

Role Playing as a Leadership Development Tool

Joseph F. Guenthner, Ph.D.
Professor of Agricultural Economics
Department of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83844-2334
jguenthner@uidaho.edu

Lori L. Moore, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education
Department of Agricultural & Extension Education
University of Idaho
Moscow, ID 83844-2040
lmoore@uidaho.edu

Abstract

Agribusinesses seek university graduates who have leadership ability. Role playing, one method of teaching leadership skills, is used in a university agricultural policy course. It has been a fun and effective leadership learning tool. Students improve their communication skills, conduct in-depth research about a topic of their choice, and develop a better understanding of other sides of issues. Graduates who have gone into leadership positions cite role playing as an important part of their leadership development.

Introduction

Technical skills we teach in universities are usually not at the top of the list of skills employers seek. "People skills" such as leadership ability are more important to employers. According to Love and Yoder (1989), agricultural employers criticized the lack of leadership skills in undergraduates as early as 1980. Employers and university faculty continue to recognize leadership as one important skill needed by agricultural graduates (Bosshamer, 1996, as cited in Fritz & Brown, 1998). Astin and Astin (2000) noted leadership development should be a critical part of the university experience.

Agricultural economists have long recognized the need to build leaders within agribusiness. Industry representatives have recommended agricultural economics students take human relations classes (Sparks, 1975) and commented on the fact that companies look for employees with well-developed leadership abilities (Luby, 1975). In their study that combined the perceptions of industry managers with an analysis of undergraduate and graduate agribusiness programs, Litzenberg, Gorman, and Schneider (1983) stated, "The emphasis on human relations as a part of the

business management training must be increased” (p. 1064). The authors went on to recommend the use of enhanced teaching techniques such as field trips, case studies, and guest manager presentations to integrate such skills into agribusiness professionals. In their 1987 study, Litzenberg and Schneider determined which attributes were important to agribusinesses hiring agricultural economics graduates. Participants ranked the importance of characteristics in: (a) business and economics, (b) computer, quantitative, and management information, (c) technical skills, (d) communication skills, (e) interpersonal skills, and (f) employment, work, and general experience. All agribusinesses ranked interpersonal skills first and communication skills second. The authors concluded that “educators must address the development and improvement of these interpersonal and communication skills” (p. 1032). Litzenberg and Schneider (1988) conducted a national survey with 543 company representatives and again found interpersonal characteristics and communication skills to be the most important areas of proficiency for entry level, middle management, and upper management employees. These findings are also consistent with those of Klein (1990). In essence, research in agricultural economics has shown that agricultural economists must find ways to teach their students not only what to think in terms of technical content, but also how to think and how to be leaders in the industry.

Leadership can be taught and learned (Bass, 1990a; Bennis, 1989; Kouzes & Posner, 1997). According to Huber (2002), “the goal of leadership education is to provide opportunities for people to learn the skills, attitudes, and concepts necessary to become effective leaders” (p. 27). The fact that many opportunities are experiential is no surprise, since according to Kolb (1984) “people do learn from their experience” (p. 3). Hultman (as cited in Bass, 1990b) recognized the importance of using action-oriented educational methods to train leaders. Similarly, Huber (2002) stated that “If the goal is to increase the capacity of people and organizations to lead, then they must gain some experience in the endeavor” (p. 29).

Instructors use different activities to teach leadership, including service learning (Hoover & Webster, 2004), movie analyses (Graham, Ackerman, & Maxwell, 2004; Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackerman, 2003), and case-studies. Bass (1990b) also identified lecture-discussion, role-playing, in-basket activities, living cases games, computer-assisted and programmed instruction, behavior modeling, and sensitivity training as methods of training leaders. According to Bass, “the purpose of playing a role, rather than reading or talking about a solution to an interpersonal problem without a script, is to improve learning and retention and to promote transference from the learning situation to the leadership performance on the job” (p. 821).

The purpose of this article is to discuss a role-play activity used in a university agricultural policy course. The sections that follow include a course description, the role playing project, an evaluation, and a discussion.

Agricultural Policy Course

I began teaching a junior-level agricultural policy course in 1995. The University of Idaho catalog description of the course is: “Goals, methods and results of government policies affecting agriculture, natural resources and rural communities; includes the role of farm and environmental organizations.” My objectives were that students learn communication and leadership skills in addition to the subject matter.

Understanding the importance of experiential learning, I sought ideas for learning activities to meet those objectives. Before I first began teaching the course I sought advice from two senior colleagues with experience in teacher education. As a result of our brainstorming sessions I decided to include a role playing project in the course.

The beginning of the course covers the political process, agrarian philosophy, agricultural and environmental organizations, and personality profiles. The rest of the course is divided into eight policy sections: food safety, technology, environment, water, price controls, marketing, property rights, and animal rights. I assign students to role playing groups of three to five members according to their topic preferences and personality profiles.

Role Playing Project

I meet with each group twice before their in-class role playing. During the first meeting we define their specific policy issue as well as the roles for each group member. One person plays the role of facilitator/decision-maker. Others will be advocates, choosing an organization they will pretend to represent. The second meeting is a rehearsal and review of the students’ visual aids.

