

The Blocks Exercise: Interactive Teaching Strategy for Introducing the ‘Climate of Performance’ in a Management Course

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an exercise that serves as a fun but thought-provoking introduction or follow-up to the study of traditional motivation models in management courses at the undergraduate, graduate and executive education level. The main lesson from the exercise is that the organizational climate may impact performance as much as internal factors that are typically stressed in traditional motivation models. In the exercise, two groups of four students each perform a task consisting of individually making a single stack of children’s alphabet blocks in one minute. The exercise shows how a manager can influence expectations and performance in a workgroup. The results of the exercise, completed hundreds of times in the U.S. and in Asia, has always ended with the same outcome. The first group of students establishes an average goal of 10-12 blocks in their individual stacks. The second group, working with the same number of blocks and same time constraints establish an average goal of 18-20 blocks. The exercise focuses on helping to understand why this happens. This activity, along with information that follows address elements in the ‘Climate of Performance’ that fall outside traditional motivational models. The exercise results in substantial student engagement. It requires very few resources. The exercise and discussions that follow can be completed in a 50-minute class session.

Keywords: Interactive learning, teaching with games, climate of performance, expectations, feedback, delegation.

INTRODUCTION

One of the more common topics covered in many management courses or seminars is motivation. Most management texts will cover a half dozen or more motivation models ranging from Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, Expectancy Theory, Goal Setting Theory, McClelland’s Learned Needs Theory, Behavior Modification, and beyond. Each of these tend to focus on the individual rather than the environment. Few discussions of motivation address the importance of the ‘work climate’ on performance. In the book “How to Grow People into Self-Starters”, Thomas K. Connellan (Connellan, 1972) introduces the concept of “Climate of Performance” and the impact this climate has on the motivation and achievement of individuals. Connellan uses the term ‘self-starters’ to describe highly motivated achievers. In his book, he shares some intriguing statistics that grew out of his research. He found that a disproportionate share of high achieving self-starters are the first born or only child in a family. Depending upon the year, these children make up between 33 and 38% of the population yet they are overrepresented in various studies of high achievers. Connellan shares some examples from his research and follows with the important point that there are factors other than birth order that account for these statistics. These other factors form the basis of the ‘Climate of Performance’ and in turn help explain why first born or only children are frequently overrepresented as achievers.

- A ten-year study of 1,503 superior ninth-grade students from Wisconsin showed that 49% of them were firstborn.
- Of the twenty-three astronauts (at the time of his book), twenty-one were firstborn; the twenty-second had an older sister who died at an early age, and an age gap of thirteen years separated the twenty-third from his next eldest sibling.
- Fifty-five percent of high creative scientists (Ph.D. and a patent rate of more than one per year) at a major chemical firm were firstborn, but only 14% of those who were low creative (a Ph.D. and a patent rate of zero per year) were firstborn.
- Tests of nursery school, kindergarten, and day-care children showed that firstborns scored, on the average, 3.5% higher in creativity than did later-born children.
- A study in England in 1874 showed that firstborns were overrepresented among fellows of the Royal Society.
- A study of 2,274 military personnel showed firstborns overrepresented in high-ranking positions.
- Eighty percent of a group of air-force “military achiever” pilots (top gun pilots) are firstborns.

- A random sample of members of two-child families who entered Columbia University over a twenty-year period showed that, depending upon the year, 52% to 66% of them were firstborns.
- Sixty-four percent of the people from two-child families who were listed in *Who's Who* are firstborns.

From his research, Connellan identifies three elements that make up the 'Climate of Performance' that has resulted in overrepresentation of first-born or only children as achievers. In his book, he goes on to point out these same three elements can create a much more motivational environment within an organization. Importantly, he also points out that when these elements exist, anyone, regardless of birth order, can grow into an achieving self-starter. It is important to stress that while Connellan spends a good bit of time on the impact of birth order on achievement, he stresses the point that it is not birth-order that ultimately impacts performance, it is the environment that is unintentionally created that actually impacts performance. The 'Blocks Exercise' is a useful way to point out the importance of creating the right kind of climate and to help identify the elements that make up a solid 'Climate of Performance'.

