Expanding Critical Voice In Management Classrooms

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Abstract

Giving and responding to meaningful communication is an essential piece for leaders in
improving the way they lead and how the business operates. Management faculty should strive
to develop their students' critical voice, enabling them to practice and strengthen their
competency as effective communicators. This paper discusses the need to expand critical voice
in the management classroom so that this skill can be practiced and better utilized in the work
place. Six learning activities are presented to accomplish this feat.

Introduction

An effectual part of human interaction is the ability to communicate and show competence of the
skill in daily interactions (Wales, 2002). Giving and responding to meaningful communication is
an essential piece for leaders in improving the way their business operates and in leading
organizations. Helyer (2011) states that "all students need to enhance their workplace and life
skills in order to better fit them for employment and life after university." (p.95). In higher
education, learning takes place in isolation, a predetermined routine, fixed curriculum. In the
traditional classrooms, the instructor is the subject matter expert who transfers knowledge to
students, who are expected to regurgitate information (Rassuli & Manzer, 2005; Wright, Bitner,
& Zeithaml, 1994).   Professors often teach the outcomes of their research or teach from readings
of their interest versus building skills to have students be effective in the workplace (Thijssen,
Maes, & Vernooij, 2002).

Theoretical training and practical skill development are paramount for students to excel in
management practices in organizations. A challenge management educators face is to ensure the
critical voice of the student is heard and is expressed in a manner that the audience can make
sense (and therefore make use) of the information. The concern arises when students are taught
to exercise their voice, which often conflicts with traditional teaching methods. This problem is
the result of the lack of exposure to a form of teaching that uses an embedded approach where

students are taught and required to use their thinking skills in the classroom (Sun & Hui, 2012; Thijssen et al., 2002)

Critical voice is conceptualized in this paper as the expression of opinions (Favorable/ unfavorable) that can make a difference in what/how strategies are implemented and how well the individual will perform. Critical voice may include communications of instructions or feedback. As a result, expressing the critical voice during the decision-making process helps to initiate or facilitate change(s) which may be considered necessary for improved performance. This interactive process can fundamentally change how one sees the world or settle a viewpoint on the current situation (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

This paper examines the concept of students practicing critical voice in the classroom. The authors begin by presenting challenges of expressing voice, then discuss voice in the literature, and lastly identify six learning activities that embed critical voice in management instruction. These strategies aid the students and their employers. The students actively participate in exercises that develop their critical voice in a learning environment where they can give and receive feedback from their instructor. This interaction increases the likelihood that the students will be better communicators in the workplace, thus increase employer satisfaction and organizational performance.

Challenge of Exercising Voice

In management education, which often employs active learning techniques, students are expected to participate in class discussions, cases, and exercises, and learn from their peers, the instructor, and guest lecturers. Student feedback can also inform the instructor of the need to alter the classroom environment to fully support active learning (Auster & Wylie, 2006). Thus, management learning environments are often a demonstration of the double-loop learning that Argyris (1977) argues is necessary if practitioners and organizations are to make informed decisions in rapidly changing and often uncertain contexts.

These intellectual exchanges give the instructor an opportunity to determine if the students have grasped the management concepts and principles. Some comments may indicate students have not been able to apply the concepts and may not be able to effectively address the current topic and similar issues in practice.

Class participation is often a component of an instructor's grading system. Instructors may allocate participation/contribution points based on the perceived importance and relevance of the student's comments (ideas, questions, reflections, and recommendations, etc.) and/or actions. Instructors also use peer evaluations to allow students to provide input regarding each other's' performance. This practice can be very helpful when student contributions to group efforts cannot be directly observed by the instructor. Students can use this opportunity to identify and penalize social loafing group members (free riders, non-performers, underperforming members, etc.). Given peer evaluations may be used to determine student grades (Bowes-Sperry, Kidder, Foley, & Chelte, 2005; Chen & Lou, 2004, Pond & Ul-Haq, 1997, Sherrard, Raafat, & Weaver, 1994), ensuring students understand how to use critical voice is important.

Kidwell and Kochanowski (2005) gave two primary reasons why some students will not express their critical voice: 1) afraid of being labeled as deviant and 2) might face unpleasant consequences. Students who express voice about negative issues in the learning environment can be labeled and punished by fellow students on their team evaluations and subsequently by instructors when grades are determined. In active learning classrooms and in learning organizations, students and employees are expected to be active participants in favorable and unfavorable discourses about organizational phenomena. To continuously improve the learning environment, instructors and managers may actually encourage them to provide qualitative feedback.

As pointed out by Kidwell and Kochanowski (2005), students who are passive in classroom discussions may stay passive when they become part of the workforce. While not participating in class discussions may be of no consequence, not speaking up in the workplace may have unwanted consequences for the organization and individuals (i.e. implementing unsuitable strategies, job dissatisfaction). In practice organizational leaders benefit when they can effectively incorporate feedback, particularly feedback that challenges accepted practices or policies which may be hindering the organization's success or damaging the organization's reputation. Effective managers are not only expected to be able to grasp the worldview of others in order to adapt and respond to environmental changes, (Kersten, 2000), they are also responsible for ensuring employees are given an opportunity to express their critical voice, and they are expected to express and address the concerns of their subordinates (as well as their own)., particularly in learning organizations.

Voice in the Literature

Farrell (1983) operationalized voice as "talking to the supervisor to try to make things better," "putting a note in the suggestion box hoping to correct the problem," and writing a letter to a government agency to find out what can be done to help the problem." Voice responses might also involve quiet murmurings, pointed questions or complaints, threats, and collective action (Graham and Keeley, 1992).

