

LEADERSHIP GAMES

Stephen S. Kaagan

Experiential Learning for
Organizational Development



FEATURES 25 EXERCISES

LEADERSHIP GAMES

Stephen S. Kaagan

Experiential Learning for
Organizational Development



SAGE Publications

International Educational and Professional Publisher

Thousand Oaks London New Delhi

Copyright © 1999 by Sage Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

For information:



SAGE Publications, Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
E-mail: order@sagepub.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
M-32 Market
Greater Kailash I
New Delhi 110 048 India

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kaagan, Stephen S.

Leadership games: Experiential learning for organizational development / by Stephen S. Kaagan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references

ISBN 0-7619-1721-7 (pbk.: acid-free paper)

1. Leadership. 2. Management games. 3. Experiential learning.

I. Title

HD57.7 .K3 1998

658.4'07124—ddc21

98-25396

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

99 00 01 02 03 04 05 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acquiring Editor: Marquita Flemming
Editorial Assistant: Mary Ann Vail
Production Editor: Denise Santoyo
Editorial Assistant: Stephanie Allen
Typesetter/Designer: Lynn Miyata
Illustrator: David G. Kaagan

LEADERSHIP GAMES

*This book is dedicated
to Susan,
who aided me in countless ways.*

Prologue

Ten upper-level managers gather on an ocean front dock in Penobscot Bay, Maine. They are participants in a professional development program sponsored by their company, the aim of which is to enhance communication and coordination among top management. Soon they will embark on an ocean journey in a 30-foot, ketch-rigged sailing craft that resembles a bathtub, or, to be more generous, a lifeboat from the *Titanic*. It has two small sails and no motor—and no on-board bathroom facilities. The boat itself bobs in the gentle swells of the harbor in front of the participants' wary eyes. All the gear and food that they will need for their several days together in tight quarters is at their feet on the dock.

An instructor joins them, introduces himself, and asks them quietly if they wouldn't mind counting off, 1 to 10. "For safety purpose mostly," he says. After all have done so, the instructor inquires as to who was number one. Following a short pause, a person off to the side answers, "It was me." "Good," says the instructor, "you'll be the captain." "Hunh?" says the startled participant, caught a bit off guard, "I don't even know how to sail." The instructor barely pauses to reply, "It's OK, you'll learn, I'll help. Now, who was number two?"

There is much useful perspective to be drawn from this vignette. First, the whole sequence is counterintuitive in terms of the way most people think about learning. The traditional sequence is that instruction precedes practice. Right? But maybe not; it could be the other way round. A second interesting piece is the relationship among instructor, learners, and the “classroom.” Deftly, the instructor allows the challenges that inhere in the context—ocean, harbor swells, boat, sails, a dock full of gear and provisions—to take hold of the participants, to form for them the base of their potential engagement with the task at hand.

Third, the instructor arrives at and assigns key responsibilities in a random manner, by lot. In so doing, he simultaneously proffers the mantle of leadership on all. This would have to be the case if such important assignments could be distributed to anyone at will. Fourth, the attention of those assigned the top jobs is riveted as fantasies regarding what they are about to do and where they are about to go dance in front of their eyes. Very important for learning that the learners pay attention, right? In this instance, all might agree that the instructor succeeds not only in getting the learners’ attention but also in tapping into a reservoir of motivation for learning. Apprehension about the unknown, as long as its debilitating effects can be blunted, is a powerful motivator.

All that unfolds on the dock may be no more than a beginning; but in a fundamental sense, it is a most satisfactory beginning. It provides a solid platform for potential learning, without which there can be no learning at all. This book, like the vignette on the dock, is about building a fit platform for leadership learning. It describes constructed experiences that promote learning and shows how to use these experiences to overcome difficult organizational challenges.

Introduction

It is the recipient who communicates. The so-called communicator, the person who emits the communication, does not communicate. He utters. Unless there is someone who hears, there is no communication. There is only noise (Drucker, 1974, p. 483).

Tough challenges await those who seek to lead modern organizations. Four of the toughest for leaders and those who work with them are

- risking innovation,
- fostering collaboration,
- managing conflict, and
- using diversity.

This book is about how to develop the capacity of leaders in any field of endeavor to overcome these challenges on behalf of the organizational missions they serve. At its heart, it is about becoming familiar with, choosing, and using much simpler, yet more powerful,

instruments for leadership development than have been employed to date. It is a primer in a field that may well have become saturated with cumbersome and costly treatments that provide only modest benefits for the people they were designed to serve.

