercise 2: Alphabet Game	Participants will engage in exercise 2 to experience going with the flow in practice in their groups.	10 minutes

Reflection on Exercise 2	Participants to share with their groups what they have experienced and learned from the exercise. Reflection questions are provided in handout (see appendix B).	10 minutes
Debrief on Exercise 2	Facilitator will debrief exercise 2 to highlight key learning points on organizational change	5 minutes

References

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Appendix A: Reflection Question for Exercise 1

- What happened in the exercise just now?
- Who initiated the change?
- Who were you paying attention to during the exercise?
- Were you comfortable with the change?
- Were you comfortable with initiating the change?
- What are some of the key lessons you can draw from this exercise that can shed light on organizational change processes?

Appendix B: Reflection Question for Exercise 2

- What happened in the alphabet game?
- Did you have a story in mind?
- Were you comfortable with going with the flow?
- How did you feel about the changes or transitions in the story?
- What are some of the key lessons you can draw on organizational change from this exercise?