During class role playing sessions the facilitators introduce the topic and issues, explain the purpose of the meeting, introduce the speakers, and maintain order. Advocates make oral presentations for five to seven minutes each. After the presentations, the facilitator handles questions and obtains input from the audience, who also plays a role. Presenters use visual aids and provide the audience with one-page executive summaries.

Role Playing Evaluation

I am pleased with several aspects of role playing as a teaching technique. First, I think that it is a fun, yet effective, method of teaching leadership skills. Student evaluations also support this observation. Although there are no specific evaluation questions about role playing, some students addressed it in open-ended questions.

Excerpts include:

- “The role playing projects created a great learning environment.”
- “Role playing makes class enjoyable and fun. I hate to miss class because it is so entertaining and informing. I like how every day is almost like a new adventure.”
- “I believe the role playing project is an integral part of the learning process and I enjoyed the experience.”

Second, I think role playing improves student communication skills. When I meet with each group I help them organize their presentations, improve their visual aids, and try to boost their confidence. It seems that acting a role is not only fun for the students, but it also strengthens their speaking skills. Student evaluation comments included:

- “Role playing helped me become a better speaker.”
- “I appreciated the role-playing presentations. I think that the way contrary opinions were presented helped to make us more knowledgeable of our positions and better able to defend them.”

Third, students bring important subject matter to the classroom. They thoroughly research the issues and the organizations they pretend to represent, then present it to their classmates. Although I guide them through the process, they become effective teachers and learners through role playing. Some student comments:

- “Role playing was beneficial because we had the opportunity to research areas which interested us.”
- “Role playing allowed us to get to know a subject matter in greater depth.”
- “Role playing skits were very helpful...I learned more in this class than in any class I have ever taken in college...what I learned will really stick with me.”

Fourth, the students enhance their critical thinking ability by developing a better understanding of other sides of issues. Since most are from farms, ranches and rural communities there is little diversity of opinion. Role playing groups must present opposing views so some students pretend to represent groups – such as Earth First, Greenpeace and PETA – with whom they disagree. By researching these groups they gain a better understanding of them. According to student evaluations:

- “Role playing allowed us to see multiple sides to various issues affecting agriculture. The most valuable part was to realize that there are two sides to every issue.”
- “I liked the element of controversy. It was helpful to be able to see issues from every angle. I feel that I am better prepared to take a stance and defend it.”

Discussion

Many former students in the agricultural policy course have moved into leadership positions in their professions. Several served as agricultural lobbyists in the Idaho

Legislature and in positions with US Senators and Congressmen. Others have taken leadership positions in their firms and agricultural organizations. Informal feedback from them has been that the role playing was an important part of their leadership development skills.

Some former students enrolled in Leadership Idaho Agriculture – a program that helps agricultural people develop leadership skills. During one recent LIA session I spoke to an orchardist who took my agricultural policy course about 10 years ago. He told me that he appreciated the role playing, remembered exactly what he and the other group members talked about and that they keep in touch with each other.

Having used the role playing procedure for a decade I have several observations that might be helpful to those considering using the tool. First, assigning students to the right groups is important. On the first day of class, after I give a brief preview of the course topics I ask the students to rate their top three preferences for role playing groups.

In the next class students learn about personality profiles and discover their root personality according to the Hartman method (Hartman, 2005). I then make up role playing teams based on student topic preferences and the four Hartman personality colors. I try to give students one of their top two preferences while giving the teams a balance of personality types.

Another helpful procedure is to show the students a brief video of previous role playing presentations. I tell them what I expect, how they will be graded, and relate that to the outstanding examples of role playing in the videos.

In the future I intend to increase the emphasis of leadership development in the course. When I meet with each role playing group I plan to stimulate critical thinking and discussion of leadership in agricultural policy. I will also seek new ideas about how to enhance leadership skills in the course.

In summary, I think that role playing can be a very effective learning and leadership development tool. I was reluctant to accept a teaching assignment in agricultural policy because the subject matter was not my specialty and I thought it was boring. My challenge was to make that subject matter interesting for both me and the students. I think that the role playing project was the key that allowed me to do that.

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Biography

Joe Guenther, who was raised on a Wisconsin potato farm, is a Professor of Agricultural Economics at the University of Idaho. His appointment includes teaching, advising, research and extension responsibilities. He has also been a consultant to the US Potato Board, National Potato Council, Frito-Lay, Lamb-Weston, Monsanto, Technico, Zeneca, and other agribusiness firms. He wrote a book entitled *The International Potato Industry* and writes *The Guenther Report* for *Spudman* magazine. Joe earned a B.S. at the University of Wisconsin, an M.S. from Montana State University, and a Ph.D. from Washington State University and was a Visiting Scholar at Cambridge University in England. He was twice selected Outstanding Teacher of the Year for the University of Idaho's College of Agriculture. Joe is Past President of the Potato Association of America. He and his wife Terri, who grew up on a neighboring potato farm, are parents of three daughters.