

Promoting Cooperation in an MBA Program: Experiential Learning in the Trees

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Abstract

MBA programs are intensely competitive. If a student excels beyond their peers, they expect to be individually rewarded. At the same time, much of the work in an MBA program is completed in groups or teams therefore MBA students need to act cooperatively. This paper describes an experiential outdoor activity for international MBA students that highlighted the differences between competition and cooperation creating an opportunity for discussion about these different perspectives. An examination of cooperation and competition from a cross cultural perspective is also presented.

Introduction

Team work is common in organizations as it enhances communication and breaks down barriers across functional areas (Senge, 1990). This type of organizational grouping is mimicked in MBA programs through group work. For MBA students, group work requires cooperation, but such cooperative work has limits because MBA students compete for individual grades and seek to maximize benefits and minimize costs for themselves. According to Kohn (1992: 198), who argues that we tend to confuse competitiveness with excellence, "...few values are more persistently promoted in American classrooms than the desirability of trying to beat other people...Our collective creativity seems to be tied up in devising new ways to produce winners and losers." MBA programs often encourage a competitive environment in an effort to replicate the competitive market place for which these students are being groomed.

In organizations and MBA programs it is important for individuals to appreciate the benefits and costs of competitive versus cooperative behaviours and recognize which approach is most appropriate for a given situation. They should also be able to change behaviours depending on the demands and conditions of the situation. According to Kolb and Kolb (2005: 194) who advocated for experiential learning in higher education, "(l)earning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world." As such, learning about competition and cooperation is best done by placing the differing approaches to work and rewards in juxtaposition.

This paper outlines an experiential learning activity designed to enhance the awareness of competition and cooperation amongst a group of students. The primary participants were Iranian students in an intensified Canadian MBA program. Their undergraduate education in Iran encouraged strong individualistic and competitive behaviours that rarely involved group work or experiential learning. The experiential learning activity described in this paper is particularly appropriate for cultures with highly individualized behaviours. The aerial event the cohort partook in was an effort to encourage cooperative behaviour amongst a cohort of MBA students for which group work and cooperation was posing continuous challenges.

At the start of the cohort's MBA program, the orientation included theory on group work and a discussion about effective and ineffective group behaviours. The students worked in groups for the first half of the program, however, the groups were constantly changing due to small and large in-group disagreements. The aerial event aimed to remind students of the advantages of cooperative behaviour and how it differs from competitive interactions.

The approach to the aerial experience was experiential learning, learning through reflection on doing rather than through dialogue (Itin, 1999). "Experiential exercises that demand rigorous engagement and involvement on the part of students are found to be an invaluable pedagogical tool in underscoring and achieving learning objectives related to decision making in a dynamic 'real-life' environment" (Devasagayam, Johns-Masten & McCollum, 2012: 1). According to one participant of the MBA cohort "The aerial experience was one of the best parts of the program." A₂ The students made it clear the event had strong student receptivity which enhanced the learning aspect of the event. The level of engagement motivated the students to discuss how they experienced the event and to reflect on their learning. The event was also beneficial to those directing and teaching in the MBA as it provided an opportunity to discuss group dynamics separate from the classroom.

Benefits for MBA Students

The activity helped students recognize how different it feels to be in a cooperative versus competitive environment and how supportive a cooperative environment can be. In a study by the Conference Board of Canada (2012) one of the key employee skills sought by corporations is team work. Prospective employees must demonstrate they can resolve group conflict, understand the role of conflict, and understand and work within the dynamic of a group.

Furthermore, "MBA programs focus too much on analytical capabilities to the neglect of 'softer' skills" (Simpson 2006: 184), such as team work, cooperation and ethics (Crosbie, 2005), skills that are seen as "increasingly important in the workplace" (Simpson 2006: 184). Soft skills, critical in emotional intelligence, contribute more to an individual's ultimate success or failure than technical skills or overall intelligence (Goleman, 1995). However, despite the importance of soft skills, MBA programs fail to significantly enhance student skills in this area. A study completed by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business ranked MBA students from two high level business schools on emotional intelligence before and after their MBA program and found only a two per cent improvement over the duration of the program (Boyatzis, 2009). The experiential activity presented in this paper was aimed at reinforcing the softer skill of cooperation and an understanding of the ideal conditions for, and differences between, cooperation and competition.

