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THE VALUE OF PRE-TEACHING IN ROLE PLAYING

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ABSTRACT

Pre-teaching or brief classroom instruction can be very valuable. This paper demonstrates this value through one specific role-playing situation. Then the paper considers other situations which could benefit from pre-teaching. Finally, students can participate in the pre-teaching.

INTRODUCTION

"Pre-teaching" involves brief classroom instruction intended to prepare students directly and operationally for a particular experience or exercise. This pre-teaching might take the form of a fifteen minute mini-lecture or a one-page handout listing points to keep in mind in participating in an exercise. The idea is not new, but deserves some direct considerations. Pre-teaching does not detract from or replace other forms of instruction, except for the brief minutes of classroom time expended.

"Old hands" at experiential methods probably have used pre-teaching in numerous situations. This abstract! paper asserts that pre-teaching can be quite valuable in some situations, and ought not be thought of as a casual, offhand matter, or as something which is optional.

This abstract/paper will demonstrate the value of pre-teaching in one specific situation, the termination interviews. Then other situations will be discussed briefly.

The termination interview usually is especially challenging to students for these reasons;

1. The termination interview is confused with the exit interview. Actually the termination interview simply informs an employee of termination and states the basic terms of separation. The exit interview comes later, if at all, and usually is conducted by a third party, such as a personnel representative.
2. The termination interview is primarily one-way communication, but inexperienced students often do not see this.
3. Various feelings of the person conducting the interview must be considered, including anxiety, regret, and guilt.
4. The communication is difficult and potentially very emotional.
5. The person being terminated may not realize the decision is final and may wish to argue or plead.
6. Approaches which "help" in other situations can be very dysfunctional in the termination situation. These approaches include in-depth, active listening, and extensive displays of caring and sympathy.

Since a workable role-playing case for the termination interview is available,¹ the termination situation offers a good illustration of the value of pre-teaching. This role-playing case involves multiple role-playing in triads, consisting of the terminating manager, the subordinate manager to be terminated, and an observer. Role switches are recommended and two or three plays are advisable. The manager to be terminated has long years of loyal service, is a friend of his/her "boss," and can be expected to have a hard time finding a new job. He/she is being terminated because of his/her unsatisfactory customer relations. As the reader might expect, the manager to be terminated disagrees with the interpretation of facts, and believes his/her customer relations are very appropriate. The role-playing proves quite challenging for virtually everyone who attempts it.

The author has developed some background information for students and instructor, and this information is presented here as an illustration.

Background Information for the Termination Interview (For Students)

The pink slip has long been a signal of employment termination. It can be quite a psychological blow to a person to hear this phrase: "Your services are no longer required." Naturally, the termination may cause desperate financial problems, too.

On the organization's side of the ledger, there are any number of situations in which termination--the pink slip--is necessary. From the perspective of an individual manager, there may be no choice in the matter. It may simply be the manager's job to pass along the bad news to the other person. The experience may be associated with anxiety, regret, and guilt.

Because many people have not had experience terminating an employee, some guidelines are offered:

1. The manager's major task is to be clear in letting the person know that he or she has really been terminated.
2. The other person may try to reverse the decision, but this is not possible. The manager can save unnecessary argument if the finality of the decision is made very clear.
3. The manager wishes to communicate the terms of the termination clearly, including the effective date, information about severance pay (if any), information about other benefits and rights, and other information.
4. While the manager may wish to help the person find a new job, that help could be postponed for now. The other person probably needs to absorb the fact of the termination for a while.
5. In short, the termination interview is primarily a one-way communication from the manager, in which he or she presents the facts and checks to see if the other person understands those facts.

¹ "The termination interview: the pink slip exercise," by Jack Mendleson, forthcoming in William Glueck and George Stevens, Cases and Exercises in Personnel, Second edition (Dallas, Texas: Business Publications, Inc., expected in 1982).

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6. The termination interview need not be lengthy. Ten minutes is probably enough time.

Background for Instructor (from Instructor's Manual)

This exercise has been conducted with five different classes or more at Arizona State University. The author, Professor Jack Mendleson, reports consistent success in building skill, generating discussion, and building awareness of the dynamics of the termination situation.

As instructor, you may wish to emphasize or supplement the six guidelines listed in the case. Some people flounder unnecessarily in the role of regional manager, because they cannot imagine being so "tough," or because they want to "help" so much. If we view the situation objectively, it is clearly not helpful to give the terminated individual any false cues or false hope.

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The primary value of this pre-teaching is to direct students away from unworkable approaches. There is no obvious value to "setting up" students to fail. In fact, before the development of the pre-teaching materials, all the role players in a particular class section have been known to fail. Experienced supervisors and managers in classes tend to agree with the six points presented above and to perform much better in this role-playing. Very interesting discussions of "theory and practice" emerge from this exercise. The value of the "theories" of supportiveness or consideration ordinarily will be affirmed by the class, but the situational issues will be seen more clearly.

What about pre-teaching in other situations? Pre-teaching seems especially important under any of the following circumstances:

1. where an obvious conflict is involved;
2. where heavy emotions are involved;
3. where the parties can be expected to differ about the facts;
4. where extensive negotiation is expected;
5. where "facts of organizational life" are assumed to be known. Some of these "facts" include performance appraisal practices, management by objectives, and job evaluation basics. Experienced students often assume the whole world to be the same as their experience, so some clarification before the exercise can be helpful;
6. where "bad news" must be given.

Pre-teaching is also a good way to digest some practical readings for the students. In the specified case of termination, a brief list of references is attached. This illustrates the kind of materials which might be helpful. It might not be feasible to have all students read all supplemental references, but it might be desirable to have selected students conduct focused literature research, and report it as pre-teaching before a particular exercise. The pre-teaching will provide very practical training experience for students. The other students could be asked to assess the usefulness of the pre-teaching after the exercise, using a semi-structured performance appraisal.

References for Termination Interview Role Playing

1. "The Art of Firing Someone Tactfully," Notes and Quotes, Number 380, February 1971.
2. Marilyn Machlowitz, "Getting Fired with Style," New York Times, August 14, 1977, Section 3, p. 1.
3. Jack Mendleson, "What's Fair Treatment for Terminated Employees," Supervisory Management, November 1974, pp. 25-34.
4. Alfred Slote, Termination: The Closing of Baker Plant (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).
5. Laurence J. Stybel, Managing Human Resource Termination, doctoral dissertation, College of Education, Harvard University, 1978.
6. "Taking the Sting Out of Being Fired," U. S. News and World Report, September 24, 1979, pp. 77-78.
7. "The Art of Firing People," International Management, May 1976, pp. 14-18.
8. Robert Westcott, "How to Fire an Executive," Business Horizons, April 1976, pp. 33-36.