For you, the reader, this book is an unique opportunity to enhance your own capability and the capabilities of those you seek to influence. It invites you to consider carefully the present state of the art of leadership development. But it offers considerably more than a discussion of where things are on this important front. It also presents a set of exercises that you can adapt to fulfill legitimate organizational ends in a manner that fits your own aims, philosophy, and style. If you use what is here, you will both broaden your repertoire and sharpen your skills as a teacher of leadership. After all, supervising other people entails more than anything else teaching leadership.

A number of noted contemporary analysts—Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal (1991, 1994), Kenneth and Miriam Clark (1994), Ronald Heifetz (1994)—argue that leadership development efforts, if they are ever to have greater effect, must become much more experiential and much less didactic. In its simplest form, what these experts are calling for is less lecturing about the craft. They are asking instead that learners be granted more opportunity to experience situations, problems, and challenges. Then, through well-facilitated discussions and directed reading and writing about their experiences, leaders in the making can expand their portfolio of enlightened leadership practices. Practices learned this way, it is argued, would have a greater hold on minds, a more pronounced effect on the way these leaders work, and a more significant influence on their workplaces.

On their face, the arguments of these commentators make sense. The underlying rationale is indisputable: People adopt new approaches more quickly if they are encouraged to revise their ideas about how to do things through intense and directed examination of what they have been doing. This is what is meant by reflection. Interestingly, a wide range of experiences can serve well as platforms for reflection, including ones drawn from people's workplace as well as constructed experiences such as simulations or exercises. The key is whether any given experience contains potentially relevant material for learning.

Yet the simple idea of grounding leadership learning in experience contrasts with the mode that continues to dominate today. The standard representation is large numbers of listeners sitting at rows of tables leaning on their elbows for support as they are provided a rendition of new approaches to leadership and their potential applicability in the workplace. The listeners are left to work through in their

own heads exactly what the lessons are, which ones to apply, and how to apply them within their own organization.

Common sense tells us that we learn more through doing and reflecting on doing than through listening, absorbing, and reframing. This is especially true of a topic such as leadership that is so richly personal, social, and political. Through a doing and reflecting sequence, the learner wrestles with the dynamics of change and development in the context of recent behavior and interactions with colleagues.

The here-and-now of experience, if well mediated by an effective facilitator, can provide a demanding environment in which learning can be deeper, more consequential, and more enduring. Experience is real and its effects are immediate. It happened. It must somehow be reckoned with. Although apprehended differently by different people, experience itself warrants that concepts put forth connect in some way with participants' observations of what happened within the experience.

In the listening, absorbing, reframing sequence—what some call “sitting and gitting,”—the learner can languish in the realm of ideas. There is not the discomfort that emerges as a result of the presence of overpowering evidence drawn from the learner's recent behavior. It is this very discomfort that can provoke altered perspective and promote ways of doing things differently in the future, much more so than a detached idea can.

Although the power of an idea might overtake the thoughts of the listener, thinking good ideas about leadership does not necessarily result in doing good leadership. For the listener, it is just too easy to speculate, whether seriously or casually, on what might be desirable to do, and then in fact do nothing. The frequently observed sequence is that a person fits what he or she has heard to his or her way of thinking, convincing himself or herself that he or she is already really doing what the speaker asserts is valuable, and decides to go on pretty much as before.

This process—listening, absorbing, rationalizing, and reverting to (in lieu of revamping) the status quo—accurately describes a large part of the leadership development enterprise as presently practiced. At ground level, here is how it works: Selected representatives of a firm go off to a highly touted and highly priced leadership development conference. Upon returning, they talk in animated tones and laudatory terms about what they heard, certain that the perspectives provided will cause them to reshape how they go about fundamental aspects of their work together. Not long after, the ideas drawn from the conference begin to command less discussion; the materials they brought

back with them start to disappear under papers reflecting competing priorities; and the enthusiasm of the participants, so strong in the wake of the presentation, gradually fades. Even though some of the terminology remains in their weekly meeting rhetoric, very little else is different from the way it was before.

There is, among other things, significantly less inherent individual accountability in the more didactic forms of leadership development. Rationalizing ideas, privately apprehended as a listener in a large room, is a path of least resistance. It is much easier than rationalizing actions that were demonstrated in the open in front of a small group of one's peers.