THE CLIMATE OF PERFORMANCE

Connellan's original research involved first-born children. He found three factors explaining their overrepresentation as achievers:

1. *There are higher expectations for the firstborns.* They are the ones who are going to be the all-star quarterback, the president of the senior class, or the captain of the cheerleading squad. In whatever direction expectations lie, they tend to be higher for the firstborn.
2. *Firstborns are given more responsibility at an earlier age.* If, for example, children are sent to the movies, the firstborn is given money to buy tickets and popcorn.
3. *They receive more feedback and more attention is paid to what they're doing.* They get more attention from friends, neighbors, and relatives than the rest of the children. Parents even tend to take more pictures of the firstborn. (Connellan; p.7)

Connellan then extended his research to look at later born children who were also high achievers. He also studied high achieving adults in organizations who were not first-born. Not surprisingly, he found the same three elements were available to these individuals. The important conclusion to be drawn is that it is not birth order that determines our level of motivation or achievement. Rather, it is being in an environment (The Climate of Performance) where three factors are consistently applied:

- (1) Positive Expectations
- (2) Regular Attention and Feedback
- (3) Early Responsibility

An instructor or a manager can have a positive impact on each of these elements. As Connellan's research pointed out, even an individual can create the positive climate for themselves by believing in themselves and setting high standards, by creating feedback mechanisms and/or seeking feedback, and by volunteering to be responsible for various assignments that will allow them to grow.

POSITIVE EXPECTATIONS

The literature on the power of positive expectations dates back to Greek and Jewish mythology. Expectations can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as it did in the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who fell in love with a statue he had carved. In Jewish mythology, there is the 'golem' effect, which suggests that negative expectations can result in lower performance. (Rosenthal, 2003) Aside from mythology, there have been a number of studies on the impact of expectations on performance in educational as well as organizational settings. One of the early investigations in education was the Rosenthal-Jacobson study. (Rosenthal, 2003) This study showed that when teachers were led to believe that a group of randomly selected students had outstanding promise, over time the student's performance did actually improve. The teacher's expectations were unintentionally projected to the students and/or the teachers gave these students more time, attention and encouragement. In an organizational setting, a two-month field study of 70 newcomers, 70 team leaders and 102 teammates in high-tech project teams found that newcomer general self-efficacy and experience predicted expectations and that expectations did impact newcomer role performance. (Chen, 2003)

ATTENTION AND FEEDBACK

The literature on the importance of feedback is both extensive and almost entirely positive. In sales, Moore found that when correctly given, feedback helps improve job performance while promoting professional and personal growth in employees. (Moore, 1970) She goes on to say that providing feedback can improve employee morale and reduce confusion regarding expectations and current performance. In the popular book, The One Minute Manager, Lewis Blanchard and Spencer Johnson identify three important actions. One was to “catch your employees doing something right” and then to provide them with a ‘One Minute Praising’. This is a simple way to stress the importance of providing positive and specific feedback in a timely manner. The last important point in the book addresses the importance of providing reprimands or negative feedback when an employee willfully fails to do what was required. (Blanchard, 2012) It is interesting to note that in the newly updated edition of the book, The New One Minute Manager, the three concepts (One Minute Goal Setting; One Minute Praising; and One Minute Reprimands) are the same, except “One Minute Reprimands” has been changed to “One Minute Redirects”, a more positive form of negative feedback. Susan Wyse (Wyse, 2017) points out that common sense and research support the importance of feedback. She identifies five reasons feedback is important:

1. Feedback is always there or available.
2. Feedback is effective listening.
3. Feedback can motivate.
4. Feedback can improve performance.
5. Feedback is a tool for continued learning.