In addition, a lack of attention to interpersonal relations and cooperation can lead to failure in leadership. For example, Jeff Skilling, disgraced CEO of Enron, encouraged cut throat competitive behaviour (Swartz & Watkins, 2003). When Enron imploded, Skilling's contribution to the collapse pushed Harvard University, Skilling's Alma mater, to re-evaluate the Business Ethics education included in their MBA program. MBA programs, by promoting theories based on practices where the winner takes all at all costs "actively free their students from any sense of moral responsibility" and thus limits their ability to play a more positive role in society (Ghoshal, 2005:76). This experiential activity links cooperation to success and leadership by requiring participants to take on spontaneous leadership roles and cooperation to do well.

Also, given that the MBA program described in this study consisted of Iranian students who had joined a Canadian MBA program to learn about North American management approaches, such an activity can be considered a unique learning experience. In Iranian culture when disputes arise often a more senior family member, such as a parent, or in an organization a more established, powerful and often older employee would negotiate a resolution (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). In an MBA program, according to an Iranian perspective, this would be the MBA director or at a minimum the professors. However, in North American MBA programs the expectation is that students need to resolve differences themselves as part of the learning around group processes. As a result of these different cultural approaches group conflicts were persisting and escalating during the program. The aerial event was designed to create a forum for all participants, students and administrators, to dialogue about how to contend with the competitive and individualistic behaviours and the conflicts that arose as a result of such behaviours.

Cooperation and Competition

Individuals interact with other each other through competition and cooperation. However, individuals do not always make wise decisions about when to compete or cooperate. Even when they know in theory that competition is counterproductive, individuals often still prefer to compete (Berg, 2010). Nothing is more basic to humans than being ‘for’ or ‘against’ other people” (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). However, “the perfectly competitive market is neither the unique nor the most widespread type of competition among firms and individuals.” Even in competition there is cooperation. “(T)he oligopoly and winner-take-all market are two scenarios where actors’ behaviour is influenced by the presence of several opponents. In both cases, they have to decide whether it is more suitable to try and cooperate rather than fight” (Ottone & Ponzano, 2010: 163).

Competition

Competitive structures work best when individuals work independently and are rewarded individually (Johnson, Johnson & Bryant, 1973). Competition is viewed as positive for many reasons. It promotes fuller use of one’s abilities, leads to fairer allocations of benefits and burdens, and discourages apathy and stagnation while leading to higher standards (Rich, 1988). Success in a competitive environment can lead to an enhanced sense of ability and self esteem. On the other hand, failure can create feelings of shame, envy, despair, selfishness, and depression (Johnson, Johnson & Bryant, 1989; Rich, 1988). In addition, competition may encourage cheating and selfishness, (Schwieren & Weichselbaumer, 2010; Cooper & Peterson, 1980) such as in sports events in which some athletes behave unethically. For example, cyclist Lance Armstrong used performance enhancing substances for Olympic-level cycling and the Tour de France (Goldman, 2013), figure skater Tonya Harding physically assaulted Nancy Kerrigan during the Olympic tryouts (Longman, 2010) and body builder Arnold Schwarzenegger used psychological pressures on competitors in the Mr. Olympia competition (Gaines & Butler, 1974).

Competitions need two or more people or groups vying for a reward that is in short supply. In addition, the competitive activities have rules (Rich, 1988). Competitions also require comparisons in which participants are compared to their competitor(s) (Levine, 1983; Charness, Masclet & Villeval, 2013). As a result, individuals in a competitive situation are more anxious, less self-assured and more self-oriented (Johnson, Johnson & Bryant, 1973). Rewards in competitive business settings can be monetary, such as when a business wins a contract or an employee advances to a higher paying position over their peers, or non-monetary, such as an employee being recognized as employee of the month.