My own experience may be illustrative here. Once, in doing an exercise that emphasized the imperative of planners and implementers working in collaboration rather than in isolation, one of the designated planners slammed the door in the face of an implementer who had come politely seeking to understand what the planners were up to. In the discussion that followed the activity, the planner, who was in real life the ranking executive in the group, valiantly asserted a firm and enduring commitment to collaboration. There was, however, no way she could escape the profoundly noncollaborative move she had made moments ago. It warranted attention and received ample discussion in spite of her attempts to downplay it. This all made for some welcome, or unwelcome, accountability, depending on whose shoes you wore.

Regardless of how compelling the case for experiential leadership development is, it has yet to take hold in many quarters. An emerging consensus among experts on the matter has not eased the way to realizing its proper place. As is true in most human endeavors, making something happen is much harder than making a case for it to happen. Ironically, the gap between theory and practice in leadership development is as great as that which exists in leadership itself. Insistent exhortations about good (read collaborative) leadership practices have had only marginal effect on workplace behavior. Urgings about good (read experienced-based) leadership development have similarly had limited effect. Most of what passes for leadership development in the public and private sectors is still heavily didactic, despite convincing arguments to the contrary.

The failure to make the desired shift to more experiential approaches is not just the result of normal implementation snags. Interestingly, there is at present no shortage of materials and basic know-how about experiential leadership development techniques. Any willing and able human resource specialist can locate enough resources to move forward with dispatch. Published case studies, guided man-

agement simulations and games, and formulas for apprenticeships and internships as well as public and community service opportunities have all been available in multiple sectors for several decades. The current literature on leadership development also provides ample treatment of all the above at both theoretical and practical levels. A cursory visit to the leadership and management section of a decent-sized bookstore will confirm this point.

So what are the hang-ups, the hold-ups, the hitches? They are threefold:

- Methods of teaching transform slowly, more slowly, in fact, than any art or technology, regardless of the sector to which they are being applied.
- Experiential teaching approaches are not easily packaged, and therefore pose problems for the provider who knows that volume distribution and easy repetition are the routes to profitability.
- The desire of service providers for profits, spurred by the indiscriminate appetite of clients with genuine needs, has all but relegated experiential forms of leadership development to the shelf featuring the “high-priced spreads.”

These three factors have served to inhibit the move of experiential methods into the mainstream of leadership development practices. This book is an attempt to set all three aside and pave the way for the more regular and easy use of experiential methods.

A short anecdote illuminates the dynamics of the first inhibitor, that teaching methods shift slowly. A large and well-respected educational organization asked me a few years ago to help shape its national leadership conference into a more experiential event. In the words of one of the top staff, the organization’s leaders wanted to be truer to their own advocacy for more active forms of learning. As the time of the event approached, however, my clients decided to go back to their traditional format, involving keynote speakers and panels on daises. The proposed experiential approaches were confined to a small corner of the agenda for a limited few who were willing to go out of their way to gain access to them.

At root, the sponsors of the event were afraid that they would not be able to control the flow of discussion in the experiential sessions as much as they could in the didactic presentations. They were also concerned that their constituents might be put off by a format that demanded more engagement from them as participants. The attendees

had, after all, paid their money and should not be disrupted from getting exactly what they had been getting without interruption for the past several decades—talking heads. A philosophical—and even a financial—commitment to more active forms of learning was not enough to overtake a set of enduring commitments to well-worn methods.

Experiential teaching, however, is not just a frequent victim of deep allegiances to the way things have always been done. In some respects it is its own worst enemy, its greatest weaknesses stemming from its greatest strength. The activities associated with experiential teaching engage, at times even rivet, the attention of participants. Simulations, games, exercises, problem-solving initiatives gain a quick and firm hold on those who join in. They almost inevitably afford people a “good ride.” Yet, however engaging the activities, they can be egregiously devoid of new ideas, notoriously incapable of engendering new ideas, and, all in all, impotent at provoking fundamentally different ways of doing business.

The best of the new thinking about leadership has yet to gain a firm foothold in the experiences generally provided to participants. Facilitators often fail to weave new ideas into the critical discussions that follow an experience. Instead, they tend to rehash what happened in an activity and leave it at that. As long as this represents the net yield of debriefs, then the growth of experiential leadership development will remain stunted.

