

**Leadership Emergence: A Role-Playing Exercise**

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### **Abstract**

This role-playing exercise, developed for use in a graduate leadership course, invites students to experience the dynamic nature of leadership emergence through participation in leaderless discussion groups. Survivors from a plane crash need to develop a plan for staying alive and safe until help arrives. Students read instructions and role play in small groups. The leaderless group must work together and develop a plan for surviving on the island. Over the course of the exercise, a leader emerges (maybe)! A brief review of leadership emergence theory, teaching notes, exercise, and student responses are provided.

Key Words: leadership, leadership emergence, experiential exercise, role playing

### **Leadership Emergence: A Role-Playing Exercise**

Leadership emergence is defined as a dynamic social process during which individuals with no formal authority become leaders (Durham, Knight, & Locke, 1997; Neubert & Taggar, 2004). According to emergent leadership theory, task leaders emerge from a group of individuals through a process of “competition and elimination” (Johnson & Bechler, 1988). The resulting leader is the individual who best meets the task and social needs of the group. While research shows that certain personality traits and individual characteristics such as dominance, extraversion, and intelligence are related to leadership emergence, other studies suggest that leaders emerge through a complex and dynamic process of social interactions. According to Emery, Daniloski, & Hamby (2011), leader acceptance and recognition depends upon individual as well as follower characteristics, the situation, or an interaction between or among these components.

In an attempt to help students understand the dynamic nature of leader emergence, we created a role playing exercise designed to facilitate leadership emergence in a leaderless group-discussion (LGD). According to Ensari, Riggio, Christian, & Carslaw (2011), LGDs are a widely used technique for studying leader emergence and assessing leadership potential. In LGDs, a problem is presented to a small group of 5-6 individuals and the group is asked to develop a solution within a given time period. No formal leader is designated. At the conclusion of the exercise, individual group members are evaluated on their leadership potential or, alternatively, asked to evaluate which of their peers exhibited more effective leadership behaviors.

In our exercise, participants were provided with a role, assigned to a leaderless group, and asked to work collectively to develop tactics for surviving on a deserted island. No member

of the group was assigned to be the formal leader; however, participant roles were “endowed” with characteristics and resources associated with leadership emergence. Through group interactions, opportunities “naturally” developed for members to take on leadership roles. At the conclusion of the exercise, group members discussed the leadership behaviors that emerged, the factor that influenced leadership behavior, and the dynamic nature of leader emergence.

In the following sections of this paper we provide an overview of the exercise as well as instructions for conducting and debriefing the exercise.

### **Overview of the Exercise**

This exercise was developed for use in a graduate leadership course and uses role-playing in a leaderless discussion group to help demonstrate leadership emergence. Other potential uses for the exercise include undergraduate courses in organizational behavior and leadership.

By participating in this exercise, individuals will (1) experience the dynamic and social nature of leadership emergence; (2) synthesize multiple concepts on the topic of leadership emergence; and (3) reflect upon factors that influence leader emergence.

The exercise can be completed in one hour; however, additional time may be needed depending on the number of related topics discussed. The recommended class size is twenty to thirty students working in groups of five.

### **Instructions for Facilitating the Exercise**

Prior to the exercise, students should be assigned readings on the topic of leader emergence (see Appendix 1 for a suggested reading list). The instructor should make the appropriate number of copies of each role description (see Appendix 2) and provide each student with a role description and survival scenario (see Appendix 3). On the day of class, have

students sit in assigned groups. Distribute role plays and the survival scenario. Tell students they have 15 minutes to come up with survival tactics. Tell students that their answers will be evaluated based on expert opinion. While students are interacting, take note on any leadership behaviors demonstrated. After 15 minutes, tell the students that the role-play is over and then review the expert's opinion so that students can evaluate their performance. Next introduce the topic of leadership emergence and facilitate a discussion using the discussion questions listed below. Conclude the discussion with a brief summary of factors influencing leadership emergence.