Cooperation

Cooperation is more effective than competition when joint work, positive interdependence and face-to-face interaction, can produce synergy and provide greater rewards for everyone (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). In complex problem solving situations cooperation has been found to produce better results as it creates more integrative and less dominating behaviour among participants (Johnson, Johnson & Bryant, 1973). The impact of an interaction on the participants is also an important consideration. Working in a cooperative arrangement, when successful, can increase participants’ psychological health by enhancing social competencies, achievement, productivity, and motivation. In cases where there is failure, cooperation can help the group cope with failure and anxiety associated with this situation (Johnson & Johnson, 1989).

Each individual has their own set of skills and experience that they bring to work situations. As a result, the amount of individual contribution to a project or activity will vary depending on the nature of the task. However, because individual accountability and effort is not always measured, teamwork is often beset with the notorious free-rider problem (Reuben & Tyran, 2008). “Collaboration could produce a better outcome for all, but it is not fully attainable because individuals are tempted to pursue their own goals while free riding on others’ contributions” (Wu, Loch & Ahmand, 2011:650).

Experiential Group Activities

Numerous studies, in various disciplines, have demonstrated positive benefits associated with cooperative based learning (Marr, 1997; Springer, Stanne, & Donovan 1997; Smith, Sheppard, Johnson & Johnson, 2005, Tomcho & Foels, 2012). While many of these studies are focused on in-class cooperative activities, experiential learning activities outside of the classroom also positively impact students.

In a meta-analysis of adventure education programs, Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards (1997) concluded that “there are few experiences in other educational programs that have as much potential to duplicate the quality and immediacy of experiences that occur during an adventure program” (Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997: 74). Adventure programs most commonly incorporate social support and team-based cooperative learning into their programs.

Many options exist for those seeking to use adventure style programs to promote group cooperation. The most popular activities include laser tag, paintball, obstacle courses and outdoor adventure experiences such as those offered by the organization ‘Outward Bound’. Laser tag and paintball offer similar experiences in that they allow individuals or groups to compete with others in a mock combat situation in a less threatening manner. Both are competitive and identify clear winners. To play laser tag, hand-held infrared devices are used to shoot other individuals on opposing teams wearing infrared sensitive equipment. Paintball offers a similar experience; participants use a paintball gun to shoot paint capsules at high speed to ‘tag’ the opponent with paint.

Outdoor adventure experiences include a range of different possibilities. The programs can vary in duration from a few hours to several weeks. These programs seek to promote cooperation through team-based activities aimed at improving social connections and fostering problem solving in unconventional, and often unfamiliar, situations. Promoted as a fun and interesting way to interact with colleagues, these activities encourage bonding and closer interactions between group members through interdependence. There are a number of factors common across programs including a break from everyday routines, engagement with nature, incorporation of physical tasks, an increased reliance on team members to accomplish goals.

Perhaps the most well-known forms of outdoor adventure programs are the activities which take place in remote locations and use challenging physical tasks (rock climbing, forest trekking, hiking and rock climbing). While adventure programs remain popular, safety has become a critical factor in such activities. The deaths of two participants of an Outward Bound trip in Lockhart Canyon, Utah, U.S.A. in 2006 (Ketcham, 2012) in combination with the intense physical nature of the activity, has resulted in a re-evaluation of the appropriateness and safety of such programs in general. In an evaluation of why the Outward Bound trip ended in tragedy, the failure of students to cooperate, in combination with ignoring trip protocol, was at the core of the problem (Ketcham, 2012).

Selection of Activity

Each of the options listed above were considered. However, given that previous research has reported that students involved in these activities generally list enjoyment of nature as highly valuable to the experience (Brown & Haas, 1980; Rossman & Uleha, 1977) and that safety concerns needed to be met, it was decided that a less physically intense outdoor activity would provide the best fit. Also it was important to create as different a learning environment as possible to encourage an openness to new ideas. According to Gunter (1987) separation from day-to-day activities creates more involvement in a new activity. Additionally, given the intensive nature of an MBA program, and the strict time constraints under which this program operated, an activity that lasted several days was not an option. While longer programs are often viewed as yielding greater benefits Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997: 63) found that “the effects for students were similar regardless of duration.” After an evaluation of available options, an outdoor aerial obstacle course was chosen. In addition, students were required to prepare a group presentation following the activity to reflect on the day’s events.