Fearing retaliation, employees often will not voice discontent to leaders (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Nemeth, 1985; Swing, 1977). Although leaders are obligated to be open to bad news, dissent, warnings, and problem signs (Kassing, 1997; Redding, 1985; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003), studies show that employees are often reluctant to voice dissent about issues in the workplace (Moskal, 1991; Ryan & Oestreich, 1991), and feel voicing their discontent is useless and even dangerous (Argyris, 1977; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Redding, 1985). Rather than voicing their concerns to leaders or challenging the practice(s) that led to their discontent, they choose exit, loyalty or neglect response(s).

The challenge in getting students to express critical voice or speak up in class has also been noted in the management literature. Desiraju and Gopinath (2001) offered some insights as to why students fail to express voice during class discussions: 1) students are not prepared (have not read or analyzed the material prior to coming to class), 2) students are not comfortable speaking in class and being challenged by their peers or the instructor to defend their views, 3) students are afraid to speak up when the instructor is at the front of the class, and 4) students do not have any training in actively listening to their peers. These insights can be extrapolated to discussions that do not involve case studies. Another reason students may fail to express voice

during class discussions is they are not comfortable speaking in class if they do not believe they have good communication skills (listening, interpreting what is said, and voicing their views about what was said).

The role of a facilitator can be useful in voicing concerns when students are required to work in teams. This role may be attributed to Parker (1990), who identified 4 roles for team members: 1) contributors (task-focused individuals), 2) collaborators (synthesizers and goal-oriented members), 3) communicators (process persons, or facilitators), and 4) challengers (divergent thinkers, or questioners who prevent groupthink). Facilitators can help prevent conflicts from escalating by keeping the instructor informed as problems arise. Again, the team facilitator can serve as a resource for class members to reinforce the concept of team facilitators in organizations.

Another form of voice is the use of peer evaluations. (Bowes-Sperry et. al, 2005). In a somewhat recent assessment of peer evaluations, Bowes-Sperry et al. (2005) identified two concerns that can be addressed by developing the students' critical voice: 1) students may try to avoid conflict when conducting peer evaluations, 2) and that peer evaluations are often quantitative and not qualitative (students are not required to go beyond rating the performance of their team members).

Unsuccessful attempts to use peer evaluations in practice have been noted in the literature. Beer, Cannon, Baron, and Dailey (2004) described five case examples in which teamwork was essential. Peer evaluations were used to determine individual effectiveness. The researchers noted that one team had a very difficult time judging the work of their respective team members, particularly when the feedback on individual members was negative. The members who received negative feedback argued the team feedback was not objective. Researchers argue that if employees do not accept the legitimacy of peer feedback, they will discount its value (Fedor, Bettenhausen, & Davis, 1999; Maurer & Tarulli, 1996).

It has been demonstrated in the literature that developing the students voice is critical and can be challenging. Students should be encouraged to utilize their voice in the classroom to address the challenges and to learn how to be an effective and meaningfully contributor to their peers in the classroom and mainly in the workplace. A solution to support the students is to create simulations using embedded learning activities to have the students use their voice by taking on different roles, doing peer evaluations and other activities that give the student insight into different communication strategies to express their voice.

Learning Activities

Utilizing the embedded approach to teach thinking skills allows for the student to practice and apply critical skills while gaining a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Stipek, de la Sota, & Weishaupt, 1999; Sun & Hui, 2012). Following are some examples of embedded learning activities to develop the students' critical voice. These examples are based on the authors' experiences in teaching management courses.

1) Classroom discussions allow students to provide meaningful insights about theory and concepts covered in the course.

1) Illustrative Stories. Instructor encourages students to discuss how theory fared in their workplace or industry. Students should be prepared to explain why the theory works or not.

2) "Mini" Presentations. Instructor asks students to prepare short presentations about an upcoming theory and use their presentation as the basis for class discussion. The presentations must convey various perspectives and applications from which the class can learn.

2) Oral presentations. Students develop presentations to explain or justify their stance on management issues.

1) Verbal Feedback after Oral Presentations. Instructor requires presenters to set aside time for reflection after their presentations. Unlike the Q&A that students usual include which allows students to ask clarifying questions about the details, numbers, etc., students can inform the presenters of any disconnect or concerns they might have about how the presentation flowed, the effectiveness of materials used during the presentation, etc. and suggest ways to improve or enhance the probability of successful idea/strategy implementation.

2) Written Feedback during Oral Presentations. Instructor may require students to write questions and comments that the presenters must address during time set aside for questions and answers or address during their planning for their next presentation. Students provide their suggestions to both the presenters and the instructor. Notable improvements based on those suggestions should be visible during the next presentation. If not; the presenters should explain why they chose not to follow the students' advice.

3) Panel discussions. Students come prepared to represent a stance and field questions.

1) Ad Hoc Discussions. Students are required to serve on a panel without advance notice. An assumption is made that they have read the required reading and can convincingly argue a point of view with a moment's notice.

2) Planned Discussions. Students prepare to serve prior to class. As such, they are expected to perform much more effectively than in ad hoc situations. The observant students usually provide more challenging feedback in these situations.

Conclusion

Exhibiting strong communication skills is critical in the workplace. The classroom, practice observations and literature indicate a need exists to develop the students' critical voice in preparation for managing in an organization. By developing their critical voice in the classroom, students have opportunities to voice their opinions, receive feedback, see how their opinions affect the situation, and manage corrective actions in a trial environment. Faculty must be able to provide students with meaningful opportunities to learn how to voice their thoughts to key stakeholders. By embedding the proposed learning activities into the pedagogy, management faculty can improve student readiness to succeed in the classroom and in the workplace.

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