Teaching Team Leadership: Experiential Activities for Educators and Trainers

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Katzenbach and Smith (1999) define a team as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable” (p. 45). McLean and McLean (2001) define HRD as “any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop…work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity” (p. 10). These two definitions assist HRD educators and trainers to see their potential roles as team leadership developers and influence “the whole of humanity” more broadly. To assist adult learners in developing this “knowledge, expertise, productivity, and satisfaction,” effective HRD academics and practitioners constantly search for new and innovative ways to teach related theories, concepts, and competencies as facilitators or leaders of team development. This is particularly true of those who teach and facilitate leadership courses, training, and development opportunities. Many use activities, case studies, demonstrations, interactive videos, action learning, and other related exercises to assist students
and participants by enhancing their understanding of leadership through experiential exercises. The purpose of this experiential workshop is to offer a variety of innovative team leadership activities and exercises that both practitioners and educators can use with adult learners in various settings (e.g., college classrooms, club activities, corporate training setting, team leadership retreats) to help them further develop related knowledge, competencies, and skills through engaged team leadership activities.

Experiential learning theory (ELT) is a process during which “the learner ‘touches all the bases’—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting—in a recursive process that is responsive to the learning situation and what is being learned” (Kolb, 2009, p. 3). In reference to ELT, Kolb (1984) explained that “knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). As a theory, experiential learning originated from the minds of “William James, John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Carl Rogers, and Paulo Freire—who placed conscious intentional action based on subjective experience at the center of the learning process” (Kolb, 2009, p. 2). In fact, Ord (2009) draws on Dewey to insist that “theories and ideas can only make sense in relation to the lived experience of individuals and communities and as such, they necessarily inform and enlarge experience; and thereby thoughts and ideas must be experiential if they are to be meaningful” (p. 4). Seeing great value in work of Kolb (1984), Hopkinson and Hogg (2004) call his model “one of the most useful descriptive models of adult learning processes” (Groves, 2010, p.2). We intend to facilitate the transformative learning experiences of those at the AHRD conference in 2011 through an innovative session derived from Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model in order to “draw new implications for action” and create “new experiences” (Kolb, 2009, p. 4).

Adults vary in their learning capabilities; they therefore tend toward different modes of
learning. A person may thrive in one respect, yet struggle in another. Despite this fact, we assert that the most meaningful learning experiences are produced through utilizing all four stages of Kolb’s model. In fact, the process is meant to initiate creative tension (Kolb, 2009) among the four learning modes. The stages of Kolb’s model are as follows:

- **Concrete experience** incorporates the surrounding environment, is based on practical experience in real world situations, and “serves as a basis for observations and reflections” (Kolb, 2009, p. 4)
- **Reflective Observation** contributes to abstract conceptualization by encouraging the contemplation of the concepts studied, the experiences had, and the knowledge gained.
- **Abstract Conceptualization** entails passively learning about concepts (e.g., lecture, film, storytelling) and drawing new implications for action (Kolb, 2009, p. 4)
- **Active Experimentation** acts on concrete experiences, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization to transform experiences, “guide in creating new experiences” (Kolb, 2009, p. 4) and allow for the reconceptualization of one’s relationship to the world (Ord, 2009, p. 6)

These four modes of learning are not exclusive; in fact, they reinforce one another. According to Kolb (2009), “When a concrete experience is enriched by reflection, given meaning by thinking, and transformed by action, the new experience created becomes richer, broader, and deeper” (p. 14). An effective experiential learning activity should thus incorporate relevant concepts, an ample reflection period, and opportunities for experimentation and dialogue. Although the workshop may not walk participants through each stage of Kolb’s model, it will nonetheless acquaint them with some of the stages and will act to supplement a fully-fledged experiential program. Team leadership activities are tools that can be used to move from the conceptual to
meaningful dialogue. Such concrete experiences can encourage deep reflection for those involved and give them the tools to facilitate future experiential learning programs themselves.

In this “Teaching Team Leadership through Experiential Activities” session—sponsored by the Leadership Special Interest Group—participants will learn different team leadership activities that can be used in teaching different leadership theories and concepts. The facilitators will use the following process in presenting these activities to innovative session attendees: discuss and present the activity (listen and learn), have participants experience the activity (practice using it hands on), and provide attendees the opportunity to discuss their experiences with others in small groups (reflection). Each attendee will also receive a handout that provides the descriptions of each team activity and the leadership theory, concept, or skill it helps teach. This will include references and lists of additional resources.

Here is an outline of our proposed session:

1. Welcome and introductions of participants

2. Session overview
   a. What are the objectives of the session?
   b. What is experiential learning and reflection? (flip chart activity)
   c. Why do these types of activities work so well? (includes introduction of theoretical framework already described)

3. Team leadership activities (each will have a short explanation, opportunity to practice the exercise, and duo or trio sharing exercise, and implications to practice discussion). These are samples of team activities that may be included:
   a. **Star Activity** (Vision, mission, values, goals, roles, processes, relationships)
   b. **Change Management Activity** (End Zone, Neutral Zone, New Beginning)
c. Traffic Jam (Communication, conflict, roles, decision making)

d. Team Lego Activity: HRD professional competency activity (communication, listening, speaking)

e. Other team leadership activity ideas: Participants share their own ideas

4. Debrief: Overall implications for teaching leadership effectively using these exercises

5. Summary. Next steps.

For the past two years, we have presented innovative sessions similar in structure but have focused on different areas of focus and activities; hence, each is unique:

- Teaching leadership with toys: Creative tools for educators and trainers—2011
  
  *AHRD Research Conference of the Americas*

- Innovative reflection tools for HRD training, development, and education—2010
  
  *AHRD Research Conference of the Americas*

Both were well attended (have become quite popular), and AHRD members tell us these are the most engaging sessions they attend during the conference. This proposal recommends a session that has a similar format but the activities and focus are much different (specifically on team leadership). We believe that through these exercises (and others) that HRD and leadership educators and practitioners can develop key teaching skills in a fun, educational, and interactive way. As we have argued in years past (Madsen & Tunheim, 2011), these sessions can assist educators and practitioners in being aware of available techniques and give them practice to enhance these skills. It can assist HRD [and leadership] professionals in learning new tools for their classrooms, whether that is in academia or for non-profit or for-profit groups, teams, and boards, as well. Most importantly, session participants can immediately begin to implement what they have learned into their own settings. (p. 4)
References