Participants

12 students were registered in the MBA program. All students participated in the day’s activities. The students ranged in age from 22 to 42 years old, four being female and eight male. Normally the MBA program in question was taught in Iran by Canadian professors in blocks of six days per course; however, due to political unrest halfway through the program, classes were moved to Canada to the university campus. The 12 students had been living in Iran at the start of the MBA and had been in Canada only one month at the time of the event. Activities such as the aerial event were included in the Canadian-based program to provide the students with a unique Canadian experience. Three additional participants also took part in the aerial course. They included the program director, an English instructor, and the program administrator; all of the MBA students were familiar with these additional participants prior to the day’s activities. These three individuals acted as observers during the aerial and presentations that followed.

Methodology

The organization of the aerial event was designed to make the students believe they were participating in a competitive situation. Colour coding of groups created an initial sense of intergroup competition. The students reinforced the competitive assumption, and those organizing the event did not dissuade them of these ideas. Once embarked on the aerial course, students began to realize the obstacle course required cooperative rather than competitive interaction. In addition, no measures were taken to compare abilities across the teams. Gradually the students recognized their team provided a support system and that even across teams support and cooperation was provided. With this recognition, and the sense of accomplishment of completing the obstacles in the course, the students began to relax and enjoy the obstacles in a cooperative manner.

The MBA program in Canada was structured with intensive full-day classes offered sequentially allowing for one to two days between courses. The aerial event was run between two courses when there was a two day break. Data, in the form of observations and recorded student comments, were gathered by the director and English instructor leading up to, and during the aerial event. Additional data was provided by the students in their video recorded presentations.

The Aerial Obstacle Course

The outdoor aerial obstacle course chosen for this program consisted of numerous obstacles and zip lines divided into five separate zones spanning approximately three hours of activity. All of the obstacles involved in the course took place in the treetops of a forest outside the city in which the university is located. Examples of obstacles included: zip-lines (participants hang from a pulley suspended on a cable attached to two points and are propelled along the cable by gravity), rope bridges, suspended walkways, monkey bridges, and rope swings.

Group Identity

In order to create a strong sense of group identities and initial competition between groups, the participants were divided into three groups with one of the additional participants being added to each team for a total of 15 participants. The groups were purposely assembled to be different than their classroom groups. Each group contained both introvert and extrovert personalities and academically strong and average students. Each of these groups were assigned a team colour a week in advance and required to arrive to the event wearing clothing to match the group colour.

Competitive Precondition

In the days leading up to the aerial course, a strong sense of competition developed between each of the teams and competitive banter could be heard whenever opposing team members were found in the same room. Comments included: "You are team green. We don't talk to team green" B₄ or "Team red is going to win. We are the best." C₁ Mostly it was playful banter but often it was designed to taunt the other groups. For example, "Just wait to the aerial," C₂ and, "Our team will definitely win. Look who is on your team." A₁ This competitive dialogue included comments between the students, the students and additional participants and even between the additional participants. Prior to the event, students started wearing their team colours, boasting how their team was going to win.

In addition to the presence of competitive banter, there was also a sense of nervousness among some of the participants about the difficulty of the aerial course and their ability to complete it. Several students admitted going to the aerial webpage of the host company to see if there was information about the course. Some admitted individually, away from others, to be terrified of heights wondering if they could even get started on the course. The students also mentioned such an activity was something they would not experience in Iran except perhaps during military service.

