

# **Learning by Doing in Leadership Education: Experiencing Followership and Effective Leadership Communication Through Role-Play**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the implementation of a role-play exercise to illustrate the influence of followership styles and effective communication on leader-follower relationship formation and development. We provide the pedagogical theory and evidence behind using role-plays in classroom settings, followed by a literature review pertaining to leader-member relations and followership on which this role-play is based. The activity aims to fulfill multiple objectives: (a) to explain the importance of effectively managing-up the hierarchy, (b) to use effective communication skills in challenging and conflict laden situations, and (c) to expand self-awareness and explore own implicit assumptions. We further provide the session plan for using the role-play including the instructions, timing, and role handouts, and discuss potential outcomes.

## **Issue Statement**

Recent leadership research and practice acknowledge that leadership is a process jointly developed by the leader and followers (Baker, 2007; Riggio, 2014). Addressing the relationship dynamics between the leader and followers is critical to adequately understanding and predicting the outcomes of leadership (Murji, 2015; Riggio, 2014; Vugt, Hogan, & Kaier, 2008). To that end, effective followers are influential partners in the leadership process; they work together with the leader to create a vision; they implement the vision and solve problems; they take initiative and act with empowerment and influence (Chen, Kanfer, Kirkman, Allen, & Rosen, 2007; Hopton, 2014). Yet, followership is often overlooked in leadership development and education curricula (Ferrell, Boyd, & Rayfield, 2013; Hopton, 2014). In response, the primary goal of this article is to describe an experiential learning tool that allows students to practice different styles of followership while simultaneously focusing on developing the leader's communication skills.

Experiential learning techniques have been used in classrooms for many years. A main driver behind such strategies is the thinking that "learning by doing" allows learners to engage in processes of critical thinking and to instigate emotions, values, and cognitions while relating to the course content, the instructor, and one another. Role-play exercises are part of this larger

body of pedagogical strategies guiding students in “constructing their own knowledge” (Shaw, 2010). As such, learners participate in plays where they assume the role of another individual for the purpose of understanding and predicting the feelings, behaviors, and motivations of this person while at the same time exploring their own thoughts and emotions (Moore, 2009). In role-plays, learners are assigned a role where they behave as if they are that individual in a particular situation. As a learner-centered pedagogical approach, role-plays facilitate deeper and more active engagement with the content (Alder, 1982). In the role-play we will describe below, students work through a situation, find solution(s) to a conflict, and practice a variety of behaviors from the vantage point of a leader and a follower. The activity aims to fulfill three learning objectives: (a) to explain the importance of effectively managing-up the hierarchy, (b) to use effective communication skills in challenging and conflict laden situations, and (c) to expand self-awareness and explore own implicit assumptions.

## Literature Review

A review of research (Shaw, 2010; Greenblat, 1973) indicates that learning benefits emerging from role-plays and simulations can be both cognitive and affective: *cognitive learning* such as application of concepts to real life situations, and gaining analytical skills or decision making skills, and *affective learning*, in that participants gain changed views or attitudes toward issues or people, and empathy toward others (Morgan, 2003). Further, there is evidence for benefits of *enhancing learner interest and motivation* in the content, and learning in general as students are motivated by each other and enjoy simulations (Shellman & Turan, 2006). Another main benefit of role-playing encompasses *longer-term learning advantages*. For example, a few studies have examined how simulations promote retention of learning by encouraging learners to employ multiple senses, take ownership of their role, and hence create more lasting and more easily recalled memories (Banikowski & Mehring, 1999; Hertel & Millis, 2002; Monahan, 2002). Greenblat (1973) also asserts that an outcome and advantage of role-plays and simulations is *increased self-awareness and self-efficacy*. Finally, role-plays and simulations may promote higher quality teacher-student relations as learning happens in a more relaxed, informal, and comfortable context leading the learner to perceive the instructor through a more positive lens, in addition to the availability of timely feedback to the learner (Shaw, 2010; Wheeler, 2006). One content area in which role-plays can make significant contributions to classroom learning is leader-follower relations.

Followership involves individuals thinking creatively to explore new possible ways to transform organizational processes (Baublits, 2014). For example, case studies have been used to educate students about followership because they not only help students to creatively problem-solve within a team, but also to use a variety of follower behaviors (influence) in participating in the group or class discussion (Hoption, 2014). Similarly, performative inquiry, such as through class role-plays, are also effective pedagogical tools to educate students about leadership concepts (Nilson, Fels, & Gopaul, 2016) because they help students to learn and reflect on leadership behaviors (Fels & Belliveau, 2008). Role-plays help students learn about followership by manipulating effective and ineffective leader-follower behaviors in specific situations.

