Using role play to develop an empathetic mindset in executive education

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USING ROLE PLAY TO DEVELOP AN EMPATHETIC MINDSET IN

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of a role play activity as part of an experiential instructional strategy to develop an empathetic mindset among professionals, managers, and executives (PMEs) attending an executive education program in change management. This article provides an approach and process for management educators and facilitators of executive education programs to introduce and teach role play for the busy executives to learn about empathy. Role play is a useful teaching method that helps adult learners understand the importance of seeing things from another person's point of view especially within a short period of time. Management educators and facilitators could introduce and teach role play for the busy executives to learn about empathy based on the proposed approach and process in this article.

INTRODUCTION

In a rapidly changing external environment driven by information communications technology (ICT), an organization's ability to continually adapt and take advantage of new market opportunities requires the development of a strong change culture and a skilled, future ready workforce (Ciarli et al., 2021). This change management capability would help organizations avoid being left behind and rendered obsolete (Belias & Koustelios, 2014). Thus, managers and executives who are leading project teams must be equipped with the necessary change management knowledge, skills, and attitudes to embark on a digital transformation journey (Errida & Lotfi, 2021; The Standish Group, 2015).

This article provides an approach and process for management educators and facilitators of executive education programs to introduce and teach role play for the busy executives to learn about empathy. A critical aspect of effective managers today is the ability to lead change. Having an empathetic mindset is very important in change management because it allows the change manager to view issues from a user's perspective. Understanding such concerns would greatly benefit the formulation of change initiatives to accelerate the rate of change and digital technology adoption. It is an essential aspect of change management competency development. The article is organized along the following headings: National Infocomm Competency Framework, executive education in change management, empathy in change management, role play as part of the

experiential strategy, role play activity and process, usefulness of the role play method, and conclusion.

NATIONAL INFOCOMM COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

The importance of a skilled and educated workforce is well-recognized by governments world-wide (Bateman & Liang, 2016). A common approach in developing trained manpower is the establishment of a national competency framework which identifies and defines the range of skills required. An institutionalized competency-based structure benefits both employers and employees as it creates a consistent baseline for more integrated human resource practices across a specific sector. These national competency frameworks could include critical sectors such as nursing and pharmacy (Deacon et al., 2017).

The National Infocomm Competency Framework (NICF) was developed by the Info-communications Media Development Authority of Singapore (IMDA) and SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) in close collaboration with the ICT industry. The NICF is a national infocomm roadmap that articulated the competency requirements and standards of key ICT specializations such as software application and cybersecurity. It served as a reference document for ICT professionals, managers, and executives (PMEs) who wished to upskill, reskill, and cross skill in the sector.

Some of the NICF approved courses were delivered through executive education programs by institutes of higher learning such as universities and polytechnics in the country. Executive education, broadly, refers to academic programs at a graduate level for PMEs. These programs integrate research with business practice (Waller & Fawcett, 2015). The main aim of such programs is to provide advanced competency development to those who are interested in becoming more competitive in the work environment. A key feature of executive education programs is the immediate application of the skills learnt at the workplace.

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION IN CHANGE MANAGEMENT

A new "NICF Communicating and Managing Change" course was launched a few years ago in response to the need for PMEs to better manage change in the workplace. Change management refers to the process and techniques to help people manage changes at work to achieve the required business outcomes (Graetz & Smith, 2010; Todnem, 2007). It teaches managing the people side of change, also known as the soft side of change, which is perhaps the most challenging and critical aspect of any digital transformation initiatives.

The three-day short course covered topics such as fundamentals of change management and communications; vision for digital change; stakeholder engagement; communicating digital change; managing internal and external communications; and enabling digital change through

organizational alignment, motivation, and training. Other related concepts such as building empathy and developing trust were also taught. The course included interactive in-class presentations, e-learning, gamification, group case study workshops, and a storytelling activity.

EMPATHY IN CHANGE MANAGEMENT

An "empathetic mindset" is defined as the established set of attitudes held by one to understand and share the feelings of another (Hong, 2020; Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008; Weisz & Cikara, 2021). It is an important element in acquiring change management competency which consists of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Knowledge includes facts and concepts for a specific domain while skills generally cover the physical abilities to perform tasks. Attitudes are associated with feelings or emotions about someone or something.

