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15.277 Special Seminar in Communications: Leadership and Personal Effectiveness Coaching
Fall 2008

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Leadership and Culture Activity

Activity Overview

Because so much of culture is not visible, we often act without a conscious thought about the values that might underlie our choices. To heighten our awareness of our culture and our ways of behaving as leaders, group members, managers, and employees today, we are asking you to reflect on and share your culture’s leadership behaviors.

Today’s exercise is to ask you to consider leadership behaviors that typify your culture—whether it is a country, a region, a company, or an industry.

Typical Activity Outcomes	Potential “Core Connections”
<p>Strengthen your ability to see and think about culture</p> <p>Make more distinctions about cultural norms</p> <p>Relate culture to leadership</p> <p>Teach others about your cultural experience</p> <p>Learn more about your leadership choices</p>	<p>Prepares for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15.280 Sessions on Culture and communication • Internships and jobs in new industries and countries • Working with international teams • Job interviews • Starting your own company, team, organization

Activity Materials

- Facilitator Guide
- Participant handout “Cultural concepts.” Questions are taken from: *Beyond Experience*. Ed. by Theodore Gochenour. Boston, MA: Intercultural Press, 1993, pp. 157. ISBN: 9781877864247.
- Participant handout: Mid-term feedback on 15.277

Activity Time Frame

Total Time: 50 minutes

Activity Schedule:

- 5 min: Activity Introduction**
- 10 min: Greetings**
- 5 - 8 min: Preparation Sheet**
- 20 min: Sharing leadership characteristics**
- 5 min: Summary**
- 5 mins: Feedback**

Setting Up The Activity

Be sure that the group has room to write and then to practice speaking.

Safety Considerations

Help the group explore these themes with each other, noting that they have a wealth of untapped knowledge about culture within the group. Some distinctions might be delicate, for example, basic beliefs about people's willingness to work with or without strong oversight. Differing sources of authority (family, age, seniority, expertise, friendship) raise questions of leadership capability. You may need to encourage expressing ideas about culture and asking questions about this without casting judgment.

Facilitation Instructions

Step 1: Introducing the Activity

(Say the following in your own words):

As you know, culture is largely invisible. It is like the air we breathe, sustaining and pervasive, often without our realizing it. To help us analyze leadership behaviors and to understand our own leadership choices, we want to explore the influence of culture on leadership. Leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin. As groups are formed, a leader who successfully leads will influence the behavior that comes to be known to the group as the norm. Part of the role of the leader is to perceive when elements of a shared culture are dysfunctional and to be able to manage change in a way that helps the group survive.

Our task today is to heighten our awareness of those choices by exploring familiar cultures. These might be obvious to us from our country of origin. Or, even from work organizations of various sizes; no particular size is required for a subunit or a unit to form a "culture". Even your study groups are at some stage in evolving a culture.

To help you explore culture, we are going to begin with a simple exercise in business "greetings" and then ask you to share with each other your views of leadership within a particular cultural frame.

Step 2: Overview the Activity Schedule

Overview the goals and schedule with the team members:

The purpose of this activity is to learn more about each other's cultures, to learn about the cultural influences on leadership behavior and to heighten our awareness of cultural concepts.

1. *Select a culture. (Choose a country, a business, an industry, a family)*
2. *Share with each other the best way to greet when meeting someone new in that setting.*
3. *Using the preparation sheet, review some cultural concepts.*
4. *Recall and develop illustrative stories about a leader (ideally it should be a real leader, although they might tell stories about fictional leaders. The story should portray one or some of the cultural concepts. It need not be the same culture as the one in the greeting.*
5. *Share your story about a leader within the selected culture*
6. *Relate stories to culture*

Step 3. Introduce the “greetings” activity

Think about a culture you have been a member of and how they like to be greeted in a business meeting. Give them an example—here's one of mine. [For example, I once worked in Finland. Their greetings took place at some distance in my perception--about 2 and 1/2 feet apart from the person being introduced--and were what I would call very formal in the use of titles and full names.]

Assume that your group wants to do business with that culture. Teach your group how best to meet someone in a business setting preparatory to doing business together.

Give them a few minutes to come up with an example and have each person teach the group how to “greet” in a business meeting.

Step 4. Prepare to identify cultural characteristics of leaders in your culture

Using the handout, review these cultural concepts and prepare to tell the group about leadership characteristics in a particular culture.

1. Think about a culture where you have observed leadership behavior. It could be a family setting, a business, a community—any organization of almost any size, even a jazz band.
2. Think about a leader you would like to describe. What does a leader in your organization do to motivate, to reward, to punish, to manage crises? (For example, holding off-site meetings to prepare new business strategies to cope with change. Another leader, a dean in a university cancelled faculty parking spaces if they did not

attend his meetings. A president of a major bank had an open-door policy; but he was so cold and distant, everyone knew to avoid going through that door uninvited.)

3. Come up with several examples that illustrate the culture and the prescribed behavior.

Facilitation Notes:

1. The handout reviews some key cultural concepts. The teams do not need to answer the questions. They should simply review concepts to help relate their stories to culture.
2. Remind them that culture shows up in relationships, in any interaction among people, especially when it comes to difficult periods as well as how people get hired, motivated and promoted.
3. Encourage them to have several examples to share. [For example, in one organization, all decisions were made based on position. In that same organization, the only people invited to meetings were people in power.]
4. Encourage them to draw on their work experiences or their home and family experiences.

Step 5. Share with the team your examples of leadership within a particular culture

Step 4: Lead a Debrief of the Activity

1. Why did you select the leader you chose to discuss?
2. How effective was the leader in supporting the organization?
3. What did you learn about how you would want to lead, and why?
4. What did you learn about culture from your teammates?

Step 5: Summarize the Activity

As you work together in this team and continue to form teams at Sloan as well as begin to work on your own projects where you are in a leadership role, these ideas might help you assess the kinds of cultures you would like to form.

Furthermore, in the OP team project, you will be asked to observe and report on an organization's cultural norms.

Again, many of you will move into new organizations this summer or next year in a new job. These organizations will have cultural norms. We hope to make you more aware of these norms, both to help you recognize them and to negotiate them in the job search and also in the job itself.

Our goal today is to heighten your ability to discern what values and beliefs are operating through the behavior you observe.

Coming up: Managing conflict.