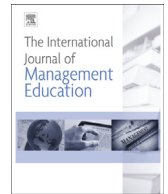


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Research Notes

Preparing potential leaders: Facilitating a learning experience on LMX and fairness in the workplace



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ABSTRACT

The topic of ethics and its relation to leadership is a pedagogical concern for organizations and educators alike. However, current empirical and instructional approaches to leadership still lack a critical perspective on the topic of fairness. We take an initial step as a response to this gap in management education by introducing a learning activity focused on leader-member exchange (LMX) and its implications for fairness in the workplace. This proposed pedagogical approach incorporates a classroom-based game to emphasize two critical psychological strategies for learning: emotional learning and depth of processing. We hope that this pedagogical approach and emphasis on these two learning strategies will contribute to management education by 1) responding to recent calls to critically appraise and redesign the manner in which we currently teach leadership, particularly as it relates to humanizing the concept and highlighting its workplace fairness components, 2) bringing to light two critical learning strategies known to facilitate the commitment of new information to memory, 3) exposing students to a facet of leadership they are likely to experience in their first professional entry-level positions, and 4) facilitating a discussion of leadership more broadly.

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1. Introduction

"I wanted to let you know I enjoyed a game you and another individual introduced one evening in [name removed]'s classroom Training and Development ... I know being in the out crowd is never fun and it made many people think."

While business schools continue to make strides in experiential learning (Finch, Peacock, Lazdowski, & Hwang, 2015; Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) and holistic approaches to business education grow in popularity (Caza, Brower, & Wayne, 2015), companies across the United States and around the world remain critical of millennial students' capacity to handle 'real' workplace scenarios (Fisher, 2015; Mulhere, 2015; Saiidi, 2015). Professionals continue to report that today's American graduates in particular are ill suited to fill necessary roles (Lund & Thomas, 2012), having neither the experience nor the

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proper education. Other countries such as the UK (Stroller, 2016), Australia (Whitwell, 2012) and India (Kannan, 2008) share similar concerns. While it may be tempting to place the blame on other fields in business education, the truth is that HR practitioners are most concerned with recent college graduates' workplace management skills taught in management education (AAC&U, 2015). Chief among these is leadership.

One area of concern in leadership education is its lack of attention to fairness. This is especially problematic given the millennial generation's hyper awareness of social justice issues (Fox, 2012) and the continued incidents of unfair leadership in the workplace (Dishman, 2015; Kostigen, 2009). Recent pedagogical research insists that management educators do not do enough to expose students to critical perspectives of leadership, neglect classroom discussions on issues of power, influence, and authority in the workplace (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). Instead, leadership pedagogy continues to limit leadership development to a 'set of skills' (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015), often focused on traits and behaviors of charismatic white men (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Jackson & Parry, 2011). Such a limited approach, while helpful in understanding the management styles of successful historical leaders (Hogan & Kaiser, 2005), fails to encompass the emerging issues faced by a diverse range of new leaders and subordinates in today's workplace.

In response to these pedagogical concerns, we propose a learning activity focused on leader-member exchange (LMX) and its fairness implications from the point of view of the subordinate. This proposed point of view relies on two critical psychological strategies for learning: emotional learning (Armony & LeDoux, 1997; Markowitsch & Staniloiu, 2011) and depth of processing (Craik & Tulving, 1975). It is our hope that this pedagogical approach along with these two strategies will contribute to management education by 1) responding to recent calls to appraise and redesign the manner in which we currently teach leadership, particularly as it relates to humanizing the concept and highlighting its fairness, 2) bringing to light two critical learning strategies known to facilitate the commitment of new information to memory, 3) exposing students to a facet of leadership they are likely to experience in their first professional entry-level positions, and 4) facilitating a discussion of leadership more broadly.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss leader-member exchange and its fairness regarding the treatment of subordinates. Next, we present the psychological learning strategies used in creating the learning activity presented herein. Following this set-up, we then use the latter part of the paper to introduce the game, describe the materials needed, and outline the facilitation steps. We end by reflecting on the effectiveness of the game, discussing lessons learned through replication, and suggesting useful variations of the game to expose other facets of the leader-follower relationship.

2. Literature review

2.1. Leader-member exchange

Following its inception over 40 years ago (e.g. Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975) LMX theory has evolved from an alternative leadership style to a process between leader and follower, ultimately resulting in a high-quality relationship based on social exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Most recent conceptualizations of the process characterize the initial interaction between leader and follower as a 'stranger' phase, characterized by low trust and uncertainty (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Scandura & Pellegrini, 2008). This stage is frustrating to many. New hires want to be acknowledged for who they are and judged based on their strengths. While strength-based leadership is an extremely effective form of leadership (Rath & Conchie, 2008), the LMX relationship begins before strengths and weaknesses are fully discovered by the leader (Scandura & Pellegrini, 2008). Because this 'stranger' phase is where many, if not all, of our undergraduate students will find themselves at their first place of professional employment post-college, it is important that leadership education begins here as well, to illustrate the assignment to an 'in' or 'out' group as a relative newcomer to the organization. Unfortunately, there is a lack of experiential activities related to LMX, despite the theory's prevalence in the management literature (for one exception, see Graen, Hui, & Taylor, 2006). Instead, exercises to date have focused on teaching implicit leadership theories (e.g., Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011), leadership concepts (e.g., leadership skills, traits, and behaviors; Comer, 2001; Hess, 2007; Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall, 1999; Powley & Taylor, 2014), and leadership styles (e.g., Eriksen, 2009). However, none of these exercises seem to touch on the fairness that come into play when a leader categorizes employees based on demographics, gender, race and 'liking.' Further, current exercises lack the viewpoint of the subordinate and instead focus on who/what the leader should be/act/feel. In so doing, they neglect an important fundamental of leadership, one that is particularly important to LMX – the role of subordinates.

Thus, to our knowledge this is the first exercise of its kind that uses actual scenarios with LMX implications to facilitate the emotional reactions associated with subordinate membership in the out-group or in-group. We contend that the game presented here responds to calls for more critical, 'messy' leadership dialogues that include mention of leaders and followers and asks students to 'dig deeper' (Collinson & Tourish, 2015) to self-identify with the real-world experiences provided in the game. The game allows students to experience how small workplace events, such as leaving early, showing up late, excelling on a special assignment, or even hitting a homerun in intramural softball, could change the nature of the leader-follower relationship – in either a positive or negative direction – for both themselves and their fellow coworkers. Exposing students to potential workplace equities and inequities is an important part of management education, and the discussion that naturally occurs as part of the game surfaces these issues of fairness, diversity, power and politics. In so doing, the game creates awareness of the leader-follower relationship and the rifts and milestones that can occur therein, and takes a step, albeit small, towards a more well-rounded consideration of what experiences students may face when they participate in an

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