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Online Communication Technology and Relational Development

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Editors' Note: Key to success in negotiation is managing and en-
hancing relationships. This concept can be difficult to convey in
short-term executive training courses where students have little time
for relational development. Not to worry: the authors assert that by
strategically using online communication before, during, and after
such courses, students can effectively both train for, and depend on,
good relations at a distance.

Introduction

Relational development, an important component of any learning
experience, is all the more relevant to negotiation training because
managing and enhancing relationships is part and parcel of the the-
ory and practice of negotiations. Negotiation skills are typically
taught through direct interactions that attempt to replicate key as-
pects of real situations (Druckman and Ebner 2008). Executive
training courses on negotiation, however, tend to have special meet-

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ing schedules and span shorter time periods than semester-long courses. In some cases, the duration of face-to-face interaction among participants can be rather brief. Therefore, the relational aspects of an executive training cohort may, by necessity, be less developed than in other training contexts. However, a side benefit of executive training, and often a participant expectation, is the opportunity for participants to network during and after the course, as they build relationships that endure beyond their shared training experience. Peer-to-peer interaction in work groups facilitates networking among training participants and can also support learning through the creation of communities of practice that extend beyond the time boundaries of the course.

Therefore, we argue that relational development before, during, and after an executive training course should become an integral component of the behavioral changes we aim to achieve through such an experience. Furthermore, as negotiation trainers seek to market "basic" courses to new customers and "advanced" courses to existing customers, having ongoing relationships with training participants and nurturing their virtual communities of practice can facilitate word-of-mouth advertising and business development.

A Framework for Relational Development

Historically, two paradigms have dominated research on work group development – linear progression and punctuated equilibrium. Linear progression asserts that work groups develop by undergoing sequential stages of development; punctuated equilibrium posits that groups remain relatively inertial until they approach the midpoint of their lifespan. More recent research (Chang, Bordia, and Duck 2002) has empirically shown that rather than competing, these two paradigms, with their affiliated literatures, merely represent different levels of granularity in analysis. We briefly describe below some of the integrated findings, which form the basis of our suggestions for nurturing relational development among participants in executive training courses.

Work groups develop in rather predictable ways. At the outset, group members are concerned with issues of inclusion and safety. They engage in social and self-categorization in an effort to make sense of their new environment. However, they usually have scarce first-hand information about other members, so their first impressions are based on the others' easily observable characteristics – usually demographic – combined with stereotypical assumptions. Consequently, group members are usually cautious about sharing their ideas during initial meetings and look to others, especially appointed group leaders, to provide task direction. They feel pressured

into focusing on the task at hand, but feel comfortable doing so at the behest of a leader, even though they are ill equipped to work as a group. The approach that these groups adopt during their first meeting sets the tone for a period that lasts for roughly the first half of the group's project-defined lifespan. During this first, rather distressing phase, very little is achieved for the group task. Members struggle with issues of power, structure, and intimacy as they clarify their roles and assert independence, so any effort expended on the task is often undermined by coalitions that form in response to relational conflict that manifests itself openly or below the surface.

This initial pattern is not hopeless, however. Midway through the project's lifespan, groups undergo a transition. In order to meet looming deadlines, they revise their approach. Relational disagreements are settled or fade in the face of overriding concerns with meeting group goals. Task goals and individual roles are clarified, increasing member satisfaction and group cohesion. As the fear of rejection subsides, members are more willing to share their thoughts and trust develops among them. This second phase is characterized by more effective task-related work, partly because group norms for productivity have been established. When groups finally reach their project-defined endpoint, they engage in feedback about their shared experience before disbanding or moving on to the next project, in which the development cycle begins again.

One can clearly see how issues of trust and reputation will manifest themselves among course participants as their work groups develop in the above-predicted manner. In an executive training course on negotiation, where participants lack prior experience with each other, they are apt to engage in *ad hoc* reputation development. This is reflected in participants' struggle for a leadership role during group discussions, or in their resorting to sniping or argumentation. During role-play simulations, this might lead to "extreme" behavior–either highly competitive or highly cooperative – depending on the image a particular participant wishes to project. As usual, trust (or the lack thereof) might surface in the participants' willingness to share information about themselves. It might also manifest itself in a participant's willingness to participate in loosely structured interactions with strangers. An absence of trust might even lead to a participant "lurking" on the fringes of a discussion instead of taking an active role, or to another responding in an escalatory manner to seemingly innocuous remarks (see Nadler and Shestowsky 2006; Ebner 2007).

