Building assertiveness and listening skills using dysfunctional peer project scenarios

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide an experiential learning exercise that develops student skills in assertive communication and listening in the context of dysfunctional group projects. It offers iterative planning, roleplays and reflection. Variations incorporate additional practice, interim debriefing or multiple partners.

Design/methodology/approach – A scaffolded approach introduces assertiveness and listening. Students prepare and discuss feedback scripts for two scenarios about problematic team members, articulate perceptions of blame (to call attention to bias) and identify listening tactics. They receive additional scenarios with complementary roles to analyze individually and then practice with new partners. In one, they are assertive, and in the other, they are the dysfunctional group member.

Findings – The challenges represented by the scenarios resonate with students. Many are shocked by the difficulty of speaking assertively with "problem" group members and find the iterative practice helpful.

Practical implications – Students avoid directly addressing problems caused by peers or request instructor intervention. This iterative activity helps them close the knowing-doing gap by practicing assertive communication, feedback and listening within the context of realistic group project situations.

Social implications – This activity develops learner confidence and capacity to handle similar situations. It incorporates valuable soft skills that are transferable to the workplace.

Originality/value – This activity draws on common problems caused by group members in college project teams. Learners develop scripts and listening approaches and practice assertive communication to achieve better group outcomes.

Keywords Feedback, Roleplay, Experiential exercise, Assertive communication, Team skills

Paper type General review

Introduction

Instructors who assign group projects are familiar with student complaints about their teammates (Hansen, 2006). Students often avoid handling problems directly and instead expect instructors to intervene regarding peers whose work is late, missing or below standard, who are inconsistent or miss team meetings or who contribute little to the intellectual content or coordination of the project. Some students avoid addressing peers

directly to give corrective feedback for fear they will be perceived as rude, controlling, arrogant or creating an uncomfortable situation. Others admit they would rather take a lower grade or complete work assigned to the problematic peers than confront them. This exercise was created to provide practice with assertive communication using four recurring problems in college project teams. The scenarios can easily be replaced with examples provided by students. The situations are relevant to learners' daily lives, and the core feedback skills are transferable to the workplace.

Exercise overview
This exercise can be run in 65 min with a pre-assignment or in an 80- to 90-min session; other variations extend or abbreviate the experience (Appendix 1). Learners analyze situations regarding a problem teammate, consider how they are personally affected and what they prefer to happen, and examine how their perception of blame might affect an assertive approach. They develop scripts and listening approaches to achieve improved situations. The exercise can be tailored to provide additional practice with multiple partners and opportunities for debriefing and improving the planned approaches. Lectures on the importance of listening and the influence of perceptions can be incorporated to highlight self-awareness and reflection. The exercise uses four scenarios that focus on dysfunctional team situations. The first two are the same for all participants; the third and fourth scenarios have two versions so as to give complementary information specific to paired roles, such that one person is a problematic team member and the other must plan the assertive communication to correct the behavior.

Learning goals
By engaging in this exercise, learners will:

- Apply an assertive approach to handle a problematic situation with a team member.
- Incorporate multiple points of view when preparing to address a problematic situation.
- Practice confronting difficult situations with the intent of resolving it satisfactorily.

Materials and technology
None needed, beyond the handouts.

Preparation for instructors
Handouts
Appendix 2 has instructions for Handout 1 for use in Steps 1–4 and the two versions of Handout 2 (A and B) for Steps 5–6. Sample scenarios that are seemingly ubiquitous to the college experience are offered, but instructors are encouraged to use their own students' examples to heighten interest, engagement and perceived value for the exercise. Scenarios should be solicited weeks prior to allow time to review and select the most appropriate. This can be done by embedding a question into an existing reflection assignment or having students write for 5 min in class to "describe a project in another course where you had problems with a team member, but did not address the issue assertively, i.e. you were passive or aggressive, but not assertive."

Mini-lectures
A mini-lecture for Step 3 is helpful to discuss assertive communication techniques, the importance of listening to understand others' perspectives and how perceiving others negatively or assigning blame to them affects our own listening and communication. During the debrief, be mindful of the role of emotions in feedback and coaching (Taylor, 2018; Woodhouse, 2007).

Preparation for students
Students need a foundational understanding of assertive, passive and aggressive communication styles (see Sutton, 2020), and tips for assertive communication include using "I" rather than "you" statements, being objective not accusatory and focusing on the outcome or change for which they are advocating. They should learn a format for feedback giving that they can practice, such as stating the situation, one's feelings/reaction and declaring the preferred change and how it would positively impact those involved. Harms and Roebuck (2010) offered a four-step feedback model that can be taught prior to or at the start of this exercise.

Instructions for usage
Step 1. Briefing and pre-assignment (5 min): Inform students that "In this activity, you will analyze common team situations and identify how to use assertive communication to handle them." Distribute Handout 1 to be done as homework before class. Learners should complete the four prompts below in Scenarios 1 and 2:

(1) definition of the core problem;
(2) impact of the problem on themselves, teammates or the project;
(3) who (they believe) is to blame; and
(4) their preferred outcome.