The participants were informed by the director in advance that if any individual felt uncomfortable during the obstacle course they could chose to be escorted down to the ground by the aerial staff. However, if they did so according to the aerial company rules, they would not be permitted back on the course during the event. Participants commented that "Being escorted down in front of everyone would be worse than being up in the treetops and scared."C₁

The Aerial Experience

To increase excitement about the event, face paint was provided to each group 20 minutes before the activity. Designing the look of the face paint and putting on the face paint created a distraction from the uncertainty of the event and allowed students to take memorable photos and be clustered in their groups before the event began. Each group was free to determine how they would design the face paint. Some applied war paint designs while others adopted predatory animal designs. The combination of colour coded clothing and face paint succeeded in creating a strong sense of group identities.

In order to ensure safety, a short preparatory training session was provided. However, due to language challenges the students faced with new technical words such as carabineer, pulley or safety harness and the speed at which the employee was speaking, students were at times unclear about the rules. This increased the anxiety among some of the students. Finally, one student translated the rules into Farsi.

All participants were required to wear a harness throughout the obstacle course to ensure safety. The safety system consisted of two carabineers used to secure participants to safety cables throughout the course. After the successful completion of each obstacle, participants were required to detach themselves from the completed obstacle and reattach their carabineers to the safety cable for the following station. Individuals were required to ensure that at least one carabineer was attached to a safety cable at all times when moving from one obstacle to the next.

While groups completed the obstacles in succession, due to the nature of the course, each obstacle could only be completed individually. Each obstacle was strung between trees. The program operators allowed two individuals on the platforms of each tree between the obstacles and one on each obstacle. As a result, although team members could support each other with verbal encouragements, they were unable to physically aid each other to complete an obstacle. Since groups completed the obstacle course back-to-back and the course looped back and forth, it allowed everyone to see each other and communicate in many places along the course.

Employees on the ground observed participants throughout the course to ensure adherence to the rules. If any individual was caught with both carabineers detached from the safety cable three times they would not be allowed to continue. Following the rules became a group responsibility. On several occasions the aerial participants forgot to maintain the carabineers as required and were placed on notice creating a heightened awareness within the groups of each other's actions and the need to provide reminders to group members.

The students progressed through the aerial course within their group. Group members talked to each other and dialogued within the group. There were different levels of capabilities displayed by the participants. Some students were visibly frightened and needed encouragement to complete obstacles, while others appeared completely comfortable. As the groups progressed through the obstacle course, students began to show more confidence and enjoyment. Only once did a student need staff help to complete an obstacle. The student was caught in the middle of a zip line without enough momentum to make it to the end. Advice and encouragement from the group did not help. With assistance from ground staff, the student was able to reach the end of the zip line and continue.

Each group maintained cohesion throughout the activity finishing at a separate time from other groups. After finishing the aerial obstacle course, the entire group was moved to a new open air location with tables, flip chart paper and markers. Each group was given 1.5 hours to prepare a 15-20 minute presentation based on their experiences throughout the day and its perceived effects on their group and the cohort. The students were also given a list of questions to answer in their groups. The questions focused on cooperation, competition, strategy, values and feelings. Each group presentation was digitally recorded for later analysis.

Student Feedback: Themes and Values

Student presentations made after the aerial obstacle course gave students a chance to reflect on the experience and what they learned from it. Numerous themes emerged in the presentations. The most common themes mentioned by the students during their presentations are discussed below.

The Value of the Experiential Activity

While there was some apprehension about their ability to complete the obstacle course, students welcomed the break from their everyday routine. Students also reported feeling that they were being treated as “more than just students.” The fresh air and ability to enjoy nature in a new location with treetop views added to the appeal of this activity. Students also commented that it was enjoyable to include the program director, English instructor, and program administrator in their adventure. All the students brought cameras to document the event. Pictures taken by group members were also posted to a departmental website creating a sense of cohort identity.