The fact that relational development in work groups follows a predictable and involved process is problematic for executive training, where time is at a premium and the focus is on the acquisition

of specific skills. Unless these relationships are actively sought and receive special attention, they are unlikely to occur.

The Strategic Use of Online Communication Technology

By understanding how relational development among participants unfolds in work groups, trainers can facilitate this process. Finding a way to make time for relational development is, however, challenging within the time constraints of typical executive training courses. Strategic use of online group activities can extend the interaction time beyond the classroom and also advance the teaching of negotiation content (Macduff 2009). There is a constantly increasing wealth of online communication modalities and tools, including innovative uses of wikis, virtual worlds, blogs, images and short movies. There is also a growing familiarity and comfort level with their use among people of all ages. Both the tools and the willingness to use them can be put to use in the context of executive training to expand the interaction time necessary for effective group formation and in the process enhance some key negotiation skills (Macduff 2009). As an added benefit, developing online ties among participants can also contribute to a continuation of useful exchanges after they have completed the training. Jack Phillips and Patricia Phillips deemed the lack of such follow-up to be one of the causes why training often fails to reach its objectives (Phillips and Phillips 2002).

We propose here three online group activities that accomplish both negotiation pedagogy and relational development objectives: participant introductions, sharing negotiation experiences during the training, and group decision-making.

Online Participant Introductions

Given the tendency of groups to spend considerable time (up to half of a project's lifespan) clarifying relational issues, we may want to enable this sense-making stage by moving it outside the course, to form and shore up the groups before they begin interacting face-to-face. This would allow the groups sufficient time to work, at least to some extent, through their predictable development stages.

One activity that can trigger early group development is for participants to introduce themselves to their assigned work groups online, prior to the in-class convening of the course. Trainers can manage the degree of participant exposure or disclosure through the framing of the invitation. For example, the instructor might ask participants to post their names, or to introduce themselves by mentioning their location, occupation, and some contexts in which they

negotiate (as well as anything else they might wish to share about themselves). This activity would jump-start relational development among participants, as well as save course time that can be devoted to discussing negotiation content or practicing skills.

If trainers want participants to become aware of their implicit assumptions of others during negotiation, they can use online communication technology to subvert this social process (Bhappu, Griffith, and Northcraft 1997; Bhappu and Crews 2005) and thus make it explicit. They could get participants to interact about course content (see next suggested activity) while they still have little or no knowledge of each other. This lack of knowledge might serve some learning goals. Race, gender, physical appearance, and other individual attributes play a weaker role online than they do in face-to-face interactions (Bhappu, Griffith, and Northcraft 1997). Therefore, participants whose first interaction is online will form opinions of each other based on performance and message content rather than visible cues that tend to anchor first impression in face-to-face interactions (Barsness and Bhappu 2004; Bhappu and Crews 2005).

To enhance the value of this "online acquaintance" exercise, trainers might ask participants in class to reflect on these interactions, elicit information about their impressions of the other group members, and whether these impressions might be different because of the online interaction and the absence of visual cues. The instructor could ask participants to describe whom they found to be most different face-to-face when compared to the online impression initially formed. This activity can provide ample material for a more theoretical discussion of cognitive frames, such as stereotyping, and the powerful impact of perceptions in negotiation.

Taking risks and being vulnerable are necessary stages of the trust-building process (Boyd 2003; Ebner 2007). And online participant introductions could help group members become more familiar with each other, triggering the group development process earlier than would otherwise typically occur. However, trainers need to set ground rules for group discussions and manage any situation where one participant's perception might prove offensive to others, because if mishandled, such events could hinder rather than assist relational development.

