

USING AUTHENTIC LEADER DILEMMAS TO TEACH MICRO-INFLUENCE MAKING

Abstract

Designing learning experiences that mimic real-life contexts has always been a challenge for leadership educators. As a result, many educators in leadership courses rely on studies of leadership perspectives, self-assessment activities, and textbook case analysis. However, many educators also successfully design micro-level processes and interactions that offer students the opportunity to experience the dynamics of power and influence whereby they practice leadership. Others explore the daunting challenges of placing students in various organizations to practice leadership. This latter type of practicing leadership is often full of challenges because of the reluctance of organizations to allow practicing students in decision making processes. In this paper, I present a two-week teaching segment in which leader dilemmas are used as inputs for practicing leadership in micro-level processes. The segment is designed in such a way that it mimics real life group dynamics, problem solving, and decision dilemmas. The objective is to provide a context wherein students practice micro-influence making as they experience the complexity of group life and, at the same time, learn to reflect on their learning, emotion, and the potential capacity to lead and follow.

Introduction

One of the challenges in teaching leadership knowledge and skills is the limited opportunity to apply theory into practice. Bringing real life dynamics into the classroom is often time taking and demanding. As a result, teaching of leadership often emphasizes theories primarily through lectures, personality assessments, and case studies of CEOs (Ferris, 1998; Antonacopoulou, & Bento, 2004), and such a practice does not fully reflect the complexity and dynamics of leadership (Doyle & Smith, 1999). Instructors often resort to using hypothetical organizations, groups and leaders in order to engage students in theory application. Such hypothetical situations may be effective in deepening students' knowledge of leadership, but have limitations in developing their capacity to lead or follow. In response to the

calls for a more meaningful and authentic learning experiences (McDermott, 1994), educators have introduced experiential games, simulations, role plays, dyadic tasks, and group tasks. While there are great examples of exercises on decision making, perspectives of leadership, group dynamics, conflict resolution (see *Journal of Management Education*, *Management Teaching Review*, and *Journal of Leadership Education*), few exist on followership, influence making, and power relations.

In this paper, I describe a leader dilemma-based learning of influence process that requires multiple sessions. The leader dilemma-based teaching of leadership constitutes a course segment because a period of two weeks is needed to integrate various tasks and familiarize students with core concepts. I

use “segment” to refer to a coherent unit of learning having its own learning objectives, assessment, tasks (exercise), activities, and sessions carefully designed to meet one (or more) course objectives. The teaching segment is part of a foundational undergraduate leadership course, and it has been implemented four times in the last two years.

Although the teaching segment is most suitable to teach influence making, it can be integrated into other teaching segments intended to teach various core leadership concepts, such as leader agency, follower agency, authority, power, leader-follower relations, and group leadership. I have used this teaching segment at various stages of a course, and the final weeks of a semester are found to be more beneficial partly because it is the time when students have already become familiar with core leadership concepts, terms, and metacognitive procedures.

I first introduce the leadership topic (s) taught during this teaching segment and its significance in foundational leadership courses. Next, I present my theoretical rationale and design principles underpinning my procedure. Then, I describe the teaching segment focusing on the pedagogical procedure (including tasks and activities), objectives, and the outcomes. Finally, I make some suggestions for leadership educators intending to adapt the material to their own contexts.

Micro-influence Making

Influence is a core concept in most foundational leadership courses. Most definitions of leadership present leading as an influence process (Yukl & Fleet, 1992). Influence as a social, psychological, and political process has been well documented (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Ferris, Perrewé, Daniels, Lawong, & Holmes, 2017). The literature on leadership, particularly transformational leadership, emphasizes influence. For example, one of the four core elements of the transformational leadership theory as proposed by Burn's (1978) is called “idealized influence.” Other scholars (Falbe and Yukl, 1992; Kipnis, Schmidt, &

Wilkinson, 1965; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Yukl & Chavez, 2002; Yukl, Lepsinger, & Lucia, 1991) have also explicated the notion of influence and its relevance in practicing leadership. Following the growing interest in followership and relational dynamics in leadership, it is also inevitable that influence gains some traction.

Unlike other topics of leadership, teaching influence poses some challenges. Some of these challenges relate to schema and metacognition (Sullivan & Durso, 1984). Having schema of the construct of influence is difficult because of its abstractness and the infrequency with which people talk about it. Second, our terminological repertoire itself, is limited to fully explicate influence as an essential leadership process or manifestation. These challenges have implications for concept (influence as a concept) encoding, retention, and carrying out metacognitive activities (Hopton, Christie, & Barlow, 2012; Hurwitz, 2017).