Competition and Cooperation

In the days leading up to the event, the students reported engaging in strong competition amongst themselves as they thought the team divisions were an indication that the aerial obstacle course would be a competitive team-based activity. Students were unsure of their own ability to complete the course. According to one student “I am focused on winning not fear” A₄ They reported “selecting war paint designs to look tough” C₁ and “waiting to be the last group to see how others do it” A₄, threatening sabotage of other participants to ensure they would not be the first to fail. One student reported shaking the safety cable of an obstacle another student was engaged in to create more difficulty for that student “I started to tap the (cable) by my feet... so she might fall” A₄. They also reported sharing strategies within their group and initially refusing to share these ideas with other teams. Despite these initial competitive actions and attitudes, the students quickly realized that competition was not a goal of the activity and that the groups were more of a support mechanism. With this realization, competitiveness seemed to wane and support between and among groups increased. For example, the student who shook a safety cable expressed regret for his actions. He apologized to the student he interfered with, recognizing his actions made her fearful.

Two student groups reported ‘synergy’ as an important value to their team’s success - a word that suggests the important role cooperation played in the day’s activities. In addition, ‘teamwork’, ‘support’ and ‘friendship,’ were also reported as important values and indicated the recognition of cooperation as valuable to the group. By the time teams reached the final zip-line, everyone, regardless of their group, cheered for each student as they completed the final task. The previous competitive atmosphere had been replaced by inter and intra group cooperation and support. This cooperative atmosphere was also evident in the socializing that took place between groups during and after the aerial course. “When we started we understood that it is completely different and we tried to support each other and other groups. Our strategy completely changed” A₂. Another similar comment was “We wanted to best the other groups, to be the best, but when we got up there it all changed” C₂. “We realized our competitive approach was not as effective as the cooperation that happened.” B₃ Once classes resumed, several students reported a much greater sense of unity and identity as a cohort. They also shared their aerial photos with family and friends through Facebook.

Individuals Versus Groups

During the event students reported having a strong sense of accountability not only to their teams, but all participants. As one student stated, “...each of us was responsible to other group members and other groups as well” B₂. Students were initially concerned that they might be the reason their team was unable to complete the course. Student’s revealed that groups attempted to use strategies that would take advantage of each member’s individual strengths to make the group stronger and more effective as a whole. According to one group, whenever the group did not perform up to the desired standard, individuals re-evaluated their roles within the group to see how their own actions could be changed to benefit the group. For example, a group changed the order their group members proceeded in placing more challenged individuals in the middle of the group to benefit from group members on both sides. The successful completion of the course was reported as both a group and individual victory. “All group members were trying to think about other members, even other groups” B₃. “We thought that maybe we should encourage other groups as well” A₄. One student admitted that in the interest of the group and the whole cohort she asked another student to push her off a platform to swing on a rope because she was afraid to willingly jump. Those within and outside the group cheered the student when she finally took the plunge.

Leadership

Although group work and cooperation were mentioned by all groups during their presentations, it was evident that in each group there were also clear leaders. This leadership was evident during the actual activity and the presentations. These leaders directed group members on where to stand and when to speak during the presentations. They also played a significant role in changing the team approach from competition to cooperation.

Despite the clear identification of strong group leaders, each group member had the chance to serve as a leader to other students during the obstacle course. For example, “I helped XYZ by talking XYZ through the most difficult obstacles” B₄. Another student reported “leadership replacing their competitiveness” A₃. Students who had completed an obstacle could coach the following student on how to best navigate that same obstacle. In this way, even those students who rarely if ever got the chance to be a leader in their everyday MBA groups were able to gain experience in this role.

Discussion

The key benefits of this activity included (a) showing MBA students the value of a cooperative approach, (b) providing an activity where emotional connection enhances receptivity to the subject matter, (c) letting students discover the importance of shared leadership, (d) linking confidence and cooperation while creating a unique shared experience to enhance cohort identity, and (e) creating a forum for discussing competition, cooperation, teams and conflict.

