

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 17, 1990

THE NAME GAME: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN INTERGROUP RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The need for intergroup behavior management to enhance productivity, satisfaction, and growth is discussed as determined by the dimensions of functional-dysfunctional, enhancement-threat, competition, --cooperation, and importance-unimportance. Strategies for productivity managing intergroup relations are described and a simulation for experiencing intergroup dynamics and applying these strategies is explained including the purpose, materials needed, preparation, procedure, participant's instructions, observer's instructions, messenger's instructions, and debriefing guide.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INTERGROUP RELATIONS

Whenever the activity of one group is destined to affect the performance and/or satisfaction of another group, there is a need for intergroup behavior management. Intergroup relations refers to the behavioral patterns that exist between two or more groups. Interacting groups may function within the same organizational department (e.g., the sales forces for two different territories) or in separate departments (e.g., sales and personnel). They may represent different levels in the organization's hierarchy (e.g., a production unit and corporate headquarters) or include external factions (e.g., the purchasing department and an outside supplier)

These intergroup relationships influence the productivity, satisfaction, and growth of the groups involved. The important considerations are **how** the two (or more) groups interact **and in what ways the results** of these interactions **affect the outputs** of each group. The results can be mutually beneficial, mutually destructive, or one group may prosper at the expense of the other.

FUNCTIONAL VERSUS DYSFUNCTIONAL INTERACTION

The most important behavioral result of two interacting groups is whether the outcomes are functional or dysfunctional - not only for the groups themselves, but also for the total organization and the individuals within the groups. The consequences of intergroup behavior may be functional for both groups, function for one but not the other, or dysfunctional for both groups. Also, what is functional outcome for one or both groups may be dysfunctional for the total organization.

ENHANCING VERSUS THREATENING INTERACTION

Group members have different feelings about the similarities and differences that exist between their own group and another group; depending on whether these characteristics are seen as enhancing or threatening to their group's that appear to be threatening; members may avoid or try to change those groups. If another group is perceived to enhance their group in some way members will feel positive about it and seek to maintain a close relationship.

COMPETITION VERSUS COOPERATION BETWEEN GROUPS

When groups compete actively with one another the

heightened spirit of competition often stimulates greater creativity and better productivity. But too much competition, or competition against impossible odds, can have the opposite effect.

Cooperation has many advantages, but surprisingly it has its disadvantages as well. Groups that cooperate with one another often achieve far more than they could if they acted alone, and groups are more productive cooperating than they'd be if they were bickering. Too much cooperation, on the other hand, produces a state of contentment that provides little incentive to improve or grow.

The key is to discover what degrees of competition and/or cooperation are most functional for two particular groups in their respective setting. The special balance of constructive tension that comes with competition and the combining of talents through cooperation can be determined only on a situational basis by closely examining the resulting functionality and enhancement.

IMPORTANT VERSUS UNIMPORTANT INFLUENCE

The relative importance that a group places on another group's ability to affect its welfare will determine how it behaves toward the other group. If competing group A perceives the addition of new personnel to competing group B as a crucial factor in group B's relative competency, the perceived functionality and sense of threat will be quite different from those experienced if the new personnel were assigned to activities that had no effect on the two groups' relationship.

If the behaviors of another group are perceived as unimportant to the protection, maintenance, and enhancement of one group's welfare, the behaviors (and the group) probably will be ignored or dismissed. On the other hand, if another group's behaviors are seen to pose even a mild threat to a function of a group's survival or growth, it is likely that the group will react aggressively.

REDUCING DYSFUNCTIONAL INTERGROUP CONFLICT

Some intergroup conflicts are normal; when the organizational gains outweigh negative consequences, we can even say such conflicts are favorable. But when the negative consequences outweigh the gains, it becomes essential to reduce or eliminate the conflict. Likert and Likert have suggested several popular strategies for effecting win-win outcomes through the establishment of common goals and more valid communications.

SUPERORDINATE GOALS. One of the most effective ways to reduce intergroup conflict is to determine a new goal that requires the cooperative effort of the conflicting groups. Such a goal must be unattainable by either group alone and of sufficient importance to supercede all their other goals. The superordinate goal could be the analysis and reduction of the intergroup conflict itself. One fairly common super-ordinate goal is the survival of the organization as a viable entity. This leads quite naturally to the elimination of suboptimal strategies on the part of conflicting groups.