In the context of leadership, the foundational understanding of influence includes the concept (what we mean by “influence”), level (e.g., whether it is at the level of organization, group, or individual), direction (e.g., whether it is upward or downward), approaches, and factors affecting influence making. It is also necessary to emphasize the similarity or differences between influence and other conceptual cognates, such as power and authority. In this paper, I use the word “micro-influence” to refer to the process whereby people influence one another in dyadic or small group interactions.

Leader Dilemmas as Inputs for Engagement

According to Hoy and Miskel (2005), “a dilemma arises when one is confronted with decision alternatives in which any choice sacrifices some valued objective in the interest of other objectives” (p. 421). A leadership dilemma is a situation that arises out of alternatives that equally (or nearly equally) sacrifice something in the group or organization. Any decision has consequences, some expected and others unexpected. Whichever way the leader acts, there

is likely to be an uncomfortable consequence for individuals, groups, or organizations involved. This can create indecisiveness on the part of the leaders until they act definitely to resolve the situation which will not go away unless it is dealt with thoroughly (Cardno, 2007).

According to Cardno (2007), leaders should learn how to confront dilemmas. Such learning includes overcoming avoidance and attempting resolution, learning the skills of productive reasoning, using the skills of reflection in action, and creating a dilemma management culture. Such capability can be provided within the pedagogical epistemology that he refers to as the “praxis of dilemma management.”

Leader dilemma scenarios are used in the course segment that are being introduced in this paper. The dilemmas emerged from students’ own stories and were supplemented with additional information obtained by the instructor. The underlying issues are real, but the characters, their action, and processes are recreated to suit the purpose of the sequence of lessons included in the course segment.

Creating a Context for Student Engagement

In order to create an organizational or social context for student engagement in dealing with leader dilemmas, I utilized the concept of group dynamics (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Waggerman, 1995). Group dynamics focuses on a system of behaviors and processes occurring within a social group. The major group dynamics insights applied include:

- individual members enter groups with their own rational and non-rational needs, and employ defense mechanisms in order to tolerate the tensions of group life. The group and its leader become a container for group members’ projections, and the group takes on a life of its own as a result (Shapiro & Carr, 2012).

- groups sometimes perform better and other times worse than the sum of their individual members. Because differentiation of selves is a crucial moderator, it is important to (i) emphasize shared common identity and promoting emotional bonds; and ii) make group members take increasingly differentiated roles that improve performance through specialization, moral responsibility, and efficiency. Barriers of group effectiveness (e.g., social loafing) are linked to submerging the individual self in the group (Baumeister, Ainsworth & Vohs, 2016).

The group dynamics framework laid a conceptual ground for subsequent thoughts that led to enacting small-group interactions. Group process as an important social arrangement and a relation building avenue is a good context for learning leadership. Similarly, since small-group interactions pose task and relation related challenges, the opportunity for deep learning is significant. Additionally, small group interactions offer authentic experiences in which motives, agency, power, and identity manifest in their full complexity. With this basic assumption, I proceeded to set my teaching segment objectives on micro-influence processes although other leadership topics, such as decision-making, conflict resolution, relation building, uncertainty reduction and self-disclosure, power dynamics, role shifting (being able to lead and follow as the situation demands), and work avoidance, and defense mechanisms can be practiced. In the following sections, I will describe the design principles and classroom procedures.

The Design Principles

The design was informed by the social constructionist epistemology that the meaningfulness of an experience is based on the opportunity for reflection and collective sense making process. Students make several decisions that allow them to construct

meaning rather than discover pre-determined meanings. In order to create a classroom experience that allows students to construct meanings of leading, following, influence, and decision making, I made four design considerations.

The first design consideration was creating a learning experience that mimics real-life situations. I sought an experience in which students explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the student (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino, 1999). My basic assumption was that students are more likely to be interested in what they learn, more motivated to learn new concepts and skills, and better prepared to succeed if the learning experience mirrors real-life contexts. I sought such authenticity both in the process and content. I constructed the leader dilemma scenarios based on what my students already know reasonably well and what had resonance for their student life. Instructor-construed leader dilemmas, when built on students own lived experiences, often offer more relevant challenging scenarios than textbook cases. The process was authentic for three principal reasons. First, the issues that constitute the leader dilemmas emerged from the students own stories. Second, the group arrangement and facilitation (e.g. using several seminar rooms, the instructor's facilitation, the extended group life) resembles team meetings in organizations. Third, the dilemmas, unlike many textbook cases that tend to be leader-centric, sought to show both power relations and the multi-directionality of influence flows. In general, in designing the learning environment, an alignment was sought between the context in which learning is presented in the formal setting and the real-life setting in which that knowledge would be called upon. A lesson's authenticity, as some argue (e.g., Bransford, Vye, Kinzer, & Risko, 1990 Young, 1993) lies with the fact that the dilemmas reflect the nature of real problems as being complex, ill-structured, collaborative, containing multiple perspectives and offering multiple paths and solutions. Others suggest (e.g., Jonassen, 1999) that an authentic activity may