When a Cooperative Approach is Better

During the aerial activity, students adopted a helpful and cooperative means of interacting. However, more interesting is the initial assumption that the grouping of the students meant the activity would be a competitive group interaction and the ability of the students to shift to cooperative behaviour once they recognized the need to change. In the aerial activities there were many observers; the success or failure of a team or team member relative to others would be obvious, and this contributed to a sense of competitiveness. However, if the students had had a better understanding of cooperation and competition they would have considered or asked about what reward would be given for completing the activity. As there was no tangible reward and cooperation could benefit everyone, a more cooperative behaviour from the start would have been more appropriate among inter and intra group participants. Cooperation was also relevant given the safety and sometimes fear attached to the obstacle course. This assumption of competition over cooperation was likely the extension of the normal competitive relationship of the cohort in their MBA courses. It is also an extension of the Iranian culture to behave individually except in groupings of family and very close friends. This highlights the need to teach about cooperative behaviours, when such behaviours are appropriate and to reinforce the benefits of cooperative interactions. It is not enough to understand what cooperation is. An MBA student should be able to demonstrate the ability to act cooperatively.

MBA students gain a wealth of experience working in groups but as this activity highlighted, they are not as clear on when the competitive approach should be replaced with a cooperative approach. Students should be able to assess in advance when a cooperative rather than competitive approach will create a more effective outcome. In this way the cooperative linkages can be established early and lead to innovative means for success. Also, given that most of these students will eventually work for international or non-Iranian firms, having an understanding of group cooperation outside the in-group collective is an essential learning experience.

Subsequent of the aerial event the following course for the cohort was Business Ethics where many of the ideas raised during the aerial were revisited and discussed in more detail. Two weeks after the aerial a workshop on group behaviour was held re-examining the subject of cooperation and competition. Students showed a greater understanding of the differences between cooperation and competition during the workshop. They were also able to link back their ideas to the aerial event. While there remained some tension in the cohort around groups and cooperation the students and program director reported using their aerial experience to navigate discussions on group dynamics.

Culture

According to the GLOBE study (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) on culture, Iranians are strongly oriented towards achievement and performance as individuals. This was evident in the Iranian student's desire to do well in the aerial course and not let their group down. In Iran, those in positions of power and authority do not tolerate much debate or disagreement (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003). As a result, in the cohort leader and follower roles were well established by the time of the aerial event. It was only as a result of the sequential nature of the aerial course that the well established leaders became secondary to other participants. Iranians measure high in in-group collectivism, "loyalty, and collectivism in their organizations or families," (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004:12), Iranians however rank low in institutional collectivism, which is defined as "...the degree to which institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective actions" (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004:12). Despite how close the students became during the program, they still did not include the cohort in their in-group collectivism, except for a few friends. This led to a continuous competitive environment within the program, which at times was counterproductive and a management challenge.

The Iranian education system is individualistic and competitive. "All academic work is based on individual achievement and entails little if any group work" (Javidan & Dastmalchian, 2003:131). At the start of the program the students told the program director that academic group work was a new experience for them. Cooperation, even within a group, was a new approach and at times challenging. Groups regularly changed their group members. The aerial activity helped to broaden the student understanding of the benefits of organizational-based collaboration. Students were pushed to think of the cohort as a whole, not just limiting their trust to immediate friends.

Emotional Connection Enhances Receptivity to the Subject Matter

After the activity, the MBA students spoke easily about the two modes of interaction and provided many examples of their initial assumption of a competitive approach and their transition to a cooperative approach. They spoke about their emotional experiences regarding this transition. This learning supports prior research by Buskist and Saville (2012) that creating an emotional connection between student and subject matter increases a student's receptivity to the subject matter. Students could easily understand the differences between competitive and cooperative paradigms having experienced the different approaches on such a personal level. The understanding created through the obstacle course was then taken back into the class.

Shared Leadership

Bennis and O'Toole (2005) argue that theory-based learning is far less effective in business than in the study of law and science. With high variance in human activity and judgment, theoretical models fail to accurately describe business environments and experiences. In addition, MBA programs are criticized for a lack of attention to leadership (Butler, Johnson & Forbes, 2008). The aerial program created an unexpected leadership opportunity for individuals who usually adopt the role of follower. MBA class work is often completed in groups with the same students taking the leadership roles in these groups. The sequential nature of the aerial activity created a need for a different type of leader, leaders who arose out of necessity, not selection. Also, given the nature of the task, groups ended up with more than one leader per group. At times, all group members acted as leaders in a form of cooperative leadership.

