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EXPERIENCING SOCIALIZATION FIRST HAND: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

This exercise demonstrates the socialization process that takes place in all organizations when a person joins it. It also introduces the topics of group norms and values, group pressures, conformity techniques of socialization, communication, social influence, role conflict and ambiguity. By making a few minor changes in the exercise, it could be used as an introduction to Principles of Management or Behavioral Science exercise. This paper discusses my use of the exercise in teaching the socialization process.

INTRODUCTION

A number of current Organizational Science textbooks and reading books [9; 2; 8; 1; 3] have included either a section on the socialization process or a whole chapter on the subject. In addition, some of the Human Resource Management texts [5; 4] have also started to include a discussion of socialization. More and more organizations and management scholars are starting to recognize the importance of the topic. But while its importance has been recognized, few if any exercises or simulations have been developed to demonstrate this phenomena.

Socialization is a continuous process of learning the values, norms and acceptable behavior patterns of the organization. The process occurs in schools, in social organizations, and in the work environment. It continues to reoccur every time an individual joins a new organization, moves from one position to another within an organization, or again when a person returns to an old organization. As Schein [6 points out "the process is so ubiquitous and we go through it so often during our total career, that it is all too easy to overlook it. Yet it is a process which can make or break a career..." To help my students become more perceptive to this process and to demonstrate some of the methods and effects of socialization, I developed the following experiential exercise.

EXERCISE

The exercise is adapted from R. A. Schmuck's "Intergroup Exercise: Planners and Operators" [7]. Other exercises which allow one group to plan and instruct another group on a task would probably work just as well. I used Schmuck's exercise because I was familiar with it.

Objectives

There are four major objectives of this exercise. They are:

1. To provide participants with an understanding of the characteristics of the socialization process.
2. To provide participants with an understanding of the methods used to socialize an individual or group.

3. To demonstrate to the participants the relationship between the socialization process and group norms, values, conformity, and social influence.

4. To demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of socialization.

Time Required

This exercise can be completed in 50 minutes, but that is without debriefing the exercise. It works best in a double period class or at least a 75 minute period class.

Materials Required

1. A set of planning instructions for each member of the Planning Staff. (See Appendix I)

2. A set of operating instructions for each member of the Operating Team. (See Appendix II)

3. A set of instructions for each Observer. These instructions should include one set of the planners' and one set of the operators' instructions. (See Appendix III)

4. One diagram of the puzzle and sixteen puzzle pieces which form the completed puzzle. (See Figure 1)

5. Five to seven participants who are not members of the class who will act as the operating team. You will need five to seven people for each planning team you have.

6. Two separate rooms are ideal, but one large room with some way to divide it will work.

7. Four 3" x 5" cards prepared as shown in Figure 2.

Group Size

If you have a large class, several planning teams of five to seven people can be operating at the same time with four to five observers for each planning team. If you have more than one planning team, you will also need an equal number of operating teams. This can be a problem since each operating team must be a group of strangers. Another method that works very well is to have one planning team perform the task with a larger number of observers. People seem to get just as much out of the exercise when they are acting as an observer as they do when participating on the planning staff.

Instructions

1. Divide the class into groups of five to seven people. Designate each subgroup as either a planning team or observers. NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: The strangers will function as the operators. They MUST be kept away from the planners so the socialization process does not start before you intended it to. I

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find that giving the strangers the other room number or having them report ten minutes later works well for maintaining this separation.

2. Each member of the planning team is given a copy of the Planning Instructions. The planners are also given the completed puzzle and the sixteen pieces of the puzzle are laid out on a table by the instructor. NOTE: In placing the pieces on the table the exact distribution is not crucial. The pieces should not have any labels or markings on them.

3. Review with the observers their role. I have found that it is important to tell the observers that they need to stay alert to the way the planners behave with one another, to watch their behavior when the new planners join the group, and to watch what happens when the planners call for the operators.

4. Review the planner's instructions with them and start the time.

5. Go to the room where the operating team is waiting. Choose two people and ask them to step outside and wait for further instructions.

6. Hand out the operating team's instructions to the remaining members and review the instructions with them.

7. Go out in the hall and give each of the individuals one of the Transfer-In cards. Insure that they understand when they are to join the planning team.