simply be one that is personally meaningful to the student—that is engaging and relevant in a way that assists them in their own meaning-making. Others emphasize engaging students in cognitive processes that reflect the real-world counterpart (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996). This would involve student in the same types of cognitive challenges as are present in the work environment, but not necessarily in exactly the same tasks an expert practitioner would perform (Savery & Duffy, 1996).

The second was the principle of optimum challenge (Fink, 2013; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The leader dilemmas were carefully written up, so that they would be challenging and, at the same time, exciting. With various variables built into the dilemma scenarios, they were intended to require higher level thinking and minimize the possibility of arriving at easy solutions or straight forward outcomes. The dilemmas were designed to reflect real-world relevance or authenticity. This assumption was made based on the belief that learning rises to the level of authenticity when it engages students actively with abstract concepts, facts, and formulae inside a realistic context that mimics reality (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1988).

The third principle was inducement of a reasonable level of anxiety. People engage well when there is an optimum level of anxiety and curiosity (Teigen, 1994). To that effect, the group leader dilemmas were reasonably complex, necessitating deeper negotiation of meaning. It was expected that whenever there is anxiety, conflict is inevitable. Conflict or anxiety inducing emotions were expected because of the ambitious or heightened demands that students should solve the dilemmas in the cases within a given class time.

Fourth, the engagement was deliberately designed to necessitate micro-influence making. In other words, resolving the dilemmas required, not only meaning negotiations, but also influencing each other for better participation in the intra-group transaction and interaction. Group members were not only required to lead each other, but also to be productive

followers.

The Classroom Procedure

The teaching segment needs at least five sessions (three small-group and two whole-class), and I will describe the procedure using my own context in which a three-credit course is scheduled in two sessions, each with a 75-minute class time. I arranged the small-group sessions to last about 65 minutes because ten minutes are devoted to provide general instructions before students break out to seminar rooms. The general instructions describe the activities (background to the leader dilemmas, expected outcomes, and given time). I usually have about twenty students in my assigned teaching section, and four to five small groups emerge out of each section. As a result, I am able to use the five small seminar rooms available in my school. I usually limit each small group size to 5 students.

First Session (65 minutes, small-group session): This is the first breakout session in which students begin to work in small groups. Students spend the entire session learning about one another and begin to build trust. In this session, they undertake four distinct tasks that involve them in setting questions for uncertainty reduction conversation. I draw insights from the theory of uncertainty reduction to design the four tasks. The theory asserts that, when interacting, people need information about the other in order to reduce their uncertainty. In gaining this information people are able to predict the other's behavior and resulting actions, all of which, according to the theory, is crucial in the development of any relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Turner & West, 2010). Additionally, students help each other understand the format of the leader dilemmas.

Second Session (65 minutes, small-group session): This is the second break out to begin to engage in the first leader dilemmas scenario (see Appendix B). Groups essentially do three things during this

session: solve the dilemmas in the leader dilemmas scenario, prepare a written report, and prepare slides for their oral report. Although group relation is not expected to be a significant barrier, because groups already had a session before, the task of reading the dilemma scenario, identifying and analyzing the dilemmas in the scenario, and deliberating on a solution is assumed to be a slow process. Students may get bogged down in the procedural details as they attempt to discern the dilemmas. At this time, the role of the instructor is to anticipate such a challenge, move from room to room quickly, and answer students' procedural questions. Too much input by the instructor may simplify the tasks, counteracting the original intent to put the process at an optimum challenge. It is normal to observe a chaotic beginning in group process.

Third Session (75 minutes, whole-class session). All groups present both their written and oral reports. The class and I ask the presenting groups questions to help them further clarify their solutions. After all groups present their work, I facilitate a debriefing discussion on their experiences. During the debriefing, I ask them the following (or similar) questions:

1. What challenged you the most as a member in your group? Would you describe your role as a leader or a follower or both?
2. How would you describe your anxiety or discomfort, if any, in your effort to persuade others towards a position?
3. Could you recall the threads of ideas that led to the solutions with which you came up?
4. How would you describe each member's influence in the buildup to the solution?

