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Powerplay — a simulation

Dick, Bob (1991) *Powerplay: a "do-it-yourself" simulation*.

A workshop design initially written for the Second International Conference on Experiential Learning (Hawkesbury Agricultural College, 3-7 July, 1989) and subsequently revised.

This brief document explains how a group of people can themselves design, run and debrief a simulation in three or four hours on a topic of mutual choice. "Power" is used as a theme to illustrate the approach.

Simulations don't need experienced facilitators to run them. A group of people can fairly easily design, run and debrief a simulation in half a day or a little more.

This document explains how. It takes "power" as its theme. The same approach can be used for other topics on which the participants have sufficient experience, and which are also likely to generate interesting social dynamics. Power, however, is a good first choice if you are looking for a topic to try your hand out.

As I have already implied there are three main phases to the activity. The first is to design the simulation. The second is to play it. Finally, it is debriefed. Below, I describe these in turn. Some other issues are then briefly canvassed.

In some parts of the description I have given a fair amount of detail. In doing so, I describe examples of the methods that I myself use on occasion. I would prefer that you treat these only as examples: feel free to substitute other processes which you use in your own group work.

Designing the simulation

To design the simulation, first choose a general topic, and then a situation which exemplifies that topic. Identify the key players, and have participants volunteer for these roles. Then agree on any "groundrules" which should apply. Here is the design phase in more detail...

1 Design the simulation

1.1. Choose a theme

1.1.1. List possible themes

1.1.2. Vote on themes, removing the lowest-rated item each time and then repeating the vote. Continue until there is a substantial majority for a single theme. Allow people to add compromise themes to the list at each round of voting.

1.2. Choose an example of the theme. Use the same process as before to select a particular scenario. I have had better results when it is an imaginary scenario but one which is similar to actual situations which have been featured recently in the press.

1.3. Identify the "players."

   1.3.1. Use brainstorming or nominal group technique to list the players.

   1.3.2. Collectively decide which players *must* be included in the simulation. It "media," "public" and "observers" are not included, include them unless you have a good reason for believing they are not necessary.

   1.3.3. For player categories which are a group rather than an individual, decide how many are necessary.

   1.3.4. Allot participants to key roles by calling for volunteers for each.

   1.3.5. When all key roles are filled, allow remaining participants to volunteer for any role they wish (either a key role where there are multiple players, or one of the other identified roles).

   (You will often find that people who don't wish to play a part will happily take an observer role.)

1.4. Agree on the groundrules and timing.

   1.4.1. Use a listing and voting process to agree on a set of groundrules which participants agree to observe during the simulation. If it is not included, add that any participant may for sufficient reason call "time out" to discuss some troubling aspect of the simulation or some breach of the groundrules.

   1.4.2. Decide collectively on the completion time for the active part of the simulation. In general you will find it useful to split the time equally between playing and debriefing.

Playing the simulation

To play the simulation, choose an initiator and then let that person begin the activity. As before, the decision is made collectively. Provide planning time for each group before beginning the simulation. Then run the simulation until the agreed time for completion.

The resulting style is a little like that of sociodrama, but without a director. You probably need a facilitator, who can manage the "time outs" and perhaps act as mediator if disputes develop.

2 Play the simulation

2.1. Collectively choose the role who is most likely to be the initiator of the situation being played.

2.2. Allow about 15 or 20 minutes planning time. During this time, the players group together (in ways which they themselves decide) to work out their general approach to the situation. They do this as themselves, or in other words *out of role*. During this time the observers decide what they will observe, and perhaps design briefing sheets for themselves.

2.3. Ask players to choose names which are different to their actual names. Ask them to label themselves (with name tags, or pieces of wide masking tape) with their adopted name and position.

2.4. Ask the key players to choose some part of the playing area as their home base. Encourage them to use furniture, signs, and whatever else they wish to decorate the area. If there are chalkboards or the like, allow the media to have access to these as a substitute for newspapers.

