

IMPACT

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Students experience new twist to leadership with simulation

The Situation

What makes a successful leader? Why is it important that our college students today learn to be strong leaders? Leaders of the future need to adapt to the changing landscape of management. According to Astroth, Goodwin and Hodnett, "leadership must of necessity focus on team work, group accountability, flexibility, and working on the cutting edge." In our competitive work force, our leaders of tomorrow need to analyze themselves, listen to their employees, motivate and stimulate, serve as a facilitator, and guide and explore the future together... as a team. At www.nwlink.com, leadership is defined as "a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent." Who are our leaders of the future? How will they be influencing others to make the world a better place? Can we teach our future generations to be strong leaders or are leaders simply born that way?

I suppose that leadership at one time meant muscle; but today it means getting along with people.—Indira Gandhi

Our Response

University of Idaho Extension and the University of Idaho Accounting Department offered four extra credit sessions of the **StarPower** simulation for Accounting 201 students. In this game, students explore their current leadership styles through a "three-tiered" society which is built by distributing "the wealth" in the form of chips. Students are not told the premise of the game only that they will "trade and bargain" while attempting to reach the three highest scores for prizes and to be declared the winner. The "surprise" of the simulation occurs as they play the game. In a series of rounds, the students trade chips to reach point levels which declare them "squares," "circles" or "triangles." During the third round, the



Top: students collaborate in groups; middle left: "initial StarPower scoring rules"; bottom left and right: students trading their chips.

group with the highest points (squares) is allowed to make the rules... any rule... for the other two groups. One group (circles) is allowed to propose three ideas to increase their standing and can talk directly to "upper management"; whereas, the lowest scoring group (triangles) can only submit one idea and must ask the middle group to plead their case. With the different levels of authority, the students learn that their decisions (good and bad) have an effect on the other groups and change the dynamics and performance of the teams greatly. As the game moves forward, the reactions to power and competition are surprising to everyone involved. The "upper management" finds their newfound authority overwhelming and exhilarating, while the other two groups become frustrated and hopeless. At the end of the simulation, we talk about power, leadership, motivation, and greed in a debriefing discussion. With money (or points in this case), usually comes power... and sometimes the abuse of it.

Program Outcomes

The goal of this simulation was to give the 88 student participants a glimpse into how they might react to change and their interpersonal relationships when looking at their reactions to authority and fair (and sometimes not-so-fair) situations. When placed into a position of power, we asked if it would be easy to make the rules. The majority of the upper management (79%) were happy with the challenge. They instantly stripped the other teams of their points, instituted confusing rules, refused to listen to proposals, and looked for opportunities to impose strict rules on their teammates that would force them to remain in the lower point ranges. At one point in the game, a bonus round allowed each group to decide as a team who received points from this round. All of the points could go to one or more players, but the decision had to be unanimous. Some of the students helped to get others ahead hoping they would “remember” them when they reached the top only to have that student forget the sacrifice.

When asked about their perceived value to their organization, students responded “Revolutionary,” “Basically the grunt workers, but not appreciated as much as we should be,” “I think my value to the organization helped them more than me,” “Before the squares made the rules unfair I had hope to reach the top. But once our scores were wiped clean I lost hope,” and “... I was just a small piece of the puzzle.”

When asked how the decisions should have been made, the students replied “More involvement,” “Maybe as a whole group, voting,” “Decisions were not made very fairly,” “With the greater good in mind,” and “You can still be on top & give rules that are fair & still give triangles and circles hope.”

Forty-three of the students (49%) believed that power was abused, 24 (27%) said power was not abused and 21 (24%) did not respond. One student proposed “throwing the squares under the bus so the circles could move up.” These, along with other sabotaging behaviors, were recorded. Other comments included “when there is not an incentive, it is hard to motivate yourself.”

Nineteen of the students who provided leadership for their fellow teammates said that they enjoyed making the rules because it “felt good to be in control” and “it felt exhilarating to be able to choose who won & lost.” Five of their teammates did not feel the same. “Although it was nice to be “in control,” I would have felt better had we not abused power. Other players obviously had no problem, but I did,” and “It’s hard to please everybody and even people within the squares started turning on each other.”

When asked for solutions as an entire group, students commented that strong leaders should “take the proposals into consideration,” encourage “teamwork,” and “voting among everyone.” They also said that “a good manager should give everyone the feeling of power over their situation and

circumstance,” have the “ability to motivate workers around them,” and “think about the team, not self.”

When the students were asked if this simulation was a value-added program, 97% said “yes” or “somewhat.”

Value Added Program?	
Yes	85%
Somewhat	12%
No	1%
No Answer	2%

For future behavior change, 98% said that they would be or would try to be more reflective in the future when making decisions for others.

Future Behavior Change	
Yes	81%
Maybe	17%
No	2%

This simulation is a fun way to observe how students might respond to the power and authority they may be entrusted with. Having leadership “power” is not as vital as knowing how to effectively use it. Many of these students will be our future leaders, supervisors, and managers. Their success and the success of the companies that they direct depends on how well they can lead and motivate their teams.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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