Groups usually focus on the issues and problems in the case scenario. They also exhibit a very cautious behavior as they move from a small-group interaction to a whole-class environment. The influence process may not be evident in the whole-class interaction. The role of the instructor is to ask questions that help

surface the small-group behavior during the whole-class debriefing. It is often useful to relate what one group says with what another group says to generate inter-group transaction.

The debriefing, which begins after all small groups complete oral presentation, also focuses on surfacing blind spots that are ignored during small-group sessions. It is also an opportunity for me to refocus their attention to group relation and micro-influence because it is common for students to focus more on issues—the dilemmas in the given scenario—than their own motives and behaviors as group members.

Fourth Session (65 minutes, small-group session). For the third time, the class breaks out to work on the second leader dilemma scenario (see Appendix C). This session follows the same pattern as Session Two. The more students work as a team, the more cohesive their relation is expected to be, and they are expected to work more smoothly than the second small-group session. As an instructor, I shift my attention from providing inputs geared towards group tasks to inputs focusing on leadership practices. Careful observations of each small group's dynamics, particularly turn-taking behaviors and persuasion approaches, is necessary to raise their awareness during the whole-class debriefing time. Examples of critical incidents from the small-group sessions, if available, are useful to explain influence making.

Fifth Session (75 minutes, whole-class session). This session follows the same pattern as Session Three. This last session is an opportunity to consolidate learning and connect theory and practice. In particular, the debriefing should focus on the following questions:

- What are the most frequent approaches to making influences?
- What influence patterns did you notice?
- Is there any challenge to making a certain type of influence?
- Do you recall any moment during the

group interaction that you think the most effective influence was made? Or a moment when an influence attempt noticeably failed?

- Do small groups have anything in common as far as micro-influence making is concerned?
- Can the lessons be extrapolated to business organizations that rely on team work?

Reflections and Feedback

Reflection and feedback are integral to this teaching segment. Three written reflections are required by each student. Two of them, called reflection on self, are submitted following each cycle of small- and whole-group sessions. Limited to two pages, each student reflects on his or her group behavior based on a set of pre-determined questions that draw students' attention to blind spots, challenges, emotions, anxiety, and level of productivity (see Appendix D).

The third, called reflection on system, is submitted one week after all small- and whole-group sessions are completed (see Appendix E). Limited to four pages, each student reflects on the interdependence among self, group, and system. Students use various resources to write this reflection paper, including the reflections on self, scenario descriptions, and feedbacks provided during whole-class debriefings. I encourage students to reflect more deeply than they do in the previous self-reflections, and critique their own blind spots, appreciate others' contributions, and examine the system (the class as a whole) in which all of these activities happen. This helps them create awareness about organization as a system, where individuals, groups, and subsystems co-exist.

Both the reflections on self and the reflection on system are grounded on the principle of reflective practice (Schon, 1983). Reflective practice requires

attention to every facet, applying practical theories, and being reflexive. The underlying belief in using reflection is that experience alone does not necessarily lead to learning. Rather, a deliberate reflection on experience deepens understanding and generates sufficient self-groundings on practice (Bolton, 2010; Loughran, 2002).

Feedback, another integral element in the process, is continuously provided to direct focus on behaviors that matter more. Not only do I give feedback during small-group presentations, I also spend a considerable amount of time responding to individual written reflections. By focusing on micro-influence making, I encourage them to relate core leadership concepts (e.g., leader-follower relations) to examine their leading and following behaviors vis-à-vis group goals. My feedback aims at both helping students learn micro-influence making and increase their capacity to reflect on their blind spots as a leader and a follower.

Pedagogical and Learning Outcomes

Since I began teaching micro-influence making through the dilemma based approach, I have kept a substantial amount of notes and anecdotes on tacit and perceived impacts of the pedagogical procedure. Particularly using the sense making methodology, I became aware of patterns of student engagement, frustrations and priorities. The sense making methodology is used to study how people make meaning of their environment (see Weick 1995; 2001). I particularly focused on three sources of data in my efforts to make sense of the outcome of the course segment. First, I kept activity logs and teaching journals in which I documented students' questions for clarification and critical incidents. This focused on the small-group sessions and the interactions unfolded. Second, I read students' reflections carefully to trace changes in their interpretation of influence making. Third, I asked relevant (students' understanding of influence) questions during the whole-class sessions, and reflected on their answers immediately after class. I subsequently compared

and triangulated what emerged out of all the three sources. The findings were illuminative of what is often unnoticed, and hence, an opportunity to learn more about how leadership should be taught. The findings, while they are not definitive, are indicative of the challenges, as well as the inherent opportunities, in designing learning experiences based on authentic dilemmas and available resources. Totally seen, the outcome, as reflected in the student texts, instructor observations, and reflections, provides critical pedagogical utility and insights to design and implement similar lessons. Some of the insights are addressed below.

