

## **Simulations as a Source of Learning: Using *StarPower* to Teach Ethical Leadership and Management**

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### **Abstract**

This research examines the use simulation, *StarPower*, as an instrument to teach students about ethics in management and leadership. The paper begins with an overview of sources of learning in leadership and management development and later focuses specifically on the use of simulations. This is followed by a brief explanation of the *StarPower* simulation and the results of an exploratory study conducted. It was determined that 100% of participants found the activity educational and would recommend using it again in the future. In addition, 96% of the participants responded that *StarPower* is an effective activity for teaching students about ethical behavior.

### **Introduction**

“I noticed that the more power I received the less I was worried about the people that got me there. Once I was at the top, I wanted to secure my power and prevent anyone from taking it.” – Student Participant

One need only look to the daily news for modern day examples of deceit, corruption, and unethical behavior among leaders in the private and public sector. Whether it is former New York Governor Elliot Spitzer’s alleged use of prostitutes or Congressman Mark Foley’s inappropriate solicitation of pages on Capitol Hill, the popular press is filled with examples of leaders whose private transgressions have hurt or eliminated their ability to lead.

Ethics in leadership and management is a hot topic. As a result, business schools throughout the world are working to incorporate the topic into their curricula. In fact, Oddo (1997) asserts that “business faculty should incorporate business ethics into their business courses by helping students identify ethical issues in business situations, and asking students to apply their own personal values to resolve the ethical issues...the goal is for students to develop a decision making process which includes a consideration of ethical issues” (p. 296).

The following article and corresponding research examines an ethics in leadership & management module in a business communications course. The module occurred over four different class periods throughout the semester and included a basic lecture, a case study, paired presentations by students, the *StarPower* simulation, a debriefing discussion, and a reflection paper.

The article begins with an examination of sources of learning in leadership and management development. Simulations, one source of learning, are briefly examined. An overview of the *StarPower* simulation is provided. The article concludes with the results of exploratory study conducted on the *StarPower* simulation.

### **Sources of Learning in Leadership and Management Development**

Jay Conger (1992), in his book *Learning to Lead*, suggests there are four primary approaches to leadership development – personal growth, conceptual understanding, development through feedback and skill building. Interestingly, he suggests that all four must be present for a leadership development intervention to be successful as they integrate and build upon each other.

Along with Conger’s four approaches to leadership development, scholars and practitioners alike should examine the sources of learning that may accompany each general approach. In essence, sources of learning are the learning interventions often employed by educators to meet the overall objectives of development. For instance, if the overall objective is “development through feedback,” some natural sources of learning may be 360 feedback or assessment centers. Likewise, classrooms, e-learning and self-paced learning may serve as sources of learning when developing “conceptual understanding.”

### **Simulations as a Source of Learning**

One source of learning in leadership and management development is simulations. Proponents of simulations assert that they stimulate interest and motivation. Most simulations are experiential in nature (Curry & Moutihno, 1992; Drew & Davidson, 1993; Faria & Dickinson, 1994; Fripp, 1997; Keys & Wolfe, 1990; McCune, 1998) and provide the participant with rapid feedback about performance which has the power to draw in players (Drew & Davidson, 1993; Faria & Dickinson, 1994; Keys & Wolfe, 1990). In addition, some suggest that competition (Curry & Moutihno, 1992) and teamwork (Faria & Dickinson, 1994; Fripp, 1997) are the most engaging aspects of a simulation. At times simulations provide realistic representations of real world situations and provide participants

with a more global view of their organization (Faria & Dickinson, 1994; Keys & Wolfe, 1990; Van Velsor, Ruderman, & Phillips, 1989).

### **The *StarPower* Simulation**

*StarPower* is a simulation that was developed in the late 1960s by Gary Shirts. According to the Simulation Training Systems website, “Since its creation in 1969, *StarPower* has been our most popular simulation. By conservative estimates, three million people have played it. Some instructors have used it with more than 100 different classes or groups. It provokes participants to rethink their assumptions about the use and abuse of power” (*StarPower*, 2007, para.1).