8. At 5 minutes and 20 minutes into the exercise give a Transfer-Out card to a member of the planning team. NOTE TO THE INSTRUCTOR: You will notice that the transfer-out cards are different types. This affects the way the new person is socialized into the group. Also it makes a difference who you give the Transfer-Out card to. If the person is the present leader of the group, it will cause a different reaction from the planners than if the person is playing an unimportant role in the group.

9. At 30 minutes, if not before, the planners must start briefing the operators. If the planners start briefing before 30 minutes, they may brief until 35 minutes into the exercise. At 35 minutes, stop the briefing and tell the operating team to begin assembling the puzzle. NOTES TO THE INSTRUCTOR: I usually give them five minutes to attempt to assemble the puzzle. I never tell the planning staff how long the operators will have unless they ask. They have never asked, but it does allow you the opportunity to discuss the need to obtain all constraining factors before making decisions. A key to success in this exercise is that the planners spend less time planning and more time briefing the operators. If the planners do this they will have time to socialize the operators and still pass on the instructions on how to assemble the puzzle. (So far, I have only had one group do this.) During the briefing stage watch that neither the planners nor the operators touch any puzzle pieces or use drawings or nonverbal gestures to describe the puzzle. The directions prohibit this, but the planners find it hard not to gesture or draw in the air.

DEBRIEFING THE EXERCISE

Depending on whether you have a 50 minute or double period class, the debriefing will be different.

50 Minute Class

1. During the remaining ten minutes of class time you can discuss the importance of socialization to an organization.

2. You can ask the observers to report on what they saw and discuss the importance of these behaviors to the organization.

3. This exercise also is a good one for a short experiential paper. I have asked my students who were planners to write papers on their reactions to the newcomers and why they handle each of them the way they did. I have also asked them to focus on the person who they felt did the best and worst job of socializing the others and to describe what behaviors they observed to make them think this person was either good or bad at socializing the newcomers or the operators. This topic also works well for the observers.

4. Another possibility is to assign a reading in socialization and then ask the student to react to the material in the reading in relation to his or her experience in the exercise.

Double Period Classes

After the exercise is over, it is a good idea to let the class take a break. You will find that during the break more socialization of the strangers will take place. Also if the operators did not finish the puzzle, the planners will show the operators how easy it was to put the puzzle together. The planners ignore the fact that just a few minutes before they couldn't explain the task to the operators. It is interesting to note that this act of doing the task for the operators also sends a socialization message. The message is "if you can't do the task, management will eventually do it for you." I have explored this idea in class and find that it helps the student see that socialization is truly a continuous process. Other areas to explore are:

1. Ask for reports from the observers, planners, and operators. I find it is interesting to first hear what the planners and operators thought was happening and then hear what the observers actually saw.

2. Here are some typical things that happen during the exercise. You may want to develop some questions from these examples to help the students see what they have just experienced.

a. There is considerable frustration in planning something which someone else has to carry out when you yourself are restricted from doing the operation. Often this frustration shows up in the socialization of the operators.

b. The time limit places pressure on the planners and affects the way the two newcomers are socialized.

c. Planning is a very seductive task which so absorbs the attention of the planners that they often forget about the operators. But while the planners have forgotten about the operators, the operators have not forgotten about the planners and the socialization process has already begun.

d. Planners frequently spend so much time planning the activity that they do not have sufficient time to socialize the operators into the group. Because of this, the operators usually start work with

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a set of anxieties and uncertainties which are detrimental to the task.

e. Planners frequently use written instructions, which are cumbersome and also send a socialization message of impersonalness.

f. While the operators are waiting they usually socialize themselves into a close-knit group, particularly if they wait for the full 30 minutes. Some operating teams have even selected a leader and set up their own organization. If this happens, when the planners call the operators in, it is interesting to see each group trying to socialize the other group into its structure. If one group doesn't finally give in, the performance of the task will not be completed except by chance.

g. The planners often ignore the first person to join their team since the person he or she is replacing has not left the group yet and consequently they do not seem to see a need for the new person. Because of this phenomena, the new person suffers communication underload but is still being socialized. The second person to join the group is quickly socialized since his predecessor left five minutes before he or she arrived. This person often suffers from communication overload. It is interesting to have each of these people comment on their feeling when they joined the group. This seems to help the class see the power of the socialization process.

This exercise is a fairly robust one. It will provide you and your class with many examples of organizational socialization to discuss now and throughout the semester.