The first, and the most reassuring signal of the impacts of the pedagogical procedure, is the depth and authenticity of students' engagement. When compared with other activities that focus on dyadic or whole-class arrangements, the group process situated students in a sense of genuine desire for solving problems or reaching consensus. This is evident in the number and frequency of questions they asked about procedures and concepts. It is also evident in the heated conversations that students generated to get work done. They did not only negotiate meanings, they also reciprocated on how to support each other to complete the given tasks. This is evident in the way they shared task responsibility and the initiatives they took. Such engagements had relevance for the objectives set out in the teaching segment. While the learning experience's relevance can be assessed holistically, the small- and whole-class interactions could contribute to students learning of influence making. Influences happen in a subtle and powerful way. Each verbal contribution that students make contributes to negotiation of meanings. In the midst of heated debates and exchanges flows influence processes.

Gradually, students began to shift their views from the leader as an irreplaceable authority to the leader as a responsible collaborator. This brings us to the second and another promising outcome of the procedure. Unlike their prior views of leadership, in which the leader was perceived to be a dominant sole decision maker, they began to realize the roles

followers can play and the need for the leader to make influences based on the roles of followers. Normally, having students view leadership beyond the leader-centered perspective is a challenge, and the emphasis on group relations gave them a critical context to experience influence process as a collaboration between leaders and followers. This was evident in students' reflection papers and oral presentations. The following excerpt from a students' reflection paper illustrates such an understanding:

Excerpt 1-- I always taught effective team work needs a strong and controlling person who should oversee what others do. In the last two weeks, I witnessed that teams can really be effective without a controlling leader. The key for the leader to make others respond is collaboration. If the leader seeks collaboration rather than imposition, I think, followers are happy to respond positively. All what we did was to share responsibility without any one dominating. We supported one another. We motivated each other. Each person stepped up whenever his or her expertise was needed. One person's courage to step up, encouraged another person's courage to step up.

This excerpt does not only illustrate that students can be effective as a group through tacit influence processes, but also demonstrate they can debunk the myth of the strong leader.

The third finding relates to students' increased awareness of the complexity of leadership. Students did not only observe the complexity of leading in the scenarios, they also experienced the challenge as they themselves worked through the scenarios. Both in their written reflections and oral presentations, students were amazed at the extent of the complexity of decisions. At first, they thought they could resolve the leader dilemmas easily and quickly. However, they proved themselves wrong because there were multiple solutions that were equally correct and relevant. In this regard, the self-generated leader dilemmas were not only effective in increasing students' awareness of the complexity of leadership, but also in generating deeply engaging debates and communicative action. During my group observations, students expressed some frustration and revealed

some challenges such as the following: that it was extremely difficult to choose one solution, because "each solution has its own negative outcome," "they all seem similar," "it is impossible for the leader not to disappoint others no matter what the solution is," and "it really requires to convince others."

The fourth finding relates to micro-influence, roles and tasks. In such complex and fast paced tasks, it is inevitable that students lose track of priorities. Both in their writing and oral presentations, some students were seen confused as regards to learning expectations. The teaching segment, from the beginning, was intended to provide students an authentic opportunity whereby they practice influence making and learn from the process. Some students focused on the group relation process, and learned most about group relations. Others focused on the issues in the leader dilemmas, and tended to learn more about solving dilemmas. Both types of students, who focused on group relations and leader dilemmas, benefitted from the teaching segment in ways that deviate from the initial objectives. Despite the imbalance, the knowledge they gained about influence is still significant. However, more data is needed to understand why they deviated from the prioritized objectives. Another area that needs more data is the extent to which the complexity and pace of the tasks promoted or slowed learning.

