

Experiential Exercise

Understanding Power Dynamics

Purpose

For students to experience the reality of power due to organizational factors

Time

30–45 minutes

Instructions:

1. *Creation of groups:* Each student is to turn in a dollar bill (or similar value of currency) to the instructor and students are then divided into three groups based on criteria given by the instructor, assigned to their workplaces, and instructed to read the following rules and tasks. The money is divided into thirds, giving two-thirds of it to the top group, one-third to the middle group, and none to the bottom group.
2. *Conduct exercise:* Groups go to their assigned workplaces and have 30 minutes to complete their tasks.

Rules

- (a) Members of the top group are free to enter the space of either of the other groups and to communicate whatever they wish, whenever they wish. Members of the middle group may enter the space of the lower group when they wish but must request permission to enter the top group's space (which the top group can refuse). Members of the lower group may not disturb the top group in any way unless specifically invited by the top. The lower group does have the right to knock on the door of the middle group and request permission to communicate with them (which can also be refused).
- (b) The members of the top group have the authority to make any change in the rules that they wish, at any time, with or without notice.

Tasks

- (a) *Top group:* To be responsible for the overall effectiveness and learning from the exercise and to decide how to use its money.
 - (b) *Middle group:* To assist the top group in providing for the overall welfare of the organization and to decide how to use its money.
 - (c) *Bottom group:* To identify its resources and to decide how best to provide for learning and the overall effectiveness of the organization.
3. *Debriefing.* Each of the three groups chooses two representatives to go to the front of the class and discuss the following questions:
 - (a) Summarize what occurred within and among the three groups.
 - (b) What are some of the differences between being in the top group versus being in the bottom group?
 - (c) What can we learn about power from this experience?
 - (d) How accurate do you think this exercise is in reflecting the reality of resource allocation decisions in large organizations?

Source: This exercise is adapted from L. Bolman and T. E. Deal, *Exchange 3*, no. 4 (1979), pp. 38–42. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

Class Exercise:

1. This exercise may create some significant anxiety or even rebellion in the lower group. Be prepared to help them keep calm until the end, without giving away the exercise.
2. One of the major discussion/sticking points will be the reality of the exercise. In all likelihood, some students will argue it is not real and that there is not that much imbalance in power. Do not argue with the students. Turn the question back to the class and ask students if anyone has had an experience with a similar disparity of power. If you are lucky, some students will perceive this disparity with the administration or faculty of your institution, which will provide fodder for an interesting discussion.
3. Key is that students understand that if either the perception or reality of such a disparity of power exists, employees will feel the same frustration they did. How can they, individually, minimize the possibility of this disparity when they begin working, with their employees?

Ethical Dilemma

Does “Aping” Others Work? Is it Ethical?

You often see children playing the game of mimicking the body movements of others. As it turns out, adults play the game, too, even when they aren't aware of it.

Researchers have been studying the science and art of persuasion for decades, due to its obvious importance. Have you noticed how you click with some people almost immediately, whereas with others you feel ill at ease from the onset? As you might imagine, the “social music” that happens between two people upon meeting has important implications for the future of the social relationship, including whether there is any future to the relationship at all.

One key element to how well two strangers bond is mimicry, or how well one party imitates the verbal and body gestures of another. One study suggested that when a mimic matched a subject's body posture (upright, relaxed, or slumped) and position of the arms and legs (legs or arms crossed, hands folded)—in a subtle way, of course—the subject behaved more prosocially toward the mimic (was two to three times more likely to pick up a pen for those who mimicked than for those who did not) and, after the experiment, reported greater liking for the mimic.

In another study, marketing researchers found that if the mimicker matched the body movements of the target person, with a 1- to 2-second delay, the target person was much more inclined to buy the product the mimicker was selling. So if the target person crossed her legs, the mimic waited 1 or 2 seconds and did the same. If she touched her face, the mimic waited again and then did the same. Though none of the target persons picked up on the mimicry, by the end of the short interview they were much more likely to consume a new drink being offered, to predict the drink would be successful, and to indicate they would buy it in the future.

Why does mimicry appear to be so effective? One neuroscientist suggested, “When you're being mimicked in a good way, it communicates a kind of pleasure, a social high you're getting from the other person, and I suspect it activates the areas of the brain involved in sensing reward.” Moreover, mirroring another person's movement may, in some unconscious but automatic way, trigger a sense that the person is just like us, and thus deserving of the Golden Rule.

1. Can you recall situations in which mimicry, or the lack of it, affected your bonding with a stranger?

Answer: The answer to this question from students will depend on their ability to recall an incident and the feelings their experience during the event. It is most likely that students recalling an event involving mimicry will express a warmer feeling toward the person than they may recall feelings toward someone who did not use mimicry.

2. If the research findings are true, it suggests that, in cold calls and other first contacts in a business setting, you can achieve an advantage by mimicking

the movements of the target person. What do you think of the ethics of doing this? How would you feel if a stranger did it consciously to bond with you?

Answer: The answer to these questions will be framed by the student's ethic. If he or she has a strong feeling against manipulation, then he or she is likely to find the mimicry concept to be unacceptable.

3. Will the findings presented here affect how you approach your initial contact with strangers? Why or why not?

Answer: Again, response will depend on the student's personal ethic.

Sources: Based on M. Iacoboni, "Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons," *Annual Review of Psychology* 60, no. 1 (2009), pp. 653–670; B. Carey, "You Remind Me of Me," *New York Times* (February 12, 2008), pp. D1, D6; and R. J. Tanner, R. Ferraro, T. L. Chartrand, J. R. Bettman, and R. Van Baaren, "Of Chameleons and Consumption: The Impact of Mimicry on Choice and Preferences," *Journal of Consumer Research* 34, no. 6 (2008), pp. 754–766.

Class Exercise

1. Divide the class into groups of three.
2. Assign one student to be a shopper buying a new watch. Assign one student to be a salesperson who uses mimicry and another who does not.
3. In each group flip a coin to determine which salesperson will go first.
4. Have the students role play the buying event with the first salesperson.
5. Ask the buyer to make notes about how he or she felt during the event.
6. Then switch to the other salesperson.
7. Again ask the buyer to make notes about his or her feelings during the event.
8. Compare notes among all the buyers in the class.
9. Were differences found in the type of reaction the buyers had for the type of salesperson?