Having an empathetic mindset allows one to connect with others in a useful way and is an essential leadership and managerial trait (McKee, 2016). Being empathetic is essential because it serves to provide insights on the impact of change on an individual, group or organization from a user's perspective. Change management, when rooted in empathy, creates a conducive environment for meaningful conversations among the internal and external stakeholders. Such exchanges help to reduce worry and anxiety and increases the level of trust between individuals and groups. Through

a better understanding of others' perspectives, uncertainties are reduced. This, in turn, further paves the way for the various parties to move forward together into the unknown.

ROLE PLAY AS PART OF THE EXPERIENTIAL STRATEGY

One main challenge faced by management educators and facilitators of executive education programs is to cover all the relevant topics for the entire course in a relatively short period of time. Typically, an executive education program could last between three to five days at most. Besides having to deliver a heavy-content curriculum, management educators and facilitators must also ensure that the participants pick up the required knowledge, skills, and mindsets during this time. It becomes even more challenging to teach concepts and ideas such as empathy which is important to change management. To help management educators and facilitators overcome this challenge, a new role play activity could be introduced to enhance the development of an empathetic mindset among the participants undergoing change management training.

Role play simply refers to the taking on of another person's position in a particular setting (Green, 2020). Various researchers recommend that educators include role play in their curriculum to enhance student learning and understanding of real-world application (Bearman et al., 2015; Rumore, Schenk & Susskind, 2016; Shen, Nicholson & Nicholson, 2015). Such a role play activity

could be introduced to enhance the attitudinal or mindset aspect of change management competency development in terms of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The role play method helps to transform theoretical concepts into an experiential format which participants could quickly understand (Feinstein et al., 2002; Sogunro, 2004). Essentially, such an experiential learning format allows participants to "learn by doing" and subsequently reflect on the experience (Leal-Rodríguez & Albort-Morant, 2019). Experiential learning activities could include workshops, field exercises, and practicums. Thus, without having to significantly modify the original lesson and assessment plan, a simple 30-minute role play activity to help adult learners develop an empathetic mindset could be designed and implemented in an existing change management executive education program.

ROLE PLAY ACTIVITY AND PROCESS

A proposed 30-minute role play activity and process could be delivered as follows. The facilitator would first provide an activity brief on "how change feels". In the briefing, the facilitator could explain the various types of emotions which could be experienced because of changes in the external factors in a situation faced by an individual or group. Next, the facilitator would give the scenario for the role play, that is, a termination of employment. Each participant would receive a personalized "letter of employment change" (refer to Appendix A) from a pseudo employer. The

participants would then be instructed to silently read the letter on their own and then reflect on the types of emotions that they experience during the process of receiving the piece of news in the letter. Then, working in pairs, they would share the emotions that they felt. The pair would then discuss and "plot" the range of emotions experienced over time. Essentially, they are to map the different emotions onto a flip chart indicating the specific order of emotions experienced based on the employment change scenario.

The participants are also expected to indicate the "highs" and "lows" for each emotion experienced relative to one another. To make the process more efficient, each pair of participants would be given a set of "emotions cards" with words or phrases such as confusion, anger, shock, detachment, letting go, enquiry and research, problem solving, curiosity, feeling of loss, nostalgia, sadness, finding new opportunities, buying into the new way, hope, excitement, and guilt written on them. These concepts are related to the Kubler-Ross change curve which is also known as the five stages of grief. This process would then be followed by a class debrief. The main learning outcome should be that participants are now able to identify the range of emotions experienced or felt by a person who has just received the "shocking news" of a poorly worded, insensitive, and official employment termination letter. They should be able to articulate the feelings felt by the "victim" because of this undesirable human resource and change management practice. This personal

experience and class discussion should, in turn, highlight the importance of seeing things from another's viewpoint.