While organizational successes and failures are largely attributed to effective or ineffective leaders, the key to high team performance remains to be the alignment or fit between

leader and followers. Just as competent and motivated followers are essential for the accomplishment of any strategy, so is the development of dyadic relationships between them and the leader, and how followers can manage-up their leaders in ways that benefit their units as a whole. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) perspective from organizational behavior addresses the development of dyadic relationships between the leader and followers (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). LMX describes how the leader differentiates among followers in developing these relationships over time (Day, 2014), and how these relationships impact the follower and the organization (Park, Sturman, Vanderpool, & Chan, 2015). Leaders give more attention, provide more opportunities and rewards to employees whom they perceive as similar in terms of personality, work ethic, and values. These followers, called the in-group, have higher quality exchange with the leader and are selected on the basis of competence, reliability, and personal compatibility early in the relationship. A high LMX relationship involves mutual trust and loyalty. As the leader develops impressions of trustworthiness, s/he will be more comfortable in delegation of tasks or empowerment of the follower. Since these are risk taking behaviors on the part of the leader, trust plays a critical role in such decisions (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). In-group followers who are those perceived as trustworthy will be more likely to enjoy assignments of interesting tasks, more participation in decision making, personal support, special benefits, career support, and leader's approval (Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999).

If a leader perceives the follower as competent and motivated, then s/he will be more likely to delegate tasks, provide opportunities for participation, share more information, and assign high responsibility and high visibility tasks. These are all task related supervisory activities. When the leader further makes positive assessments of character and cognitively categorizes the follower as trustworthy based on observed benevolence and behavioral integrity, leader will also be more likely and willing to provide career support, approval, attention, and personal support (Schriesheim et al., 1999) which are all activities that indicate a relationship at a more personal level. And yet, not all followers wish to be in the in-group or seek high visibility or high responsibility assignments. Learning about effective followership involves understanding that there are differences among followers that may align certain followers with certain leaders so that when the fit is achieved, outcomes are maximized.

Kelley (1988) defined followership along two dimensions: level of critical thinking and level of involvement and engagement in organizational decisions. Based on these dimensions, Kelley grouped followers into five categories: effective, conformist, alienated, passive, and pragmatic. Accordingly, passive followers are those who are low on critical thinking and low on engagement. They are individuals who prefer to let others do the thinking and do just enough to keep their jobs. The passive followers follow instructions but require close supervision. Another follower type low on critical thinking is the conformist follower; conformists are in fact quite engaged and energetic, involved in decisions, and yet eager to please. Conformists follow others' thinking and like to please the leaders; consequently, autocratic leaders tend to prefer conformist followers.

Two types of followers who are both high in critical and independent thinking are effective and alienated followers. Alienated followers are smart, critical, and independent in their thought processes but deliberately prefer to stay uninvolved. It may be that they do not like the leader's style or that they feel like they are unappreciated. The effective follower, on the other

hand, is both energetic and engaged and, at the same time, is an independent and critical thinker. The effective follower is assertive and not afraid to take initiative in pursuing ideas. The last type, the pragmatic follower, is someone who portrays all four styles previously noted depending on which style fits best the current situation. Pragmatic followers are quite political and do what is necessary to protect their self-interests.

### ***“The Missed Deadline”*: A Role-Play Exercise**

This role-play exercise was developed specifically for a leadership development workshop focusing on relationship building and communication skills of staff and supervisors working in the International Initiatives Office (IIO) at a large regional comprehensive state university. The exercise was also effectively used in multiple sections of an undergraduate course on organizational leadership for the purpose of illustrating concepts of followership and leader-follower communications. The role-play was loosely based on the experiential activity titled *“The Deadline Has Come and Gone”* by Robbins and Hunsaker (2006). In the current exercise, the focus is globalized international education and services at a university, while in the original exercise, the case was developed around a hospital restructuring. The original was further intended as an activity for teaching delegation and employee empowerment while the focus in the current exercise is on followership and communication. The main similarity in the two exercises is that an experienced employee misses a deadline.

