

Understanding Coalition Dynamics: A Role Play Class Activity

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ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this activity is to illustrate the role and challenges of coalitions in group conflict and decision making. In this activity, students take on the roles of organizational members tasked to arrive at consensus, but having different goals, interests, and information that could impact the decision. In discussing this activity experience, instructors can illustrate the six principles of coalitions presented in Wilmot and Hocker's *Interpersonal Conflict* text. This activity is applicable to any course that addresses conflict and group interaction, including interpersonal and group communication, organizational and professional communication, family communication, and workplace skills seminars.*

The ability to recognize, assess, and manage conflict effectively can be tricky business. Individuals may have a variety of needs and goals that seem incompatible with the needs and goals of others, which serve as the root of conflict (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). While an individual may make behavioral decisions based on his or her own conflict management style preference, the individual is also the sole party responsible for those decisions. When conflict occurs between interdependent groups, however, the responsibility for poor conflict behavior is easily dispersed, and with seeming support from those in one's own group, conflict between groups can easily escalate to the point of organizational disruption. Whether in the form of school project groups, departmental divisions, or labor and management disputes, conflicts often occur between sub-groups, or coalitions, of people who are part of a larger group, organization, or community. The coalitions within a larger group are made up of individuals with shared goals and more frequent interaction (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011). Group conflicts can effectively disrupt the ability of the larger organization to achieve its goals. The purpose of the activity described here is to help students recognize the dynamics of coalitions and group conflict by first taking on the roles of individuals within a group conflict, and then discussing how communication within the scenario affected the outcome of the group conflict. After participating in this activity, students should have a stronger sense of potential sources of group conflict and recognize some common hurdles to assessing and resolving group conflict. While the primary text for understanding the principles of conflict coalitions comes from the Wilmot and Hocker (2007) *Interpersonal Conflict* textbook and used in a conflict communication course, this activity is applicable to a variety of classes that address group decision making, including group communication, organizational communication, risk and crisis management, network analysis, family communication, and

university or workplace skills seminars. The seventh edition of the Wilmot and Hocker (2007) text includes a list and description of six principles of coalitions as part of the chapter on assessing conflict. Unfortunately, the current eighth edition (Wilmot & Hocker, 2011) does not provide the list of principles, but does include the principle concepts of coalitions in the text on mapping conflicts. However, for lecture and discussion purposes, the list of the coalition principles from the seventh edition offers a simple breakdown for understanding and improving group conflict dynamics after the activity.

For this activity, the class is divided into groups of six. Each person in the group will have a different role in the scenario of a local company (Funco) that is trying to decide on a soft drink distributor with which to contract in Asia. Each role in this activity serves to demonstrate different types of power, relationships, and goals within the group. While the overall goal of the company, and the primary goal of the company president, is to have this group reach a consensus decision on the distribution company with which to contract, the enacting of the character descriptions should result in the formation of coalitions. Common student experiences in this activity reflect typical challenges of coalitions in conflict: 1) that the goals of these interdependent individuals are initially seemingly incompatible, 2) not all individuals are willing to be completely open about their true goals and interests, 3) participants can have different understanding or knowledge of the situation, and 4) not all of the relationships and levels of support and access within the group are equal.

Understanding Coalitions Dynamics Activity

Objective

The purpose of this activity is to have students experience and demonstrate the dynamics of coalitions in a group conflict situation. Students will also be able to observe and discuss the impact of coalitions on group decision-making.

Time for the Activity

This activity should take about 30 minutes, 20 minutes for the role play and ten minutes for the class discussion.

Resources Needed

Instructors will need to provide one copy of the student role sheet (Appendix A) to each group of six students. The role sheet should be cut to separate each of the roles, and the separated roles given to individual students so that each student can see only her or his own role's information.