APPENDIX I BRIEFING SHEET FOR THE PLANNING TEAM

When all the pieces from all four piles are properly assembled, they will form a large square containing an empty place in the middle. A sheet bearing a diagram of the completed puzzle is provided to your team.

YOUR TASK IS TO DO THE FOLLOWING:

1. Plan how the sixteen pieces distributed among you can be assembled to make the puzzle.
2. Decide on a plan for instructing your operating team to carry Out your plan for assembling the puzzle.
3. You may call the operating team and begin instructing them any time during the next thirty minutes.
4. The operating team must begin assembling the puzzle thirty-five minutes from now, and you are required to give them at least five minutes of instruction.

Before you start, READ THESE RULES:

DURING PLANNING:

1. Keep the pieces from each pile in the pile they are currently in.
2. Do not touch the pieces nor trade any with other persons, either now or during the instruction phase.
3. Do not assemble the square; that is the operator's job.
4. After the signal is given for the assembly to begin, you may not give any further instructions; stand back and observe.

APPENDIX II BRIEFING SHEET FOR THE OPERATING TEAM

1. Your team will have the responsibility of carrying out a task according to instructions given to you by your planning team.
2. Your task will begin thirty-five minutes from now.
3. Your planning team may call you in for instructions at any time during the next thirty minutes.
4. If they do not summon you during the next thirty minutes, you must report to them on your own initiative at the end of the thirty minutes.
5. You may send notes to the planners and they may send notes in reply.
6. Once you have begun your task, your planning team will not be allowed to give you any further instructions. Finish the assigned task as rapidly as possible.

APPENDIX III BRIEFING SHEET FOR THE OBSERVER

You will be observing an exercise on socialization. Watch how different people are socialized into (made a part of) the work group. The operators will be socialized differently than the two people who will be joining the planning team later. What differences do you see?

Also each of the individuals joining the planning team will be socialized differently. Why? Watch for the differences and be prepared to describe what you saw.

You have a copy of the instructions given to both the planners and the operators. THESE ARE FOR YOUR USE ONLY. DO NOT SHOW THEM TO THE PEOPLE INVOLVED IN THE EXERCISE.

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FIGURE 1
THE COMPLETED PUZZLE

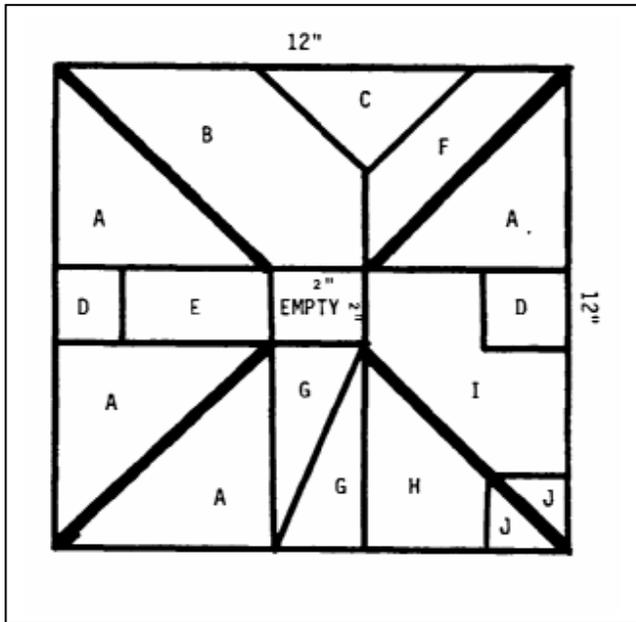


FIGURE 2
TRANSFER-IN AND TRANSFER-OUT CARDS

You have just received transfer notification. Leave the group in 10 minutes

NOTE: Once you leave the group, you will become an observer.

WARNING: If you make any input to the group after you depart, I will lower your grade by one letter grade for this class.
WARNING

+ Five Minute Transfer-Out Card

You have just received a short notice transfer. Leave the group now.

NOTE: Once you leave the group, you will become an observer.

WARNING: If you make any input to the group after you depart, I will lower your grade by one letter grade for this class.
WARNING

+ Twenty Minute Transfer-Out Card

You have just received transfer orders to join the planning team. Report in 5 minutes.

+ Five Minute Transfer-In Card

You have just received transfer orders to join the planning team. Report in 25 minutes.

+ Twenty Minute Transfer-In Card

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