The purpose of articulating blame perceptions is discussed in Step 5. Second, assign half of the learners to Scenario 1 and half to Scenario 2, for which they will draft a script that begins with a brief greeting and then sketches out a conversation that incorporates an assertive approach to handle the situation and advocate for their desired outcome. Encourage them to use best practices for assertive communication and feedback giving.

Step 2. Critique and improve (5 min): Learners assigned to Scenario 1 are paired with those assigned to Scenario 2. They take turns talking through their scripted conversation, attempting to use an assertive approach. The pair collaborates to improve their scripts.

Step 3. Interim debrief and concept reinforcement (10 min): Query learners about their handout responses to *a–d* and how their initial approach was tied to how they defined the issue or assigned blame. Ask what changes they identified in Step 2 for their scripts/ approaches. Introduce effective listening techniques and the importance of listening for differing perspectives or interpretations of a situation. Reinforce assertive communication and feedback-giving tactics.

Step 4. Incorporate listening (3–5 min): Pairs review and revise their scripts to incorporate aspects of listening and moderate the impact of blame.

Step 5. Prepare a new script (10 min): Distribute Handout 2 (version A) to half of the learners to read and analyze Scenario 3. Distribute Handout 2 (version B) to the other half, who should focus on Scenario 4. For their scenario, they should do reflection questions *a–d*, and develop a script that incorporates an assertive statement and a plan for listening. When done, they should read the other scenario and complete reflection questions *a–d*.

Step 6. Two roleplays (15 min): For *Scenario 3,* learners find a new partner who has the other handout, i.e. different colors for Handouts A and B, and note their name. The person with Handout A leads the Scenario 3 roleplay. When finished, each completes Scenario 3 reflection prompts *e–f.* Those who took the lead write about what went well and what to improve; their partners critique the approach and indicate if they felt heard. For *Scenario 4,* learners again find a *new* partner who has the other handout and note their name. The person with Handout B leads the Scenario 4 roleplay. When finished, each completes Scenario 4 reflection prompts *e–f.*

Debriefing (15 min)

(1) In what ways were people with Handout A assertive in Scenario 3? What worked well? In what ways were people with Handout B assertive in Scenario 4? What worked well?

(2) What were your partners' strengths in these roleplays? What were your own strengths?

(3) What was challenging about being assertive and giving feedback? What helped or hindered you? *Note: learners might consider how they analyzed the situation, used best practices, planned an approach, built rapport or understood the other's perspective.*

(4) What could your partners have done differently to be more effective? *Note: combat hesitancy by urging them to help each other succeed. Peers who get feedback and practice a skill while in school will be more ready to use it at work than will someone who only received praise.*

Optional questions:

(1) What emotions were experienced during the roleplays? Note: If negative emotions beyond discomfort (*Woodhouse,* 2007) and fear of feedback are noted, discuss how emotions affect individual performance and why trust, support and preparation matter (Taylor, 2018).

(2) What insights do you have about assertive communication or giving feedback? Will it be easier, similar or more difficult to be assertive in the workplace? Note: Students assumed there will be less need for assertiveness at work because managers will address issues of late work or poorly completed tasks, and coworkers will be motivated. They viewed peer-to-peer assertiveness as rude but boss-to-employee assertiveness as a management responsibility.

What to expect
Students rushed, seemingly to alleviate discomfort. They stated concerns that peers would equate assertiveness with being blunt, rude, mean or accusatory, and conversely, they worried about the ineffectiveness of being hesitant or "too nice." They vigilantly monitored body language, tone, confidence, openness and empathy as well as the approaches used, such as "not jumping to conclusions," "pushing myself out of my comfort zone" and "validation of the other point of view." Though they acknowledged the need to "be comfortable being uncomfortable," they also mitigated comments to their partners by using filler words ("hopefully [. . .]" or "maybe you could"). These quelled their own anxiety but did not always progress the conversations effectively – softening feedback a lot masked the actual problems.

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Appendix 1. Variations

No prework: Step 1 can be completed in class (15–20 min). Introduce the exercise and distribute Handout 1. Learners read Scenarios 1 and 2 and work individually on the first four prompts below each:

(1) problem;
(2) impact of the problem;
(3) who (they believe) is to blame; and
(4) preferred outcome.

The purpose of articulating blame perceptions is discussed in Step 3. (Optional: learners compare responses with a partner.) Next, assign learners to Scenario 1 or 2 (if already paired, they divide the scenarios between themselves). Each drafts a script that begins with a brief greeting and sketches out a conversation that incorporates an assertive approach to handle the situation and advocate for the desired outcome. Students may need to refer back to prior notes or readings about best practices for assertive communication or feedback giving.

Additional practice: In Step 4 have students with Handout A partner with someone who has Handout B to roleplay Scenario 1 such that the student with Handout A will attempt to resolve it assertively. To roleplay Scenario 2, they find new partners who have a different handout than themselves, and students with Handout B will take the assertive lead.