Research conducted by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management also supports the importance of feedback. In one publication, the office identifies three important elements needed when providing feedback. (Feedback is critical to improving performance, 2017)

1. Specificity
2. Timeliness
3. Manner

DELEGATION

Like feedback, the benefits of proper delegation are well recognized. There is little or no literature that discounts the importance of delegation. There is a substantial amount of literature, however, on when to delegate, and on the proper techniques of delegation. Most discussions of delegation identify the benefits to the delegator. These include better use of their time, and increasing their value by allowing the delegator to achieve more. Most discussions of delegation recognize a number of benefits to the recipient employee. These include an opportunity to develop new skills and experiences, to build self-esteem, and to enjoy and benefit from job enhancement. In a team environment, delegation allows for more efficiency, more flexibility, encourages teamwork, helps balance workloads, aids in communication and may help retain high performing team members. (Burns, 2006)

Much of the literature on delegation focuses on the proper techniques for delegation. Topics typically covered include identifying some of the reasons managers do not delegate well, focus on when the manager should delegate, and on the specifics of how to delegate properly (Heller, 2008). In a classic article in the Harvard Business Review entitled “Management Time: Who’s Got the Monkey?” the focus was on how to recognize and prevent reverse delegation. The article includes excellent advice on the proper way to manage the delegation process. (Wass, 2015)

THE BLOCKS EXERCISE

When introducing the topic of motivation in a management class, it useful to begin by introducing the concept of the importance of creating a positive ‘Climate of Performance’. It is equally useful to conduct the exercise and the discussion of the ‘Climate of Performance’ following the study of the more traditional motivation models. Each approach has worked successfully. Before introducing the three elements in the ‘Climate of Performance’, however, it useful to conduct an exercise that will demonstrate to students how powerful expectations are and how a manager (or in this case the instructor) can impact our expectations. The exercise begins by asking for eight volunteers. Students are told that we are going to do an exercise in “goal setting”. The eight students are divided into two groups of four students each. One of the groups is asked to wait in the hall while the first group completes the exercise so that their goals are not impacted by the performance of the first group.

Once the group of volunteers is divided and one group is ushered into the hall, the remaining group receives the following instructions:

1. This is an exercise in goal setting. You will be working as individuals, not as a team.
2. You will stack these children's alphabet blocks in a single stack, using only one hand.
3. You will have one minute to complete your task.
4. At the end of one minute the blocks have to remain standing long enough to be counted.
5. In one minute, you should be able to get about 10 blocks in your stack.
6. Points are awarded in this manner: Assume you set a goal of 10 and you actually have 12 in your stack. You will receive 10 points for all up to your goal and five bonus points for each block above your goal. You would have 110 points in this example. Assuming you set a goal of 10 and you only have eight in your stack, you will still receive 10 points for each, so a total of 80 points. The numbers are written on the board and then erased. Students are provided with a blank slip of paper.
7. Do not worry about points but on the slip of paper provided, just write down the number of blocks you are going to attempt to have in your stack. This is your goal. You do not have to write your name of the slip of paper.

The individual slips of paper (goals) are collected and given to a seated student who is asked to remember these are the goals for the first group. At this point, students gather around the instructor's desk at the front of the classroom. The blocks have been distributed on the surface of the desk. The students are given the signal to begin. They are told when 30 seconds remain. They are then given the stop command at the end of the minute and asked to count their blocks. The first group of students are then seated and the second group of students are asked to return from the hall.

The instructions given the second group are identical to those given to the first group except for items number five and six. For item five, the group is told that in one minute, they should be able to get about 20 blocks in their stack. For item six, the instructions are as follows: Points are awarded in this manner: Assume you set a goal of 20 and you actually have 22 in your stack. You will receive 10 points for all up to your goal and five bonus points for each block above your goal. You would have 220 points in this example. Assuming you set a goal of 20 and you only have 18 in your stack, you will still receive 10 points for each, so a total of 180 points. The numbers are written on the board and then erased. The students write their goal on a slip of paper, these are collected by the instructor and given to another seated student who is asked to hold these and remember that they are the goals for group two.

Once the second group completes the exercise they are seated and the instructor is given the four slips of paper representing the individual goals established by the first group. The goals are written on the board, totaled and an average is derived. Then the goals set by the second group of students are listed on the board, totaled and an average derived. The average goals established by the first group of students are almost always between 10 and 12. The average goals established by the second group of students are almost always between 18 and 20. The only difference between the two groups is the 'climate' of expectations that were established by the instructor while giving the instructions and examples of how points would be calculated.