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COMMON ENEMY. Common enemies often restore alliances at the international level when bickering nations unite against a common adversary in times of war or natural catastrophe. Warring departments and other organizational groups will suppress their conflicts and join together to aid their company to compete successfully against another. Sometimes, however, they must be reminded that the opposition is out there.

INCREASED COMMUNICATION. Consequences of intergroup conflict include decreased communication, lack of understanding, and negative stereotypes, and develop more positive feelings among the members of the groups. In situations where it is feasible to rotate group members, experiencing things from the opposing perspective often facilitates communication and enhances understanding.

PROBLEM SOLVING. Problem solving is a more structured means of bringing together conflicting groups for a face-to-face confrontation meeting. The purpose of the meeting is to identify and solve their conflict through a mutual airing of differences, complaints, and negative and positive feelings in the form of a verbal exchange. An effort is made to work through differences and bring about a greater understanding of the group's attitudes, perceptions, and position. The problem-solving approach requires considerable time and commitment and is not optimal when the conflict is based on differences in value systems. It has been deemed effective, however, when conflicts result from misunderstandings or differences in perceptions.

EXPANSION OF RESOURCES. When the major cause of intergroup conflict is limited resources, the likely outcome is a win/lose situation in which one group succeeds at the expense of another. If at all possible, the organization should eliminate this source of conflict by expanding the resources needed. Additional investments may pay off handsomely in terms of increased productivity.

THIRD-PARTY JUDGMENT. Groups may appeal to a common boss or an outside judge to serve as a mediator in resolving their conflict. Common superiors are often called in to settle conflicts between departments; the superior listens to both sides of the argument and then recommends a solution. Arbitrators have more third-party clout in that the warring parties must agree before the fact to abide by an arbitrator's decision.

CHANGING ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE. When the reasons for intergroup conflict lie in scarce resources, great status differences, or power imbalances, changes in organizational structure may be the answer. Structural changes include such things as rotating group members on a semi-permanent basis, creating liaison or coordinator positions, and eliminating special-interest groups that exist within the organization. More complex approaches, such as regrouping activities into teams under matrix forms rather than traditional units, allow individuals to become members of overlapping teams. This decreases identity with one particular department and increases understanding of the requirements and needs of other groups. In some situations conflicting groups can be relocated, task responsibilities can be redefined, and hierarchies can be decentralized.

SMOOTHING. Smoothing is a means of repressing conflict by providing the conflicting groups with some incentive to control the conflict and to avoid open expression. The smoothing process plays down the differences between the groups and accentuates their similarities and common interests. The rationale is that eventually the groups will

realize they are not as alienated from one another as they initially believed. The fact that this approach circumvents full confrontation of the sources of conflict means they will probably resurface in the future and possibly cause a more serious disturbance. Smoothing is at best a temporary, short-run solution,

AVOIDANCE. Some groups may be able to ignore dysfunctional situations temporarily by looking the other way or disregarding the threatening actions of others in hope that the situation will resolve itself. But most conflicts don't fade away; usually they worsen with time. Although avoidance is ineffective in the long run, certain controlled conditions can be established to lessen the short-term consequences of conflict. Sometimes conflicting groups can be separated physically; sometimes they can limit the amount of interaction that takes place between them. Procrastination, disregard for the demands of others, and attempts at peaceful coexistence are all variations of the avoidance process.

THE NAME GAME

The following simulation serves as an opportunity for participants to experience intergroup relations in a dynamic situation which allows them to manage the degree of competition versus cooperation as they deem appropriate. The consequences of their actions will be very apparent in the results of each of the three rounds of participation.

Through proper diagnosis, and application of the principles for managing effective intergroup relations, participants can learn the benefits of common objectives and cooperation between groups. If sub-optimization occurs, the total organization will not prosper, and participants must provide the techniques for improving intergroup conflict to turn the situation around. Either way, the debriefing provides a rich opportunity to analyze the consequences of intergroup behavior and learn how to manage it effectively in the future.

PURPOSE

Name Game is an exercise in the cooperative exchange of materials to complete a common task. The game is played by three groups, analogous to three different departments in the same organization.

The task increases in complexity in about the same way that a growing organization would become more complex. The first task is analogous to the task of a small manufacturer with its production contained in a few buildings. The succeeding tasks become more difficult and parallel those of an expanded operation producing a wide variety of more complex products. The methods used when the company was in its infancy become inadequate for its present operations.