The fifth finding reveals that the teaching segment provided a learning experience that is overwhelming and challenging. For many students, the experience put them out of their comfort zone. This was evident in the level of support students needed to be on board. As a group, students needed additional instructions and examples to be able to complete the leader dilemma analysis on time. Some of them were even unable to complete given tasks according to the plan. Individually, many students had difficulty understanding how to complete the reflection on self and reflection on system tasks. In other words, a significant number of students sought an "absolute" clarity with regard to procedure. Similarly, a significant number of students were not comfortable with the "unknowns" or the "inexplicable". The

following example—a frustration expressed during a small-group session—illustrates the extent of the challenges students faced initially:

Excerpt 2-- The whole process is so complicated. What we are doing has many parts. It is overwhelming. I like what we are doing, but I also feel I am not doing it right. Could you give us more time until we figure it out how to do it better?

It was not only the task design that contributed to such a challenge. The fact that the teaching segment was scheduled towards the end of the semester was an additional source of stress. It is not uncommon to see some of them being unable to submit one or two reflection papers. While student anxiety and the sense of being overwhelmed was expected because of the principle of optimum challenge—one of the design principles—it is important to pay attention to what Vygotsky class support points for performing an action within the context of scaffolding (Wass, & Golding, 2014).

Initial frustrations and the sense of being overwhelmed had ripple effects on expected outcomes and deliverables. Students, as any agentic beings, resort to heuristic short cuts when faced with challenges. For example, some students' reflection-on-self papers, particularly the second, were not good enough given the amount of efforts and time spent. It became a heuristic shortcut from some students to resort to duplicative writing. In other words, they over-repeated ideas from the previous papers, which affected the expected originality and rigor in their reflections.

In general, while the teaching segment has a promising outcome, it also has challenges. The logistical organization and having self-constructed cases might overburden busy faculty who have heavy teaching load. However, the burden might be mitigated through other ways, such as co-teaching a course or having graduate assistants.

This dilemma-based approach to teaching micro-influence making can be adapted to various institutional and teaching contexts. Here are three areas where the teaching segment can be modified to meet one's unique environment.

Procedure. The number of small-group and whole-class sessions can be higher or lower depending on time availability. My recommendation is that the activities should be used after students have studied core concepts in foundational leadership. For example, it is useful that students are familiar with the concept of collective engagement or group dynamics and how members can effectively hold diverse roles or subjective positions.

Learning Content. The leader dilemma approach can be used to experientially learn diverse concepts such as authority, power, role orientations, agency, delegation, conflict resolutions, relationship building, and collective visioning. Students can be encouraged to apply various concepts as well as practice leading, following, or both. In my experience, learning concepts can be integrated because no one concept stands on its own. The most important way to engage students is by seeking a theory-practice connection.

Contextualization. Since authentic problem or dilemma solving is an essential element in this course segment, it is necessary to write scenarios that students can relate to or correspond with their schema. Ready-made cases or problems often do not meet the criterion of authenticity, and it is therefore necessary to rely on self-constructed scenarios. Instructor-constructed cases also take into account the student's schema, i.e., students' theory of the world. According to schema theory, students are more likely to notice things that fit into their schema. Students have schemata for everything they experience. These theories not only affect the way information is interpreted, thus affecting comprehension, but also continue to change as new information is received (Rumelhart, 1965).

How to Adapt the Dilemma-based Tasks

Conclusion

Since its first implementation, this group process-based practice of leadership has become part of my foundational leadership course. I have drawn several lessons that can be replicated. One of the lessons from this approach is that courses can create real-life like situations to practice leadership. The activities have enabled me to observe behaviors and emotions that enrich my understanding of leadership students.

The second is the depth of understanding that amounts to learning turning points. Students are likely to think beyond the surface to recognize the cognitive and emotional challenges of making decisions or solving problems as a leader. They also realize the enormity of the emotions involved in collective decision making and the challenge of leading. For example, students have revealed multiple times that they never thought leaders would encounter such a complex decision dilemmas and situations. Students not only recognize the inherent challenges of making decisions or solving problems as a leader, but also keep followers engaged in collective efforts. Such a revelation is often evident to them as they witness their group members get distracted or oscillate between personal and collective goals. They witness how groups get stuck because they do not know the decision-making procedure. I often observe how emotions and anxiety play out in group dynamics at various stages of the group development.

The most important opportunity created through this approach is the knowledge gained about leadership. The exercises elevate the leadership classroom to a higher level (i.e., experiential engagement) than what I normal witness in other approaches of teaching. As a result, several of them recognize that leader-follower collaboration is needed to deal with dilemmas and problems. They are able to recognize that leadership is not a person, but it is a process, a relationship, an interaction, or a communicative exchange simply because they are encouraged to pay attention to every facet, aspect or dimension of the leader dilemmas.

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