It is suggested that post course participant feedback be collected to identify any empathy-related responses to assess the effectiveness of role play method in teaching empathy. At the end of the course, participants could be asked to reflect and leave their comments, outlining the most important lessons they have learnt and how these lessons could be applied at the workplace, in a post course evaluation survey. The assessment could be based on Kirkpatrick model for evaluating training effectiveness (Kirkpatrick, 1987). This model consists of four levels which measure: level 1 - reaction, level 2 - learning, level 3 – behavior, and level 4 -results. The reflection assignment and post course evaluation survey focus on level 2 – learning, that is, how much of the content participants learned because of the course. The model questions posed in a post course evaluation survey could be found in Appendix B.

It should be noted that participants should not be prompted beyond what is required on the importance of developing empathy to better understand the needs of the affected stakeholders undergoing a change during the in-class lectures and presentations. This is to avoid any forms of biasness for the empathy-related response in the reflection assignment and post course evaluation survey. The evaluator could single out any mention of concepts or ideas related to empathy. For

example, words and phrase such as empathy, empathize, to put myself in the shoes of others, and understanding others from their points of view. Such data could subsequently be examined for any references to empathy which could be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of a simple process such as this in helping adult learners develop an empathetic mindset with short course in change management.

The proposed approach and process of using the new role play activity has been progressively introduced and tested in several runs of an executive education program to enhance the development of an empathetic mindset among the participants undergoing change management training. The initial feedback collected consists of various individuals who have provided some form of reference to empathy from the individual reflection assignment or post course evaluation survey. These responses seemed to suggest the participants demonstrate a deeper appreciation of this required mindset in change management through the role play method. However, more extensive quantitative research should be conducted to establish any cause-and-effect relationships. Future research could focus on the setting up of such experiments.

USEFULNESS OF THE ROLE PLAY METHOD

In this digital age, there is no denying that everyone is busy. PMEs are overwhelmed with far too many office activities to perform and have too little time to work on them. Consequently, these

busy employees could hardly find the time to attend training programs to upskill or reskill. Thus, it is important for management educators and facilitators to be able to identify opportunities to impart maximum learning impact in a given period of time. They must be able to create a training plan with the appropriate exercises to achieve the required leaning outcomes.

Role playing is an effective way for PMEs to make sense of the world around them because of the changes being introduced. Through such as activity, they could learn about how to empathize with others. In the case, they take the role of a distressed employee experiencing a job loss situation. Despite it being a short and simple activity and process, it is believed that adult learners would benefit from the exercise. The participants should be able to "experience" empathy within the short, allotted time of 30 minutes and with minimum effort on the part of the management educators and facilitators to revise the lesson plan. Subsequently, the participants should be able to reflect and recall the concept of empathy and articulate its importance after the course and apply it immediately at work.

CONCLUSION

Empathy is an important element in acquiring change management competency which consists of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. One main challenge faced by management educators and facilitators of executive education programs is the relatively short period of time for the entire

course to be conducted. The role play method is useful in developing an empathetic mindset among PMEs attending executive education programs in change management especially within a short period of time. Management educators and facilitators could introduce and teach role play for the busy executives to learn about empathy based on the proposed approach and process in this article.

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APPENDIX A – Letter to Participants

Date: 5 June 2017 [*Modified according to the actual training period*]

Ministry of Information and Technology

Service Support Professional Unit

Dear *[Actual name of participant],*

Notification of Employment Changes

I regret to inform you that due to the Ministry's productivity commitments, it is necessary for this department to reduce its staffing numbers.

You are being placed in a limited position out of seniority. You have sufficient seniority points to afford you the opportunity to review the job description of the less senior employee(s) in order to decide who should be laid off immediately.

You will be indefinitely transferred from a career position to a nine month appointment as a Human Resources Assistant effective from 22 September 2017 *[Modified according to the actual training period]*.

I have scheduled an appointment for you to meet with the Special Placement Coordinator on 3 September 2017 *[Modified according to the actual training period]* at 3.45pm, in Meeting Room 3-01. The purpose of the meeting is to provide you with information on preferential rehire and recall rights and to review your qualifications for reemployment.

If you have any questions regarding this action, please contact me on +65 1234 5678.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Elsie Pang [*Fictitious name*]

Senior Human Resources Manager

APPENDIX B – Post Course Participant Feedback Questions

a. List below three concepts/techniques that you have learnt about during the course that you

believe would have the greatest impact in your change management activities.

b. Explain why you have selected these concepts/techniques and outline how you would apply

them in your work.