Just as ideas can easily remain detached from experience, experience can easily remain detached from ideas. Beyond the sidelining of new thinking about leadership, most experiential leadership development efforts have also, to their great detriment, kept essential organizational development objectives to the side. Effective links are rarely made between what participants are experiencing in an exercise and the larger challenges confronting organizations.

What is needed instead is real clarity about how experiential approaches can be targeted to fulfill aims integral to the successful functioning of organizations. Experiential approaches cannot continue to dangle somewhat aimlessly in a nether world, on the one extreme, detached from the larger problems of work in organizations, or on the other, tightly tied to narrow realms of technical knowledge with little potential for application in broader contexts.

The second point, that experiential methods do not lend themselves to a volume business and to easy repetitions, should be self-evident. Experiences that bear the earmarks of solid preparation and sound debriefing cannot just be “cranked out” on a “take it and use it”

basis. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, thoughtfulness and discretion are necessary. Like good cooking, sound experiential leadership development requires careful preparation and artful execution, with the facilitator-cook standing ready to deal on the spot with unexpected developments as the ingredients are combined and the heat is applied.

Never, for example, was I more speechless than when I was running a simple group problem-solving exercise in a sylvan setting for a group of educators. After the exercise, I asked the participants to sit down on the lawn so we could discuss what had just happened in the activity. One of the participants blurted out, "I don't do grass." I knew instantaneously that she was not making a pun, even though some of her peers tried to twist it into one for humor's sake. As it turned out, she had spent her entire life in inner-city settings and was dead serious about not wanting to sit on the grass. After alighting on the obvious alternative of inviting her to stand, I took a moment to appreciate a truth that every facilitator is wont to forget: All learners have different starting places when it comes to discomfort and related learning thresholds. Everything is indeed contextual, and adaptation to context is integral to the workings of experiential leadership development in all its forms.

The third constraint on the expansion of experiential approaches is artificially induced high cost. Because of the effort and sophistication involved in designing and doing solid experiential leadership development, the prevailing assumption in the marketplace is that a lot of high-priced expertise and commitment of resource are required to do the job right. Although it is in many respects true that tailored experiences cost more, they do not need to command the price tags that have generally been attached to them.

It is as if the present leadership development industry has been segmented into two sectors, cheap and oversimplified versus expensive and overelaborate, with little in between that is worthy. Either one can go to Barnes & Noble and purchase a how-to manual on team development exercises for \$15, or one can employ consultants of repute for \$15,000. The absence of an effective middle ground is not satisfactory. It is possible, as this book demonstrates, to establish one, where tailored and well-guided programs can be had at much less than the top dollar they are now commanding, if the mind is applied and the will takes hold.

The present incapacitation that hampers the effective implementation of experiential leadership development, delivered at reasonable cost, represents a fit challenge. When enumerated and weighed, the

three reasons underlying that incapacitation make up a set of needs whose fulfillment will dictate the pace and the extent of advancements in leadership development in the years ahead. The aim of this book is to meet these needs head on by providing a compelling and enticing invitation to organizational leaders to think and act differently when they go about the work of leadership development.

Put another way, the intent is to increase the intellectual capital available to individuals who could, if they chose to, improve the quality of leadership development opportunities offered to their coworkers. In this book, that capital takes the form of exemplary experiential exercises and, as important, the articulation of connections between the exercises and essential organizational objectives.

Considerable substantiation for the experiential approach as the preferred method of teaching already exists. The agenda here is to lay out a set of real possibilities and present them well enough to spur action by those concerned with the cost-effectiveness of leadership development programs.

True to its asserted teaching principles, the book is an invitation framed in experiential terms. It not only accepts the validity of the argument that leadership development efforts should be based more on participant experience, it lays out a path, both conceptual and practical, that will help the reader (read participant) make them that way.

Although much of the book is quite practical, the intention is not to produce a how-to piece. In addition to offering many concrete suggestions about how to do experiential leadership development, it also focuses on the why's and wherefore's that underpin the how's. There is ample discussion of teaching concepts, factors that motivate adult learners, broad organizational development purposes that specific exercises serve, and the pitfalls that might be encountered in earnest albeit unguided attempts to use experiential exercises for organizational development.