Linking Confidence and Cooperation

Hollenbeck and Hall (2004) argue that managers need to pay more attention to self-confidence and its link to leadership success. In order to develop confidence one must place themselves in situations that stretch their capabilities and take risks. "Self-confidence is based on perceptions, both of our capabilities and of what the task or challenge requires...Our self-confidence concerns what we believe we can do with what we think we have and what we think we have to do" (Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004: 257). In other words, self confidence is built on perceptions. For students in a competitive MBA program, their sense of ability, which contributes to self confidence, is influenced by the other students in the MBA cohort and the abilities the students have writing papers and exams, making presentations, and analyzing data. This is particularly true in a competitive environment where the rewards, such as grades, are limited.

Changing the task requirements, by having the classroom in the trees and making the class work physical and cooperative, allowed for a change in the source of confidence for students. The students also realized that those operating their MBA program had confidence that they could complete the aerial program. This translated into a sense of confidence in their ability to complete the program. In addition, the cooperative behaviour of the cohort cheering each other on contributed to an enhanced sense of confidence. The exercise served as a mini retreat in the midst of a very intense and demanding MBA program.

Implications for Theory and Implications for Practice

This research has implications for practice. Many organizations hire MBA graduates with the expectation that they have an understanding of working in groups and that this experience translates into an understanding of how to cooperate. The cohort highlighted in this research is not unusual in its intergroup difficulties. Also, organizations are faced with similar dynamics among all employees. Employees are rewarded individually but in many work situations expected to work in groups and/or for a common goal. This means individual competitiveness will always create tension with cooperative goals in an organization. Therefore, whether it is in an MBA program or an organization, an activity dedicated to experiencing cooperative behaviour in contrast with competitive behaviour and discussing which behaviour is appropriate in which situations can be beneficial. Ideally more than one such event is held as the tendency is for groups to revert back to individual over group objectives. Having the activity outside the class or organization and unrelated to the regular work activities creates a chance for individuals to examine the dynamic and rewards more fully in the context of larger long term class or work goals.

A second practical application is using this type of activity if an organization is shifting job design from individual work and rewards to group or team design. Much has been written about the benefit of a systems approach (Senge, 1990). For organizations a shift from individual tasks to group tasks may be adopted to be more competitive or to improve a product or service. Such a shift will require a conscious examination of the common goal(s) and the means of interaction. Engaging in an activity that examines modes of interaction can avoid conflict or at a minimum provide a language for discussing the differences in approach. Because of the link to rewards for individual or team work all levels of an organization would need to participate in such an activity if the initiative is to be effective.

A final implication for both theory and practical application is improving cross cultural dynamics. In the example outlined in this paper there were differing expectations around how conflicts within the groups and among the students would be handled. The students believed the program director and professors should mediate interpersonal problems. Alternatively, the program expectation was that the students manage their intergroup dynamics. Many universities and organizations are establishing global locations. The operational side of such expansion must include a recognition of different cultural means of interacting and work and rewards. From a theoretical perspective more research is required in the area of cross cultural expectations around managing groups and group and individual conflicts. Such research has to go beyond the cultural tendencies to include a recognition of the context and the organizational structure. In this research the management of the program was run by Canadians but the student group was Iranian. The context included a very intense MBA program. Cross cultural dialogue on teams and conflict can also have practical benefit. An aerial event or similar activity can provide an opportunity and a defined and short undertaking in order to complete more research or dialogue around cultural differences and potential solutions.

Conclusion

MBA programs stress and reinforce competitive interactions between students and groups of students. Cooperative behaviour, while equally as relevant in a working environment, is often overlooked or under emphasized in the MBA setting. The purpose of this activity, completed with a cohort of MBA students midway through their MBA program, was to provide an activity that encouraged students to consider these two modes of interaction and expose them to situations when cooperation was more effective than competition. It also was designed to assist the students in resolving group and individual differences themselves by providing an opportunity to dialogue about both modes of interaction.

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