

Beer run: Communication exercise as preparation for group projects

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ABSTRACT

This exercise is constructed to expose the student(s) to the challenges of effectively communicating in writing specific objectives in respect to management initiatives. The application is designed to be utilized before a class group project is commenced to improve intragroup communication and dynamics, and assist in the reduction or elimination of unproductive efforts and tasks resultant of poor communication in the process of successful completion of group projects.

Keywords: group project, communication skills, class exercise, productivity, intragroup dynamics, management



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INTRODUCTION

The development of communication skills is an important corollary in preparing students to be productive when projects and initiatives require integrative group output. “Business leaders and business instructors agree on the importance of overall student/employee communication ability; however, they vary significantly regarding the importance of individual skills” (Conrad, Newberry 2011). Written communication skills as applied in the business environment are essential in the preparation of undergraduate business students for productive careers. This exercise serves as a platform to lessen this disconnect and to expose to the student(s) their level(s) of competency with the intention the student(s) will recognize their respective competency level and apply techniques learned throughout the curriculum to improve these skills.

THE EXERCISE

In this example, a class size of 30 students is utilized. The instructor brings into the classroom a stack of Wall Street Journals (or any newspapers), 5 rolls of masking tape, a six pack of bottled beer, and a remote control car (approximately 8 inches long, 4 inches wide and 3 inches high) and places all materials where these items can be clearly viewed by the class. At the beginning of class, the instructor indicates the class will participate in a group exercise on communication, and that the class will be divided into 5 groups of six students each. The preferred method of dividing the class is by having the class “count off” using the numbers 1 through 5. This separates students that are sitting together and requires that students must work as a cohesive unit with unfamiliar individuals in preparation of the workplace environment. Once the groups are formed, the groups are then asked to sit together. Group dynamics immediately surface as select students begin taking charge in organizing and selecting areas for their groups. If at any juncture a student asks about the beer, newspapers and other materials, the instructor can simply reply “we’re going to make a beer run.”

FIRST DECISION

With the class organized into their groups, the instructor then projects the following instructions for view of the class:

Beer Run

5 Teams

- Management/Design Team (East Coast)
- Construction Team (West Coast)
- 5 minutes to get organized, construction team goes outside
- All communication between teams is WRITTEN

At this point it is suggested that the instructor not answer any questions from students and either point at the instructions or indicate “follow the instructions.” Typical questions are “what are we going to do” and “can I have one of the beers.” Experience indicates that the inclusion of beer brings an element of fun to the exercise, and student reactions at this point exhibit a relaxed, puzzle-solving and inquisitive atmosphere.

The students selected from each group as “Construction Team” are then asked to leave the classroom, and instructed that they have 15 minutes of free time to utilize as they choose. At the end of the 15 minutes, they will be given their written instructions from their respective management/design teams.

DEVELOPING INSTRUCTIONS

The following instructions are now posted for the remaining students in the class (management/design teams):

Management/Design Team – 15 minutes to prepare written instructions to construct a bridge of Wall Street Journals and masking tape that will hold up a beer while a car is driven under the bridge

- Bridge must be free standing
- All communication to construction team must be written, with no communication after instructions/design is passed
- First team to successfully drive car under bridge that holds up a beer wins 5 bonus points
- 2nd team – 4 points
- 3rd – 3 points
- 4th – 2 points
- 5th – 1 point

These teams are each handed their allotment of newspapers, a roll of tape, a beer, and a remote control car. A standard legal pad is provided, and the groups are instructed to write their group number and their names on the pad. No questions are answered by the instructor, and experience shows that a majority of students require oral communication before beginning this task.

There are multiple elements of group dynamics developing at this interval in the process. From observation, the management/design teams are slow developing their course of action, and much discussion precedes the required element of writing down the instructions for the construction teams. The construction teams spend the majority of their time speculating on the task they will be assigned, and none of the 38 teams that have been observed have successfully derived the objective of this exercise.

DELIVERING THE WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS

A building with a lobby area and outside courtyard or other paved walkway or available space is most desirable for the “build out” section of the exercise. With no oral communication, the management/design teams deliver their instructions and materials to their respective construction teams. The construction teams proceed to the designated construction area. The management/design teams remain separated, and are required to observe the construction process.

CONSTRUCTION PHASE

The instructor again observes the process, noting observations concerning the progress and methodologies utilized by each group. The phase continues until all groups either finish or quit, or the instructor calls time. In this sample, 34 of the 38 teams have successfully completed the construction of a bridge that supported a beer while the toy car was driven under the bridge. By observation, less than 50% of these would have completed if not able to overhear and see other teams and absorb the objective from the environment.

In each of the 8 instances this exercise has been executed the construction teams have all been in view of one another. Adjusting this dynamic would likely reduce this completion rate, but would also serve to reduce the enjoyment factor of the class.

OBSERVATIONS

This exercise has been utilized in 8 classes with a cumulative total of 38 unique groups. The data below summarizes the evaluation of the written documents submitted to the construction teams:

	<u>GROUPS</u>	<u>%</u>
Omitted the word "bridge"	17	45%
Omitted "free standing"	35	92%
Omitted time element (points)	29	76%
Attempted additional communication	11	29%
Drew a bridge	36	95%
Restated exact communication	1	3%

Additionally, the classes were required to identify unnecessary and inaccurate instructions that detracted from the clarity of the communications. In the 38 groups, a total of 314 were identified by the students. Examples include:

- “from section A of the Wall Street Journal dated September 14th, 2012, remove pages 1,2,3,4,13,14,15,16”
- “make sure the sticky part of the tape is on the inside”
- “the beer bottle has to stand up”
- “the car is a remote control car with batteries”

The students were required to grade their group’s written communication in the exercise. The average self-assigned grade for the 38 groups in this sample is 56.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

The classes were assigned a written essay titled “Begin with the End in Mind” to analyze the exercise and explore the following:

1. How the communication could be improved

Perspectives

- a. Management/design teams
 - b. Construction teams
2. How to utilize the concept learned in this exercise to increase the efficiency and productivity of a group project
 3. Comment on what you have benefitted from personally as a student and how you can apply this knowledge in communicating and working within teams

APPLICATION

Immediately after the completion of the “Beer Run” exercise, the classes were assigned their specific group projects. Students are required to outline projects in a manner identical or similar to the following:

- 1 Describe project and objectives.
- 2 List the tasks to complete to make the project a success.
- 3 Set a timeline for your project
- 4 Find the resources that you need to make your project happen.
- 5 Create a list of roles that you will need to fill within your team
- 6 Communication.
- 7 Measurement and evaluation.

After completion of the various assigned group projects, 219 students were questioned about the effectiveness of the “Beer Run” communication exercise in assisting and improving the communication of group members in their projects. Results are below:

	<u>N</u>	<u>%</u>
Significantly improved/assisted communication	203	93%
Somewhat improved/assisted communication	16	7%
No benefit	<u>0</u>	<u>0%</u>
	219	100%

This same sample of students was also asked to self-evaluate their competency in written business communication on a scale of 1 to 100. The average was 78.83 with a standard deviation of 10. The most common response was 80.

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