TEACHING POINTS / LESSONS / DISCUSSION

- There are dozens of well-known and respected motivation models. These generally focus on elements within the individual. They do not generally address the external 'climate' of the organization. This exercise can be followed by a review of traditional motivation models or it can be conducted at the conclusion of a review of traditional models. Each approach has worked successfully.
- The main goal of the 'Blocks Exercise' is to introduce the concept of the 'Climate of Performance' and to show how the external environment can influence one's goals, achievement and motivation.
- The elements in the 'Climate of Performance' include: Positive Expectations; Attention and Feedback; and Delegated Early Responsibility.
- Those in authority (parent, teacher, facilitator, manager, coach, etc.) play a crucial role in helping create a positive 'Climate of Performance'.
- Unfortunately, authority figures can also create a negative 'Climate of Performance' by projecting negative expectations, providing little or no appropriate feedback, and by failing to delegate early responsibility.

- Absent a strong authority figure, an individual can create for him/herself a positive ‘Climate of Performance’ by having positive expectations, by regularly seeking or creating feedback, and by volunteering for and being willing to assume responsibility.
- Birth order appears to be significant but it **does not** matter. Environmental or climate factors do matter.
- Student goals are influenced by the suggested performance expectations of the instructor.
- To some degree, student performance in the exercise is influenced by the goals they establish. It is not uncommon to observe students stop stacking when they achieve their goal, others continue.
- Financially – there is no cost to having and projecting positive expectations.
- Financially – there is no cost to providing attention and feedback.
- Financially – there is no cost to delegating early responsibility.
- Thus, some of the most important factors under the influence of authority figures have no financial cost.
- The costs associated with creating a positive ‘Climate of Performance’ are in the time and effort needed from the authority figure.
- Classroom discussion typically includes the observation that were we to conduct the same exercise a second time, the influence of the instructor on the goals established would be greatly diminished. The goals would be influenced more by past experience with the exercise and by the knowledge of what the first group of students were able to complete. This allows for a final lesson. The authority figure (teacher, coach, manager, parent) will have the greatest impact on expectations very early. Following this, we tend to be influenced more by our past experience and by our peers. Our greatest influence will occur early, so as a manager, take advantage of creating ‘new’ opportunities to influence the employee’s expectations in a positive way. Proper delegation can provide the manager with these opportunities.
- Once expectations are established, the authority figure must provide specific and timely feedback and look for chances to delegate new growth opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

This exercise has been conducted over one hundred times and using the same instructions, the exercise has ended with the same results every time regardless of location or group composition. The average goal established by the first group ranges from 10 to 12. The goal established by the second group ranges from 18 to 20. In every instance, they have the same resources, they are doing the same task, and they have the same amount of time. The only difference is that the instructor has influenced their expectations regarding what they should be able to accomplish. At this point, the ‘Climate of Performance’ can be introduced and the point can be emphasized that the first element, the power of positive expectations is real, and that this has been proven in a small way via the ‘blocks exercise’. The information on birth order, which is usually interesting to students, is used to discuss how attention and feedback is impacted, and how early responsibility is important. These elements make up the important ‘Climate of Performance’.

It is the observation of instructors conducting this exercise, that the three elements that make up the ‘Climate of Performance’ are not related to gender, age, education level, or cultural background. In fact, the exercise has been conducted in over one dozen MBA courses delivered in Taiwan and mainland China. The results have been identical to results at the undergraduate, graduate and executive education level in the U.S.

One additional lesson was learned from this exercise quite by accident and sharing the results can lead to a deeper discussion of goal setting, rewards and motivation. One time the instructions were modified slightly. Once a goal was established, the students were told they would receive 10 points for each block. Once the goal was met they would receive five bonus points for each block above their goal. But if they did not reach their goal, there would be a five point penalty for each block below their goal. With this scenario, there was very little difference between the two groups of students and in both cases, the goals were established at an extremely low level, in the range of 5 to 6 for both groups. It becomes clear that if managers create an environment where they punish their employees for not meeting goals, this will create a very negative climate and will result in much lower goals and motivation.

The authors of these ‘teaching notes’ would like to invite our colleagues to try this exercise. Students tend to enjoy the activity, to become engaged and learn to appreciate how important creating a positive climate is to performance.

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