To fulfill its potential, experiential leadership development has to match the concerns of organizational leaders today. It also must stand up to the test that it is concerned with ingredients of leadership that are enduring. Four leadership ideas are the weight-bearing pillars of this book. They are *risking innovation*, *fostering collaboration*, *managing conflict*, and *using diversity*. Commentary of noted theorists and practitioners corroborate how integral these are to advanced and forward-looking thinking about leadership. *The Leaders of the Future* (1996), a recent collection of essays from the Drucker Foundation, makes the case well. It explores the perspectives of leading analysts and executives on the matter of critical aspects of leadership and principal themes in

leadership development. The four ideas contained in this book receive focused attention from both those who frame ideas and those who execute them in today's organizations. In some greater depth, here is what they are about:

- Reasonable risk assumption and initiative taking involve pushing oneself and others with whom one is working to the creative edges of an undertaking so that it grows, spreads out, takes in new clients and customers, and serves them in new and more powerful ways. At the same time, whatever is done has to be done soberly. Rhetoric about the desirability of risk taking has outpaced reality in organizations, and the result is considerable cynicism in almost every quarter. Many in the middle and lower ranks of an enterprise hear repeatedly that they should take risks, innovate, show initiative. Yet when they do, more often than not they are knocked back. Prudently and predictably, they revert to behavior that is characterized by compliance with rules and regulations and pleasing the boss.

- The word *collaboration* is one of the most overused and misapplied terms in the work of today's organizations. Frequently, it heralds a leader's vague hope that a group of individuals might, when thrown together for a legitimate purpose, become a tightly knit and highly productive force within the organization. The hope is rarely realized. So-called teams disappoint more than they produce. Real collaboration, or teamwork, is a rarity. In its purest form, teamwork requires that a group of people act as one. Teams accomplish commonly held objectives. Members support each other's strengths and shore up each others' weaknesses. They are committed to holding each other mutually accountable for results. Successful teamwork is a product of artful *team building*, which takes time, energy, and savvy. It requires establishing team cohesiveness before teamwork on an assigned task actually gets underway. Cohesiveness develops from the application of sophisticated deliberation skills. Active, careful listening is critical, as is the adoption of strategies that make group discussions flow in the direction of desired results.

- Conflict is the one given likely to be present when two or more people get together to do something in an organization. Conflict is inevitable. Yet solid understanding that it is inevitable by all who are brought together to accomplish something is not inevitable. Most people operate within a realm of naïveté: They tend to think that what is in their head pretty much aligns with what is in other people's heads. That this is not the case is the root cause of conflict. Furthermore, it is also rarely the case that groups are well equipped to transform

conflict into an advantage for accomplishing an assigned task. Understanding the roots of group and organizational divisiveness is essential. Learning its positive uses and acquiring the means to deflect its negative effect are also essential. Promising approaches to resolving conflict depend on engaging with it.

- Using diversity refers to ways of achieving greater productivity in the context of challenges offered by racial, religious, ethnic, and gender differences. In many respects, it is an extension of the problem of managing conflict. Personal identity, defined by race, religion, ethnicity, and gender, presents particular difficulties for those wanting to lead effectively. Who is in the room and how their diverse identities affect the quality of proceedings and product command considerably more attention in the present work context than they did in the past. Differing perceptions about these matters can distort proceedings and detract from product quality unless group members open themselves to defining the forms of diversity that are most important to them and identify handles of respect that each member of a group can grasp. Failing this, what might have been powerful assets within a group faced with an assigned task may turn readily into disabling deficits that paralyze a group and make failure a foregone conclusion.

Although the case has already been made that a variety of people concerned with the quality of organizational functioning in multiple sectors might benefit from reading this book, exactly who is it aimed at? At the top of the list are people seeking to become more adept at enhancing the learning of those who aspire to leadership in organizations. Included are leading executives in corporations, government agencies, and not-for-profit organizations. Increasingly, they see it as one of their highest priorities to develop the leadership capacities of the people working with them. A growing number of organizations also see themselves as being actively involved in the teaching of leadership.

Individuals and groups responsible for designing and implementing leadership development efforts will benefit from the teachings in this book. In this category are those who have responsibility in their organizations for human resource development, as well as those who come in from the outside to assist with professional or staff development, either from a university or from a consulting firm.

At the same time, just about anybody interested in the improved functioning of organizations, large or small, will find the material presented here useful and compelling. It will give them not only a lot to think about in terms of professional and organizational development