The game is ordinarily played in three innings, each of which increases in complexity. For each inning of the game each group will receive an envelope with specific instructions and the materials needed for the inning of play.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Paper and pencils. Three sets of three envelopes each: set 1 for the four seasons; set 2 for the days of the week; set 3 for the months of the year.

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PREPARATION

Prepare the envelope sets prior to the exercise as follows:

Set 1, seasons:



Shuffle the twenty-two letter cards; divide and place them into three envelopes, one for each of the participating teams. Label the three envelopes "TASK 1 -- Seasons."

Set 2, Days:



Shuffle the fifty letter cards; divide and place them into three envelopes. Label these envelopes "TASK 2 -- Days."

Set 3, Months:



Shuffle the seventy-four letter cards; divide and place them into three envelopes. Label these envelopes "TASK -- Months."

Set 4, States:

If a more complex task is desired, prepare the letters for the fifty United States in the same manner. You'll need larger envelopes for this exercise.

PROCEDURE

Divide the class into organizations of three teams of five to seven members each. If the class size is greater than thirty-five use four seven-member teams. The letters for each of the three tasks can be divided into four envelopes and the exercise conducted in the same manner. Verbal communication is permitted only within one's own group; communication with other teams must take the form of written messages.

Appoint one observer and one messenger on each team. The five-to-seven student teams act as workers. Extra students can serve as additional observers.

The innings are timed, but there is no time limit.

This exercise works best when teams can operate out of separate rooms. If only one room is available, spread the teams out so that verbal conversations will not be overheard accidentally.

For each condition the task will be accomplished when (1) all the letters available to the three groups have been used in spelling the required words; (2) all the groups have completed their work.

Condition 1 --Seasons

Objective: Spell the seasons of the year.

Restrains: Each team must have four or more letters in its possession at all times. All teams must spell a season before the task is complete.

Condition 2 --Days of the Week

Objective: Spell the days of the week.

Constraints: Each team must have seven or more letters on hand at all times. All teams must spell at least one day before the task is complete.

Condition 3 -- Months of the Year

Objective: Spell the months of the year.

Constraints: Each team must have fifteen or more letters on hand at all times. All teams must spell at least three months before the task is complete.

OBSERVER' S INSTRUCTIONS

1. Announce the objectives and restraints for each condition according to the preceding specifications.

2. Distribute and collect materials.

3. Observe the following group process factors for debriefing:

- Leadership function: influence and coordination
- Role behavior: task, socioemotional, personal
- Decision-making process: analyzing problem and alternatives versus diving right into the task
- Suboptimization (complete own task) versus total organization
- Flexibility versus rigidity (change or continue same process as task complexity changes)
- Intragroup sentiments versus intergroup sentiments

MESSENGER' S INSTRUCTIONS

1. Distribute messages between groups.

2. Keep a messenger in each room at all times.

3. Observe intergroup process for debriefing

- Intergroup coordination
- Intergroup influence or control
- Competition versus cooperation
- Intergroup sentiments
- Intergroup communication process (problems and effectiveness)
- Total organizational effectiveness
- Other intergroup problems
- Messenger role in organization (importance, sentiments, perception of self and others)

DEBRIEFING

For an effective solution, this allocation-of-resources problem requires intergroup cooperation; that is, the teams must collaborate. Groups have a tendency to begin by trying to deal with the task, but they must deal with process and structure before a good solution can be achieved. Before the game is completed, leadership problems must be solved in and between teams.

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Begin the debriefing by asking the observers and messengers to report their findings. Then the instructor, observers, and workers should discuss these observations and analyze them in terms of the following concepts

1. Groups frequently address themselves to the task without taking time to analyze the problem.
2. Competitiveness can develop even when groups have been told that a task is cooperative.
3. Sometimes a team finishes its task 3rd relaxes without recognizing the need to break down the order it has created and switch parts with another group so that other teams can finish and thereby solve an entire problem.
4. A good solution is sometimes offered but not accepted by a group because it is offered tentatively or because the group is not ready to listen.
5. Good communication develops only as a conscious process in response to a recognized need. Teams that try to take control are usually less successful than those that suggest process and structure and *offer* to give control to another team.
6. Groups find simple solutions for simple tasks and continue to apply them unsuccessfully on more complicated tasks.
7. How well do these concepts apply to the class's experience in performing the Name Game?
8. If time permits, analyze other groups in terms of these six concepts.

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