Activity Directions

For this activity, the class is divided into groups of six. Each person in a group will have a different role in the scenario of a local company (Funco) that is trying to decide on a soft drink distributor with which to contract in Asia. Each role in this activity serves to demonstrate different types of power, relationships, and goals within the group. The six roles are as follows, with names changeable as needed: Dylan, the president of Funco; Pat, the night shift supervisor; Chris, the day shift supervisor; and three day shift labor representatives, DJ, Billy, and Kelly. Appendix A provides the different perspectives, relationships, levels of information, and individual goals of each role.

While student role players can verbally share any information they choose from their role description, they are not to let other group members see their role description. This rule allows the communication to more accurately reflect genuine communication, which includes opportunities and choices regarding honesty, openness, and deception.

The overall goal of the company and the company's president is to have this group reach a consensus decision on the distribution company with which to contract. Groups are given 20 minutes to try to reach consensus. Participants can communicate or not communicate with whomever they choose in their group. Students can find separate spaces in and around the classroom to have private conversations with other group members (coalition conversations). The president is typically off to the side, with group members talking to her or him as desired.

Alternative Approaches

A class can have one or two groups of six taking on the roles in the activity, with the rest of the class members silently taking notes on what they observe in the interactions. To motivate all students enacting roles in this activity to work toward achieving consensus in order to avoid a stalemate (which would result in the president losing her or his job), the president can be given the power to fire employees that are seen as unreasonably inhibiting the decision-making process.

The group communication skills addressed in this activity are broadly applicable. The activity can be easily modified to suit the needs of high school and theater instruction programs. High schools can use this activity to address the challenges present in effective team building and group cohesion. For high school students, the scenario can be made more relevant by changing it to one of student government decision making, with the social connections being those of shared activities rather than alma mater. Similarly, theater programs can use this activity for developing conflict awareness and management skills among cast and crew teams. Instead of a workplace setting, the scenario can be changed to a theater production setting making a choice about a show. In modifying the roles, the company president can be changed to a student director, the social connections can become shared past productions among students, and the different coalition groups can be cast and crew teams. In any group setting that has members forming smaller groups that share common interests and interact more frequently, the

challenges of conflict between coalitions are likely to occur. The scenario can simply be modified to be meaningful to a particular class or program.

Debriefing and Discussion

After 20 minutes the class regroups as a whole to discuss the challenges each group experienced in trying to reach consensus. At this point students can openly share their role character's interests and level of information during the activity, and how these factors influenced their communication with other group members. Other class members can also share what they observed during the activity. To guide the discussion, students can be asked to share what they observed about the following:

1. What coalitions did you see formed? Who communicated most frequently with each other?
2. What did you observe about the level of openness in communication by the different group members?
3. Who openly communicated with whom? What do you think might have influenced these choices?
4. How do you think power and the ability to influence were perceived by different group members?
5. How might deception have been used to influence others?

After class discussion, the instructor can present the six principles of coalitions as described in Wilmot and Hocker's (2007) textbook *Interpersonal Conflict* (pp. 190-194):

Principle #1: Coalitions begin for good reasons.

Principle #2: Coalitions and counter-coalitions become self-justifying.

Principle #3: Coalitions become the problem.

Principle #4: Coalitions can be clarified by identifying who is in them.

Principle #5: Coalitions predict future conflict.

Principle #6: Organizational systems can be changed by softening the coalitions.

Appraisal

By putting students into the roles of different characters in a conflict, they can experience firsthand the frustration of having limited information in decision making and begin to see the importance of fostering more open communication in group decision making. The open reflection and discussion phase allows students to more effectively empathize with character roles other than their own. Through this activity, students can come to understand the importance of softening coalition boundaries and fostering more open communication among all group

members, making it possible to address conflicts at the level of interests rather than focusing on rights or power. With greater mutual understanding and trust, all group members can more comfortably engage in effective decision making that benefits the whole group.