With 22,000 plus students, the university offers over 100 Bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree programs in the liberal arts and sciences, and applied professional fields. 15 percent of enrollment is comprised of graduate students while the majority, 85%, of the student body is undergraduate. The newly adopted strategic plan of the university emphasizes leadership development of staff and faculty as one of the strategic foci of the institution for the next 10 years. As such, academic departments as well as administrative departments have been seeking training of their faculty and staff with regards to leadership skills.

The IIO as an administrative office reporting to the President of the university has recently undergone major structural changes primarily as a result of the development of the new 2015-2020 international strategic plan developed under the umbrella of the university strategic plan. The primary goal of IIO staff is to coordinate the internationalization effort at the university and hence prepare students to excel in a global knowledge economy. In order to effectively implement the strategic plan, a major restructuring has taken place and four separate departments, *Office of Study Abroad*, *International Student and Scholar Services*, *International Partnerships*, *International Recruitment* and the *English Language Center*-- were merged under the umbrella of IIO; the purpose of restructuring was to create synergy and optimize international resources at the university. However, soon, communication problems emerged, and hence the need for a team building and leadership fundamentals workshop arose. *“The Missed Deadline”* role-play exercise was developed for this cohort; there were 15 participants in the workshop.

Participants have already taken an assessment to find out their predominant followership style, based on Kelley's (1988) model. A brief discussion in small groups where the participants addressed how their predominant followership styles and communication skills help or impede

their relationships with their managers and subordinates preceded the role-play exercise “*The Missed Deadline*”.

Table 1.

<b>Chris Buckley</b>
<p><b>Situation Overview</b></p> <p>Chris Buckley is the director of Global Education: Study Abroad (GESA) department at University of West Nevada (UWN). Morgan Williams works under Chris Buckley as a China Program Specialist responsible for the university’s multiple programs in China. Morgan is the point of contact for multiple Chinese universities and UWN faculty who would like to teach in China.</p> <p>About 8 weeks ago, Chris, after consulting with Morgan, assigned Morgan a project to streamline all activities related to international study and research/clinical opportunities in China. Chris also wants the UWN students to successfully compete for national scholarships such as the Gilman and Fulbright focusing on China. Morgan seemed accepting of the assignment in the meeting s/he had with Chris and verbally agreed that the project would be completed in 8 weeks. It is now 9 weeks past their initial meeting and Chris hasn’t heard anything about it from Morgan.</p>
<p><b>Your Role</b></p> <p>You have 10 years of experience in managing Study Abroad programs. You were recently hired from another public university of comparable size in a neighboring state. Since you joined UWN, the workload of your department (GESA) has grown rapidly. There is an increase of about 30 percent in the number of students applying for GESA programs in relation to last year. You have hired four new employees at the entry level with little experience in global education. The Provost’s policy is that she wants to expand global education offerings at UWN. You believe there is great potential in China but you need data to back up any proposal for expansion there. The Provost and VP of OIA is expecting a report from you with recommendations based on solid data and research. A comprehensive study would guide future projections and plans to properly compensate all staff travels there as well as restructure the current system to accommodate new programs and recruit faculty. You delegated the research and study to Morgan 9 weeks ago.</p> <p>The reason you chose Morgan for the job was that s/he has been the Chinese program specialist for 15 years and was a trusted employee under the previous GESA director. You have three other specialists working for you focusing on countries in Europe and South America. Since Morgan is an experienced country specialist, you assumed s/he would do a good job and deliver the China study and projections by the agreed-upon deadline. Now that the deadline has passed, you are getting a little concerned. You like to provide as much discretion in decision making as possible to your experienced subordinates so that they are professionally developed and prepared for more responsibility in the future. You don’t like micromanaging. You also know that such a strategy leaves more time for you to get connected within the university and manage your own supervisors in top administration.</p> <p>Performance appraisals are due in two weeks, and you have decided that this is a good time to ask Morgan about the China study. So you emailed Morgan to stop by your office today.</p>

Participants made groups of three and selected their own roles to play: the role of Chris (the manager/leader), the role of Morgan (the employee/follower), and the observer. After teams

were formed and roles were assigned, all participants playing the Chris role read their role descriptions and spent about 10 minutes studying their roles. All participants playing the Morgan role were asked to do the same and plan their meeting strategy. The observers read both role descriptions and reviewed the observer's rating sheet. We provide the role descriptions in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 2.

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**Morgan Williams**

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**Case Overview**

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Chris Buckley is the director of Global Education: Study Abroad (GESA) department at University of West Nevada (UWN). Morgan Williams works under Chris Buckley as a China Program Specialist responsible for the university's multiple programs in China. Morgan is the point of contact for multiple Chinese universities and UWN faculty who would like to teach in China.