Abbreviated exercise: To run the exercise in less time than proposed, skip the paired discussions in Steps 2 and 4. Substitute a class discussion/review of the scenario analysis and scripts for Scenarios 1 and 2, which will demonstrate how to approach Scenarios 3 and 4.

Intermission for script revisions: Pausing between the roleplays of Scenarios 3 and 4 (Step 6) allows for an iterative approach to consider what worked well and what to improve. Instructors might probe for use of listening, empathy, directness and specificity, and the overall tone or approach and could incorporate the discussion from Step 3 to reinforce concepts related to assertiveness or listening or ask how perceptions of blame affected their approach. Learners then annotate/adjust their plans and scripts based on based on the discussion, self-reflection and suggestions from their partners.

Fishbowl: This format is useful for courses with small enrollments. Student pairs roleplay Scenario 1 in front of everyone. If online, observers would turn their cameras off to deemphasize the sense of people starting. Debrief each pair, first with their own observations, then those of the observers. Subsequent pairs attempt to incorporate these insights. Students then individually prepare

for Scenario 2, which can be roleplayed in the same open format or in breakout rooms. The exercise concludes with a reflection or assessment of the approaches taken and a debrief. Be aware that a fishbowl format can create anxiety (Taylor, 2018; Woodhouse, 2007).

Synchronous virtual format: If the roleplays will take place in virtual breakout rooms, it might be best to add a fifth paired scenario and have trios run through 3, 4 and 5 such that the third person observes and gives feedback. The feedback could be entered directly into a shared discussion board or document, e.g. GoogleDoc and learning management system (Levesque, 2020). Instructors can monitor comments in real-time, which creates accountability for observers. Recall students back to the main virtual room to discuss briefly before the next roleplay. Groupings can remain the same for all three scenarios, or students could be assigned to new breakout rooms as long as they have a chance to try each role (observer, assertive team member and team member causing the issue).

Appendix 2. Handouts

Handout 1: *This handout includes Scenarios 1 and 2 and their prompts. Include enough space for the learners to write a script and a listening plan for their assigned scenario (see Step 1).*

Scenario 1: One member of your five-person team (Chris) was slow to submit work for the first project deliverable. Chris did what was assigned when work was divided at the first meeting but did not respond to some group chats and missed several meetings. Another member updated Chris about what was decided and discussed. You and the two others are unhappy and concerned about upcoming work and due dates. The team can "fire" Chris from the group, but you do not want any extra work as the project is much bigger than you first realized. Identify:

- Core problem.
- Impact on you.
- Who is to blame for what?
- Preferred outcome.

Scenario 2: You and your team members have very different opinions about how to complete the project. One member (Riley) dominates discussions and has strong opinions about how each part should be done. Two group members speak less lately and offer fewer ideas. A third member missed the last meeting and did not reach out about it. Riley's judgmental comments to the group may be a factor. Another team member told you that Riley threatened to go to the professor about the team because the first part of the project is due soon. Identify:

- Core problem.
- Impact on you.
- Who is to blame for what?
- Preferred outcome.

Handout 2: Two versions on different color paper signal parallel roles for pairs to roleplay in Steps 5 and 6. Both handouts need space for writing a script and a communication plan. They differ in that Scenario 3 in Version A and Scenario 4 in Version B will list these prompts:

- Core problem.
- Impact on you.
- Who is to blame for what?
- Preferred outcome.
- What went well?
- What to improve?

And these prompts are to be used with Scenario 4 in Version A and with Scenario 3 in Version B:

- Core problem.
- Impact on you.
- Who is to blame for what?
- Preferred outcome.
- Critique of their approach?
- Were you heard?

Version A: Scenario 3: In your five-person project team, Pat does assigned work before anyone else has a chance to contribute. Pat's work is below your standards, but it is awkward to edit it after it has been shared with the team. Each time you start to contribute, you realize Pat already started or did your part and is getting aggressive about the workload. A member was 10+ min late to a recent Zoom meeting (with notice) and everyone heard Pat mutter almost angrily about it. Scenario 4: You are Morgan on a team with five members. The team turned in its first report and will soon start its second. The work assigned to you did not inspire you to want to do it, perhaps because the team was not very welcoming to you. Hours before the deadline for your portion of the work, you received a terse text asking where your work was. You were mad and chose not to submit anything at all. The next day, you texted back that you had planned to do the work, but the group treated you as if you were incompetent.

Version B: Scenario 3: You are Pat. You have a very busy life and like schoolwork done ahead of due dates. Your four teammates have different views about deadlines. It is hard to trust them when they are not proactive and only contribute right before deadlines. As a result, the work is almost all yours. One was late for the last Zoom meeting, and the others did not care. They do not respect your time. There are a few assignments due before the semester ends. Scenario 4: Your project team has four other members. You divided the writing into five sections. One member (Morgan) still had not provided a draft 2 h before the deadline to submit the report. You texted Morgan but got no response, so you took on Morgan's work at the last minute to finish it. The next day, Morgan replied that the work had been started but was not finished because of the group's rudeness. You think Morgan is blaming the group and not taking responsibility.

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