To help students apply their new understanding of coalition dynamics to their own lives, instructors can assign students to reflect upon and write about their own coalition experiences, whether these are coalitions at their jobs, in student organizations, or even in their own families. As described by Wilmot and Hocker (2007), coalitions can be mapped by writing the names of group or organizational members and drawing circles that encompass the names of members that interact more frequently. Students can then write about what interests might be shared among circled coalition members, and describe how rigid coalitions and limited communication between coalitions might explain some of the conflicts they observed in those groups.

References

- Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2007). *Interpersonal conflict (7th ed.)*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Wilmot, W. W., & Hocker, J. L. (2011). *Interpersonal conflict (8th ed.)*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Appendix A: Activity Roles

Dylan: President of Funco Your main goal is to have your two supervisors and three labor employee reps come to a consensus on which Asian distribution company to contract, Popco or Sodaki. If they can't reach a consensus, a contract won't be signed in time and you will lose your job As a Finley College alumnus, you are on the athletics board with Pat (night supervisor), another Finley College alumnus and more of a business associate than a friend. Chris (day supervisor) is a Sheldon College alumnus. Both Pat and Chris are up for promotion to vice-president, which will largely be based on their successful recommendation of Popco (Pat) or Sodaki (Chris).	Pat: Supervisor, night shift, Funco You are trying to work your way up to vice-president, and you know your ability to have your recommendation for Popco (vs. Sodaki) accepted as the Asian distributor could help you get the job. Popco has offered the lowest bid for the contract. You see Chris (day shift supervisor) as your main competition for the job. Chris makes a point of trying to make you look stupid in front of your boss. None of your night shift employees are represented in this meeting. You are a Finley College alumnus, as is Dylan (the president), and you both serve on the athletics board. Getting Dylan on your side could sway the others to agree with your recommendation. All six of you must reach a consensus to get a contract signed.
Chris: Supervisor, day shift, Funco You are trying to work your way up to vice-president, and you know your ability to have your recommendation for Sodaki (vs Popco) accepted as the Asian distributor could help you get the job. Popco, the lowest bidder, has recently received some bad press regarding labor practices, exploiting both children and elephants, which you feel would reflect poorly on Funco. Pat, the night supervisor, is your main competition for the job and is friends with Dylan (president), as both are Finley College alumni and are on the athletic board together. As usual, you have done more research than Pat on who should receive the contract. You expect your dayshift employees (and labor reps) DJ, Billy, and Kelly, to support your decision. All six of you must reach a consensus to get a contract signed.	Kelly: Labor rep, day shift, Funco You are an employee at Funco, working in the warehouse with DJ and Billy. All three of you are labor reps, and your union is encouraging you to try to get Funco to sign a contract with Sodaki (vs Popco), the Asian distribution company that is unionized. Your supervisor is Chris. You have worked at Funco for 15 years, and have received only token wage increases while DJ and Billy started earning more money than you when they came to Funco five years ago. You were recently approached by Popco and offered a job that would pay twice what you get now if you are able to convince your company to sign the contract with Popco. You can't tell anyone about the job offer without the offer being taken away. You were told the reported labor abuse issues with Popco were largely exaggerated in the media, and the company has been improving its reputation. All six of you must reach a consensus to get a contract signed.
DJ: Labor rep, day shift, Funco You are an employee at Funco, working in the warehouse with Billy and Kelly. All three of you are labor reps, and your union is encouraging you to try to get Funco to sign a contract with Sodaki (vs Popco), the Asian distribution company that is unionized. Your supervisor is Chris. You are friends with Billy, but Kelly is a slacker who didn't attend any union meetings. All six of you must reach a consensus to get a contract signed.	Billy: Labor rep, day shift, Funco You are an employee at Funco, working in the warehouse with DJ and Kelly. All three of you are labor reps, and your union is encouraging you to try to get Funco to sign a contract with Sodaki (vs. Popco), the Asian distribution company that is unionized. Your supervisor is Chris. You are friends with DJ, but Kelly is a slacker who didn't attend any union meetings. All six of you must reach a consensus to get a contract signed.