2.5. Just before the actual simulation begins warn players that there is a tendency for people to be more bloody-minded in role plays and simulations than in "real life." Suggest that they will get more out of it if they try to demonstrate the same levels of cooperation and willingness to compromise as is evident in their normal lives.

2.6. Declare the simulation open. Let it run until the agreed time for concluding.

Debriefing the simulation

The debriefing is an important part of the activity, and consumes more time than you might expect. It has three main phases: collecting the information, discussing and analysing it, and drawing conclusions from it.

3 Debrief the activity

3.1. Collect information on reactions to the activity.

3.1.1. I ask participants to make a clear distinction between people in role and people as themselves. I remind them that during the simulation they are in role, and ask them to talk only of the characters being played, not of the people playing them.

3.1.2. I find it useful to collect emotional reactions first, and to do it with participants still in role. I ask them to jot down three adjectives which characterise the views of themselves and of each of the other key players.

3.1.3. More cognitive reactions can then be collected, for example in the form of answers to the question "What did you observe other groups doing, and what did you think they were trying to achieve?" This is again done in role.

3.1.4. This information is collected publicly.

3.1.5. The observers add their own observations to the information which has been collected.

3.2. Players step out of role. When "power" is the theme, I have found the following a useful way of marking this transition, while also exchanging useful information...

3.2.1. Still in role, players are asked to line up across the room in terms of how powerful they felt during the simulation. I define "powerful" as "able to influence others".

3.2.2. A sample of players from different parts of the line are asked to describe briefly their reasons for taking up that position.

3.2.3. Players may question each other about their position, or offer their views about where they expected the player to stand. During this exercise they are asked to address each other in role, not by their actual names.

3.2.4. Players maintain their relative positions on the "powerful" dimension, still in role. They are asked to move at right angles to this dimension to take up a position which represents their ability to withstand influence. As before, a sample of players are asked to explain their position; other players may then question or comment on this.

3.2.5. Players are now asked to think about where they would stand on the same two dimensions "as themselves, in your everyday life and work." At a signal, they replace their role name tags with their actual names, and move to the chosen position.

3.2.6. Participants are requested from this point to make a distinction between behaviour in role and behaviour out of role.

3.2.7. As before, participants discuss their own position and react to other people's position.

3.3. There is a structured discussion on the key events in the simulation, and the conclusions which might be drawn from them. This might take the form, for example, of reconstructing a "chronology" or history of the simulation in terms of key events. These are listed on chalkboard or butcher paper as they are contributed.

3.4. Participants collect the "insights" they have developed from the activity.

3.4.1. Working individually, participants reflect on the activity, noting any "surprises" they experienced. A surprise is a sign that something unexpected happened; this in turn indicates that people didn't understand it at the time, and that it is an opportunity for learning.

3.4.2. In small groups, participants try to capture what they have learned by stating what behaviours produce what outcomes in what situation. “In situation *x* if you do *y* then the outcomes you produce are *z*.

3.4.3. These “if... then...” statements, as I call them, are collected in the whole group.

3.4.4. In small groups, people devise practical and personally-relevant applications for some of the “if... then...” statements.

3.5. Closure. People say their farewells, and the activity is concluded.

Numbers

The simulation has been run with numbers varying between about 8 (at the International Conference on Experiential Learning, where half of the intending participants went to an alternative venue by mistake) and about 40 or 50. It seems to work best with large numbers, though at the cost of being slightly more difficult to manage. My own preference is for about 30 participants.

The small numbers had a surprising influence on the course of events. Large groups are slow to start, but then “take off” quickly as they generate their own dynamics. The smaller group got off to a much quicker start, but then continued at a relatively modest pace for all of the activity. I thought at the start that smaller numbers would save us time; but because of the slower pace, this was not so. As I have only used this once with such a small group I wouldn’t necessarily expect the same to happen again.

Debriefing activities can be much simpler with small numbers. If you are doing this with large numbers, I suggest you give some attention to planning a detailed debriefing process.