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**Your Role**

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You are the country specialist for China in GESA department at UWN. You have been at the university for 15 years and have worked with three different GESA directors during your tenure. You have always been a highly performing and competent manager. Partly because of your quantitative and research skills and partly due to your ability to get your work done independently with little supervision, you feel like you are the best among the three country/district specialists in this division and your outside job prospects are very good, to say the least. (You have been contacted by a couple of executive search firms last year.) However, after the last GESA director decided to retire, top administration decided to hire someone from outside to fill the position, even though you have applied and made a strong case. You feel like you should have been considered very seriously for a promotion to the position; you don't think you are appreciated in the university.

Whenever there was a special assignment, past directors usually checked on your progress frequently. The new hire, Chris Buckley, has been the GESA director and your immediate boss for 9 months. Chris has asked you to conduct a comprehensive study to identify expansion opportunities in China, develop plans for recruiting more faculty, and prepare a detailed feasibility and restructuring proposal. You accepted the assignment verbally during a meeting but there was no follow-up email or any other form of written communication about it except a brief mention at a department meeting. You expected that Chris would check on the progress of the study and that you would have a chance to share your concerns, but s/he never did. So you just let the work sit on the back burner, as you are already very busy with regular day-to-day tasks.

Chris just emailed you asking you to come over to the office. You do not know what Chris wants, but you hope it's not about the China study; you think there are multiple issues to be resolved before you can even start your work on that project, not that you have any time anyway. Plus, since s/he has not inquired about it for so long, you figured s/he probably has other priorities.

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Table 3.

<b>Observer's Rating Sheet</b>	
What style and behaviors of followership (managing-up) did Morgan display?	
What response did Chris have to the situation? Did Chris use any particular conflict resolution tactic? How?	
How might the results have been different if Morgan had used another style of followership (managing-up)?	
Evaluate Chris's communication skills using: 5 <i>strongly agree</i> 4 <i>agree</i> 3 <i>neither agree nor disagree</i> 2 <i>disagree</i> 1 <i>strongly disagree</i>	
Used a positive and cordial tone.	
Was friendly, open, and honest.	
Maintained eye contact with Morgan.	
Provided all important information.	
Listened carefully.	
Asked questions and paraphrased.	
Explained benefits of the study.	

### **Facilitating "The Missed Deadline" Exercise**

This exercise requires minimal advance preparation and should take approximately 45 minutes to complete. The exercise can be used with undergraduate, or graduate students, as well as with a group of working professionals. The steps for facilitation are summarized below.

*Mini-Lecture and Set-up* (10 minutes):

1. Review Kelley's (1988) Followership Typology with the class.
2. Instruct participants to make 3-member groups, and decide on Chris, Morgan, and observer roles.
3. If there are participants left over, have groups assign 2 observers.



*Role Preparation* (10 minutes):

4. Give participants their respective role handouts and instruct them to read only their own roles.
5. Instruct participants to devise a strategy, be ready to improvise/expand upon the role as needed, and avoid looking at their notes/role descriptions during role-play; but rather, act as they think a real leader or follower would act in this situation.
6. Instruct observers to read both role descriptions and study the rating sheet.
7. Instruct observers to remain completely silent during the role-play.

*Role-Play* (10 minutes):

8. Instruct groups to spend about 10 minutes conducting the role-play. Providing direction on the time allotment prevents some students from ending the play early and others from taking too long.

*Observer Feedback* (10 minutes):

9. After the role-play concludes, observers share their notes, ratings, and observations with the role-players, first. Instruct observers to use the rating sheet and provide participants with specific feedback;
10. Encourage all participants to engage in the feedback sharing discussion.

*Class discussion and Debriefing* (10 minutes):

11. Pursuant to the small group discussions, instruct observers to share what happened in their groups with the whole class and allow for input from everyone in class.
12. As the facilitator, use the debriefing questions provided below to connect the experiential exercise to the LMX, followership, conflict resolution, and communication concepts.