Trainers should keep in mind that together with benefits the online venue poses some challenges to positive relational development, particularly in the area of trust development (Bos et al. 2002; Ebner 2007). To mitigate problems deriving from the electronic medium itself (Turel and Yuan 2008), trainers need to guide the conversation. For example, they might encourage participants not only to share their assumptions about other group members but also to re-

flect on what their assumptions suggest about their own cognitive frames. This may re-focus group discussions on the characteristics of the perceiver rather than on those of the perceived.

Sharing Negotiation Experiences Online

Asking participants to post online stories about their own negotiation experiences can be very useful and engaging, serving several relational and pedagogical purposes. The nature of the shared experience will depend on whether the activity is conducted before, during, or after the training course. For example, trainers could invite participants to share their most memorable negotiation experience as part of online group introductions (see above). During the course, experience-sharing might be framed more narrowly, such as asking participants to reflect online each night about particular negotiation dynamics or tools that were discussed during the day (similar to the blogs proposed in Macduff 2009). After the course ends, group members could continue to discuss virtually any challenges that they encounter in implementing some of the tools and techniques they acquired during the course (as suggested in Phillips and Phillips 2002).

From a relational development perspective, participants will be more comfortable with exposing their own shortcomings or negative experiences as their work group progresses through the typical group development cycle. Therefore, experience-sharing during the early stages of work group development should be limited to reputation-enhancing information. Note, however, that the sharing of shortcomings itself might provide group members an opportunity to identify with each other and share vulnerability, engendering trust and enhancing relational development among them.

Experience-sharing allows participants to begin creating reputations. Some will become known as openly sharing or withholding information, or as seasoned or novice negotiators. To enhance the relational impact of this activity, trainers might invite participants to respond to each other's postings with advice, insights, or suggestions. The participants could then observe whether the work group reciprocates their own trusting behavior. This provides a structure for participants to relate to each other empathetically, a basic negotiation skill (Ury 1991).

Online Group Decision Making

During any activity that requires work groups to converge on a joint decision, participants undergo a full iteration of the typical group development cycle. Relational development among participants (including trust and reputation) increases with each experienced itera-

tion of the typical group development cycle. Therefore, we suggest that trainers plan activities that require the work groups to make several decisions during the training course.

Specifically, we recommend that participants make joint decisions using online interaction. While research has shown that online groups, in general, make better group decisions than their face-to-face counterparts (Jessup and Tansik 1991; Kiesler and Sproull 1992; Lam and Schaubroeck 2000), the online venue changes the dynamics of participation and attention during group discussions, bringing more participants into the fold (Nunamaker et al. 1991; DeSanctis and Monge 1999). This is due to a lowering of inhibitions (decreased social distance), the inability of individuals to dominate group conversations (parallel processing), and more attention being paid to the ideas of lower-status group members (reduced social cues) (see Ebner et al., *You've Got Agreement*, in this volume). Some participants might even feel more comfortable communicating online, or be more textually inclined, which would allow them to contribute more to an online discussion than they would face-to-face. Moreover, negotiating electronically during the training enhances an added skill that is increasingly necessary as decision support systems and e-negotiations proliferate (Turel and Yuan 2008). Besides the direct course benefits, online decisions and the discussions surrounding them contribute to the strengthening of group bonds (Chidambaram 1996), which transcend beyond the training program when participants may only be able to communicate electronically.

Overcoming Practical Obstacles

Strategically, the design of a course with online interactions has to take into account a range of scenarios, from across-the-board successful group formation to partial success or even outright failure to connect. That is, trainers should design the negotiation training to take advantage of well-formed work groups emerging from such interactions, but should not count on them. If work groups are successfully formed during the online exchanges and are performing well, then course time can be fully devoted to learning activities and trainers can work on transforming work groups into communities of practice. But trainers should be prepared to handle challenges associated with having participants work on relational development before, during, and after an executive training course convenes.

What does it take practically to facilitate work group development? Challenges are similar, in some respects, to designing any training program involving group work, but include some specifics related to the proposed online interactions, such as:

- Identifying and securing means of communication that are accessible to all and conducive to the establishment of relationships;
- Structuring tasks that increase the likelihood that participants will engage each other;
- Sequencing the online activities to match the needs and events of the face-to-face course components;
- Defining the optimal time period needed for effective group interaction; and
- Providing guidance for continuing relationships after the end of the course, for those interested in networking and support.

