

12 Clarifying objectives

Aims of the exercise

- To demonstrate the importance of being certain of the objectives of a task.
- To show the importance of good briefing.
- To encourage leaders to ask relevant questions.

Who it's for

Groups of up to eight.

How to use it

You can best use this exercise early in a course to identify the importance of clarifying the objectives of a task.

What happens

Small groups are selected, with one person appointed the leader and another as observer. You give the leaders a poor brief. In turn, the leaders brief their task group. After a period of time, you visit each group and comment that the end result of the task is not what you were expecting. Observers note down on a checklist all relevant parts of this process. Groups list what they think they did well and what needs improvement. Eventually, you explain that the reason the task inevitably failed was down to you ... but that this demonstrates to everyone the importance of clarifying objectives.

Time it takes

Set-up time: 10 minutes

Group work: 25 minutes (15 minutes for the first part of the task; 10 minutes for the second)

Review: 20 minutes

What you need

- Worksheet 12.1
- Flipchart and stand or whiteboard
- Marker pens for trainer
- Flipchart paper and marker pens for participants
- Paper and pens for participants
- A clipboard for each observer
- A bucket of Lego®-type bricks (mixed sizes) for each group (about 500 bricks)
- One large room suitable for whole-group work, plus smaller rooms in which small groups can work privately

How to prepare

- Photocopy or print out a copy of Worksheet 12.1 for the observers.
- Set up each group room by leaving in it plenty of paper, pens, flipchart paper and marker pens, and a bucket of Lego®-type bricks.
- Make sure, in advance, you are fully informed about the role of the observer.

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Trainer's notes

Introduction

Explain

You are about to take part in a leadership exercise. You will be divided into groups. Each group will have a leader and an observer. Leaders will be given a brief, which they will pass on to their groups.

Select groups of up to eight and tell them where they will be working. Nominate one person in each group to be the leader and one to be an observer. Explain to all the groups that you will need to spend a few minutes privately with observers and then with leaders. The groups should wait quietly for further instructions. They should not be tempted to look through any resources that have been made available for this task.

Tell each group – including the observer and leader – which rooms they will be working in. You will have set up these rooms beforehand so that each one is equipped with the necessary items. Ask the groups not to touch anything until they are instructed.

What you tell the observers

Call together all the observers and take them to one of the smaller rooms. Give each of them a copy of Worksheet 12.1 and ask them to look through it. Briefly explain its contents and relevant areas, and tell observers not to disclose this information to the other participants.

Now explain that you are about to give each group leader a poor brief to demonstrate what happens if objectives are not clear. The observer of that group will be present (albeit discreetly) when the leader is briefed

and should make relevant notes on what happens and what is said or asked. Check observers are aware of the importance of accuracy.

What you tell the leaders

Call the leaders together and take them to the room in which the observers are waiting. Ask each leader (and relevant observer) out individually (possibly this will be into a corridor area, but it should certainly be well away from any other participants) so that you can verbally give them their brief.

State the leader's brief

Your group has been given a bucket of bricks. Your joint task is to build a garage with four petrol pumps. Please return to your group, pass on the brief and commence the task. You have 15 minutes for this. The best garage will be the winner.

The observer will return to the group with the leader. Leave each leader abruptly, saying you have to see someone urgently. Leaders may well try to ask you questions. If this is the case, bluff your way through without giving answers, saying that you don't have time to think about it at the moment or you're not in a position to answer right now. Then ensure you are unavailable to answer any questions during the next 15 minutes.

After 15 minutes

Visit each group individually and tell them to stop work on their garage. Ask them to stand away from the work area and to wait there while you visit the other groups.

Return to the groups one by one, in the order you set them the task. Then, in a negative manner, tell them that what they have produced is not what you wanted. You can say that the construction is the wrong shape, the wrong size ... whatever you can think of. Observe the groups' reaction. They will probably either blame you or the leader.

Now ask the group to review its work. Tell each group to list, on a sheet of flipchart paper, what's been done well and what needs to improve. Allow 10 minutes for these views to be noted.

After 10 minutes

Gather the groups together into one large room (bringing with them their garages) and ask each in turn to present its views. Ask specific questions from the 'Suggested questions' section to establish the facts. Let groups see each other's constructions. Ask each group's observer to use their checklists and notes to comment on the group's approach. Highlight the questions asked of leaders and discuss the leaders' responses. Ask everyone whose fault they think it was that this task failed.

State

It was my fault that this task failed. I let leaders begin this task knowing that they had not received a clear brief. It was unlikely that any group would succeed.

Ask whether participants have experienced this lack of clarity with their workteams.

State

We have all given information that isn't clear. What's more, we rarely think about the consequences. We are likely to be busy and therefore rush the information required, assuming that the team will work it out and succeed in the task. It may well do, but it is not due to our efforts as leaders.

Ask the whole group to discuss the consequences of this type of action. Explain that, in the workplace, a team will probably tolerate a situation like this once, but it is likely to lose faith in its leader if it happens repeatedly. The team may be frustrated that tasks are never completed properly. Also, an alternative leader may emerge, which could make it difficult in the long term for the appointed team leader.

Suggested questions

- How confident did you feel at the start of the task?
- What was each person's specific role?
- What questions were not answered?
- How did you feel when working on the construction?
- How did you decide on the design?
- How confident did you feel when your efforts were rejected by the trainer?
- What problems did the leader encounter?
- How could the leader improve?

Points for emphasis

Participants should be reminded of the following to help them back in the workplace:

- When given a new task, always ask lots of questions such as 'What are the parameters of success?', and 'How will we measure success?'.
- Make sure you are confident about what you have to do.
- Outline what you believe you have to achieve and gain a confirmation that it is correct.
- If your questions are not answered, don't progress with the task until you have the answers. If necessary, arrange to see your manager again when they can answer your questions. Let your manager know that, without answers to your questions, success is not guaranteed.
- Be positive when you brief your team about a task.
- Try to pre-empt the kinds of questions your team might ask.
- Answer questions with confidence.
- Ask the team if it has any queries.
- Always check your team has understood your instructions.
- Develop a clear plan, which the team understands.
- Allow the team to contribute to the plan.
- Admit any mistakes.

Observer's checklist

You are about to observe a group leader receiving a brief. You will then observe the leader passing on details of this brief to their group, which will attempt to complete the task. In your role as observer, you need to ensure that you make appropriate notes for the following questions. You must remain silent throughout and not help the group in any way. The group has 15 minutes to complete its task. It will then have a further 10 minutes to review the task.

- How did the leader react when they received the brief?
- What questions did the leader ask?
- Was the leader confident when they were informed of the task?
- How did the leader brief the group?
- Did the leader allow questions to be asked?

Continued ...



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- If so, what questions were asked?
- What was the leader's reaction to the questions?
- How confident was the leader with these questions?
- How did the group react to the leader?
- What happened during the task?
- How well did the group perform the task?
- Was the group confident at the end of the task?
- What was the leader's reaction when the group was told the construction was incorrect?
- What was the group's reaction?