In the simulation, participants are placed in a scenario where they must trade chips with one another to “advance” in a society made up of three distinct groups – squares, triangles and circles. This experience tests students’ abilities to act ethically and stay true to their personal values. In addition, healthy modes of communication are often “thrown out” as students become more and more enthralled with their status in the simulation.

Having facilitated the simulation more than a dozen times, I know that regardless of the topic discussed in the session leading up to the simulation, many students resort to competitive and unethical behaviors. The room buzzes, people get to work, and in the 45 minutes of “play,” honest and dishonest deals are made among participants. In addition, students have real feelings as they progress through the game. Some are completely energized while others are appalled by their experience. Moreover, some participants have a strong and visceral reaction to being “wronged” by classmates while others seem to take it all in stride or simply “check out” as they watch their opportunities to advance diminish.

### **Ethics – The Topic at Hand**

Ethics is a topic that is often overlooked by leadership scholars. In *Ethics: The Heart of Leadership*, Joanne Ciulla (1998) suggests that “the state of research on leadership ethics is similar to the state of business ethics twenty years ago. For the most part, the discussion of ethics in the leadership literature is fragmented, there is little reference to other works on the subject, and one gets the sense that most authors write as if they were starting from scratch” (p. 4). Leadership scholar Northouse (2002) agrees and suggests “in spite of a wealth of biographical accounts of great leaders and their morals, very little research has been published on the theoretical foundation of leadership ethics” (p. 249).

With the exception of Northouse (2002) and Ciulla (1998), little has been written on the topic of teaching ethics in leadership courses. However, the management

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literature has a solid foundation of research on the topic. Oddo (1997) suggests that “business ethics should not be an ‘add on’ to an already-crowded curriculum. Rather, ethical issues should be addressed con-current with business subjects taught in courses throughout the curriculum” (p. 294). As a result, the ethics module in the business communications course weaved throughout the curriculum. It was not simply a “one shot” event.

### **Research Design**

This exploratory study used survey methodology. There was a 50% response rate (N = 25) and data were collected anonymously using SurveyMonkey. Among the participants, 53% were male and 48% were female. In addition, 76% of students were sophomores, 12% juniors and 12% seniors. Participants are involved in the following ways on campus and in the community.

Table 1  
Participant Involvement on Campus in the Community

Job/Internship	65.2%
Professional Organizations – In Major	47.8%
Volunteer/Philanthropic Organization	39.1%
Athletics	34.8%
Honorary Societies	26.1%
Fraternity/Sorority	21.7%
University Programming Board	8.7%
Religious Organization	8.7%
Student Government	4.4%
Other	2%
Residence Hall Association	0.0%

Table 2  
Student Response to the *StarPower* Simulation

Question	Yes	No
In hindsight, did you make decisions that you would change?	37.5%	62.5%
Did you find <i>StarPower</i> as useful activity for teaching ethics?	96%	4%
Did you find <i>StarPower</i> to be an educational activity?	100%	0
Would you recommend I use <i>StarPower</i> again in the future?	100%	0

In addition to the questions above, I asked participants to share their responses to the following questions. Representative responses included:

- ***What observations to you have regarding the StarPower activity?***
  - The *StarPower* activity made us aware of our dispositions toward greed and power.
  - It was very interesting to see how people responded to receiving power and how far they would go to keep that power.
  - *StarPower* brought out expected reactions from participants: the closer to a prize, the more unethical behaviors became.
  - Showed how people acted to reach a powerful position and even worse what they will do to stay in power. This activity displayed ethical issues that people face ever day.
  - I felt the *StarPower* activity brought out many beliefs others have towards cheating and the desire to win that they may not have been aware of. Before *StarPower* many students may believe that they would compete ethically in a situation but then when the time comes to be ethical they show that they just want to win. It was interesting.
  - I thought it was a great way of showing students the degree that ethics plays in the business world. It also shows students their natural tendencies when it comes to competition.