## Outcomes

Our experience facilitating the role-play demonstrated that a wide range of follower (Morgan) behaviors and leader (Chris) behaviors emerge as outcomes of the role-playing. While some participants playing the role of Morgan may display the effective followership style, others may portray alienated follower behaviors. Effective followers are typically in control of the role-play and work with Chris to turn the situation around and find common ground to work with Chris in the future. Alienated followers typically remain alienated due their being passed over for the promotion. They tend to simply agree to whatever Chris tells them to do next. Pragmatic followers will likely adapt their styles to how Chris approaches the situation. Pragmatic followers tend to come up with solutions that work for both Morgan and Chris. Chris is usually in charge with pragmatic Morgans. Passive followers typically will admit their lack of involvement and make a commitment to Chris to get the project completed as soon as possible or by the new agreed upon date.

Some leaders may defend Chris's current position in that they may assert that it is okay to assign a job without establishing any check points since Morgan is an experienced professional and should not require close supervision. Other leaders may see errors in that approach and decide to change the way they relate to Morgan in the future. Most leaders benefit greatly from the feedback on their usage of communication and conflict resolution skills.

There are many possible debriefing questions to use to facilitate a class discussion after the role-play. A few examples are listed below, even though these may further be improvised depending on the direction of discussion in class.

To the observers:

- What type of followership (managing-up) behaviors did you observe?
- How did Chris respond? What worked and did not work for Chris? Was there a predominant conflict resolution style that Chris displayed?
- Was there a particularly effective Morgan? How?
- Was there a particularly effective Chris? How?
- How was Chris rated on the communication questions you were given? Any problem areas? Why?

To the whole class:

- Leaders:
  - What did you know going into the meeting? How did your position change?
  - What was your overall experience? How would you describe it?
  - Was it a successful meeting in your opinion? Why?
  - Was the observer's feedback in alignment with how you perceive your own communication skills and conflict resolution style?
- Followers:
  - What did you know going into the meeting? How did your position change?
  - What was your overall experience? How would you describe it?
  - Was it a successful meeting in your opinion? Why?
  - Was the observer's followership style feedback in alignment with how you perceive your own followership (managing-up) style?
- Leaders, Followers, and Observers:
  - If you had this meeting all over again, would you do anything differently?
  - What would you change in this exercise to make it more effective in addressing our learning goals of effectively managing-up and effective communication?

## **Reflection**

In organizational settings, individuals tend to categorize and hold preconceived notions about others as leaders and followers (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Goodwin, Wofford, & Boyd, 2000). Assumptions about others' traits and behaviors determine several interpersonal outcomes such as liking, relationship quality, trust, or job satisfaction (Sy, 2010). In an effort to bring to surface these implicit assumptions as well as explore ways to manage both up and down the hierarchy using effective communication skills, we designed a role-play exercise. In retrospect, the exercise was received well by the workshop participants; this was indicated in the feedback forms participants completed after the workshop and in the extensive discussions the role-play generated in class.

Future research can focus on assessing the effectiveness of the exercise by employing questionnaires asking about individual assumptions before and after the role-play (Hopton,

2014). Questions may target the differences between participants' own perceptions and/or assessments of their followership styles and what style the observers' feedback indicated. An assessment of communication skills before the role-play can be helpful in comparing the observed feedback to participant perceptions. A reflection activity can also be used to assess participants' main take-away from the exercise and what communication and followership behaviors they intend to change in the workplace in the course of their interactions with their own leaders and followers.

Taking the followership inventory at the beginning of the session helped our participants to find out what their preferred and back-up followership styles were. The assessment further raised awareness of other class participants' followership styles. Even though the assessment was not directly related to the role-play activity as facilitated in the workshop, it can be used in the role-play by assigning specific followership styles to Morgan Williams. Morgan can take the role of an effective follower, followed by another round of play where s/he can be an alienated follower. The responses that different followership styles will elicit from Chris will accordingly vary.

### **Recommendations**

Leadership studies have acknowledged the impact that implicit perceptions of followers and leaders can have on personnel decisions and how at times these perceptions could be distorted (Heslin & VandeWalle, 2008). However, education, research, and practice have primarily focused on leaders rather than followers (Murji, 2015; Sy, 2010). Leadership educators can attempt to close this gap by designing experiential activities that will allow participants to explore their implicit assumptions about followers and leaders and find out ways to improve their relationship building efforts in the workplace (Nilson & Gopaul, 2016). In parallel, experiential learning activities should aim at providing opportunities for individuals to find out predominant followership behaviors and explore contingencies that make it appropriate to change these behaviors or use multiple styles and skills based on situational contingencies. Such "learning by doing" exercises can and should target multiple learning goals pertaining to both leadership and followership development.

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