An early jump-start to group formation requires the use of online communication technology to "connect" training participants before the course convenes. But will the technology get in the way of establishing relationships? Earlier research indicated that if participants use technology often enough to become familiar with it, they will find ways to adapt it to achieve their relational goals (Chidambaram 1996). Nowadays, given the popularity of online chat rooms and social networking sites, it is very likely that participants are already familiar with groupware − software that supports online group interaction. An added benefit of priming participants to use some type of groupware is that this same technology could then be used during and after the training for work group interaction, in order to enhance the learning that occurs during and after a quick-paced, executive training course.

Research comparing face-to-face and online interactions has found them to be different along certain dimensions. Specifically, online communication is somewhat less conducive to relational development, precisely for some of the reasons that make online introductions an interesting exercise; the absence of visual and verbal cues makes it harder for participants "to feel" that they are physically and socially part of a group. However, it has been shown that the sequencing of online with face-to-face or voice interaction can make a difference. When preceded by initial, brief interactions conducted face-to-face or by phone – even just "schmoozing"− online interactions enhanced inter-party trust and collaboration (Morris et al. 2002; Nadler and Shestowsky 2006), likely by filling in the cues missing in electronic interactions that enable trust building to occur. Therefore, we recommend that group interactions conducted online before the course physically convenes be kept to the light, introductory side of the conversational spectrum and not pose relational challenges to group members.

The time available between in-class interactions may dictate the choice of online group activities. The trainers' assessment of a work group's developmental stage will affect the depth at which participants engage in relational development. For example, a focused group decision-making activity that bridges between the content discussed on Day 1 and Day 2 of a two-day executive training course might be helpful in making the most of scarce class time. At the end of Day 1, trainers can ask participants to post online their group's decision in a negotiation case, and to comment on the decisions made by their own and other work groups. Trainers can then relate participants' online discussions to the content for Day 2. This type of exercise can set the stage for carrying online group activities beyond the temporal boundaries of the course. In courses that extend over a longer period, work groups can engage in multiple iterations of this type of exercise, allowing for deeper relational development among participants as they cycle repeatedly through the group development process.

After the Course

Online group activities taking place after an executive training course can benefit from the lack of time pressure, allowing for a deepening of the relational development among group members achieved during the course. However, although participant motivation for continued group interaction might be high, especially in a work group with a strong collective identity, the "bubble" insulating the work group during the training course recedes as participants face the reality of their individual work environments and reprioritize their commitments and resources. Therefore, to foster continued interaction among graduates and help work groups transition from a training course into viable yet virtual communities of practice, trainers need to be committed to this objective and have strong organization skills. Such a transition does not happen naturally. Instead, the emergence of a community of practice needs nurturing; trainers need to provide the structure (both pedagogically and technologically) and support to facilitate this. Given that this task requires considerably greater effort than is needed to deliver a typical executive training course, trainers should build the necessary time and resources into the cost of the training.

One way to facilitate viable virtual communities of practice is to ask participants to self-select into different communities according to areas of need related to the training content (e.g., practicing decision tree analysis, setting and believing in high aspirations, managing concessions, probing for interests, creating opportunities for negotiation) rather than, or in addition to, being assigned to a com-

munity based on work group membership. Although we might expect that participants who have worked together before and during the training course feel closer to each other, the entire "class" is exposed to the same language, concepts and materials so any new group configurations have a head start in going through development stages and becoming functional.

To engage participants in durable virtual communities of practice, trainers need to set expectations and gain upfront commitment. Participants' awareness from the outset that their work group may shift venue at the end of the training program will orient them towards that possibility and lead them to put more effort into the relational aspects of their working group during the training. It is also necessary for participants to understand why and how having a virtual community of practice to support their continued learning can be instrumental to implementing the behavioral change that the training aims to accomplish. For trainers and participants alike, this is the ultimate payoff for designing and nurturing relational development in executive training courses on negotiation.

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