- The *Starpower* activity was interesting. It illustrated how people are willing to do anything to get ahead; including lying, cheating, and betraying their peers.
  - ***What ethical dilemmas did you experience while participating in StarPower?***
    - I was faced with the dilemma of whether to “do the right thing” or cheat, knowing full well I could get away with it.
    - Whether to lie and get ahead or stick to my morals and be honest even if it meant I wouldn’t get to the top.
    - Whenever you traded with someone, there was a possibility that you might get ripped off. Once someone broke a deal with me and ripped me off, I never made a deal with them again.
    - I was ethical throughout *StarPower* but I trusted some of my classmates and they lied to me and gave me the wrong color coin. I was faced with the choice to cheat also because everyone around me was.
    - If I wanted to care about the people on the bottom of the spectrum or if I just wanted to focus on helping myself get richer.
    - I noticed that the more power I received the less I was worried about the people that got me there. Once I was at the top, I wanted to secure my power and prevent anyone from taking it.
  - ***What implications does StarPower hold for an undergraduate business major?***
    - *StarPower* made me aware of the ethical dilemmas I will face on a daily basis as the employee of an organization.
    - It taught me that there are people who follow the rules, people who break the rules, and people who make their own rules. When you are dealing with someone, even on a personal level, you have to know what kind of person they are so that you are not taken advantage of.
    - When you get out in the business world there will be times when you might want to “cheat your way to the top.”
    - It brings individuals in touch with their true ethical values and beliefs. It is easy to say you believe one thing, but actually behaving that way is altogether another issue.
    - The implications that *StarPower* holds for undergraduate business majors is that in the real world, everything is not always black and white. There will be times when one has to make ethical decisions. One may have to give up power to make the right decision.
    - I am a communication major, but for me some actions I saw would make me wary of doing business with some of my classmates.
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- It puts everything in perspective. It allows one to know that no matter where you are on the corporate ladder, one will have to make tough decisions that may determine the success of the company.

## **Conclusions**

“The implications that *StarPower* holds for undergraduate business majors is that in the real world, everything is not always black and white. There will be times when one has to make ethical decisions. One may have to give up power to make the right decision.” – Student Participant

Ethics in management and leadership is an important topic and many argue business schools have a responsibility to weave the topic into courses and learning experiences. However, teaching ethics can be a daunting task – after all, the topic does not often yield immediate excitement among students.

However, it is clear that students who responded to the survey in this course enjoyed the *StarPower* simulation and feel that it should be used again. In addition, at least one-third of participants determined that if they could play again, they would change their behavior. In fact, in the oral debrief of the activity I was interested by the number of students who commented on their amazement at how the activity influenced their behavior to act in an unethical manner. One student commented, “*StarPower* made me aware of the ethical dilemmas I will face on a daily basis as the employee of an organization.”

Simulations are an important source of learning. Rather than passively learning about terms such as ethical relativism and ethical universalism, students had an opportunity to witness these dynamics unfold firsthand among their class mates. This notion is exemplified by a student’s comment that “it brings individuals in touch with their true ethical values and beliefs. It is easy to say you believe one thing, but actually behaving that way is altogether another issue.”

Although not a panacea, simulations are an important source of learning. More specifically, *StarPower* is an important simulation that provides students with an experience that evokes feelings and emotions not soon forgotten.

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## **Biography**

Scott J. Allen, Ph.D., is a visiting assistant professor at John Carroll University where he teaches strategic management, organizational behavior, business communication, and management development. In 2005, Scott founded the Center for Leader Development, an organization dedicated to providing leadership development resources, job links, tools, conference announcements, relevant links, publications, and information-rich content regardless of sector. Scott is the co-author of *Emotionally Intelligent Leadership: A Guide for College Students* (Jossey-Bass).