### **50-60 Minute Learning Module**

- Divide students into groups of 5 and distribute roles descriptions and survival scenario (5 minutes)
- Students develop a survival action plan (15-20 minutes)
- Review the expert's opinion (Appendix 4) on survival and have students evaluate their performance (5 minutes).
- Facilitate a discussion of leader emergence and student reaction to role play using discussion questions (20-25 minutes)

### **Discussion Questions**

After the role play, begin the discussion by asking: Did a single leader emerge in your group or was leadership shared? Two situations can develop from this exercise: shared leadership and individual emergent leadership. Regardless of which situation developed, it's important to focus on the factors that influenced leadership emergence/behaviors. Ask the following follow-up questions: What individual characteristics and behaviors influence the emergence of a single leader or leadership behavior? Several individual characteristics have been associated with

emerging leaders, such as gender, self-esteem, self-monitoring, dominance, cognitive skills, and emotional abilities (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2002, 2006; Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001). In terms of behaviors, task-focused and member-focused behaviors are the strongest predictors of leadership emergence (see Lord, 1977; Taggar et al., 1999). Typically, students will respond that “someone” took out a piece of paper and started taking notes and soliciting ideas. Such a response can provide an opportunity to discuss both behaviors and the underlying characteristics that enable the behaviors that predict emergence. Next, ask the following: How did individual resources influence who emerged as a leader? Leadership theory suggests that leaders emerge to meet the needs of followers through a process of competition and elimination. Students should talk about the resources they possessed based on their roles and how their resources may have allowed them to compete for the leadership role or allowed them to participate in group leadership. A fifth question is how did the degree to which individuals perceived themselves as leaders influence leader emergence? Recent research indicates that people who perceived themselves as leaders were more likely to be accepted as leaders (Emery et al., 2011). The different roles in the exercised vary in the degree to which the characters perceive themselves as leaders. Depending on the degree to which students immersed themselves in the roles, answers should show that perceiving oneself as a leader influenced leadership emergence.

### **Discussion Summary**

Research on leadership emergence has demonstrated that when groups form, leadership tends to emerge quickly and automatically (Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999). While individual characteristics influence leader emergence, this exercise should help to demonstrate that leaders emerge as a “consequence of interactions within the group that arouse expectations that he or

she, as opposed to someone else, can serve the group most usefully by helping it to attain its objectives” (Bass, 1990, p. 16).

### **Student Reactions**

“Organizational Leadership” is a required course for MBA students and is offered in a hybrid format. Hybrid courses are taught face-to-face and online over 15-weeks during the Fall and Spring semesters. Course objectives focus on critically evaluating leadership literature, applying leadership theory and principles to individual, team, and organizational situations; and developing an understanding of one’s leadership capabilities and challenges. This exercise was developed to provide students with the opportunity to evaluate, apply, and reflect upon leadership emergence theory. After participating in the exercise in the face-to-face class, student participated in an instructor-led discussion.

This exercise was facilitated in six courses over a three-year period. The initial exercise was developed by the first author, an MBA student taking the Organizational Leadership course, in response to a class assignment that required students to creatively present a summary of leadership emergence literature. The exercise was modified over successive semesters and has been facilitated in its current form with over 60 students across three separate MBA courses.

Students participating in the exercise seemed to be comfortable assuming the assigned roles and actively participating in the exercise and discussion. This may be due in part to the fact that the exercise was conducted half way through the semester after students had completed other in-class experiential exercises and had spent time interacting with each other on a weekly basis in both online and face-to-face classes. The most common form of leadership emergence in the MBA class was shared leadership. Again, this may be a function of previous social interactions among the group members. Regardless of the type of leadership that emerged (shared or

individual) students were able to discuss the dynamic, social, and non-linear emergence of leaders in a leaderless situation; identify the factors that influence leader emergence such as personality, experience, skill set, and access to resources; and relate the leader emergence experience to multiple concepts in the readings on the topic of leadership emergence.

**For the Experiential Learning Association Exercise**

This exercise can be demonstrated at the Experiential Learning Association Meeting in 30 minutes. ELA attendees will be assigned roles and will participate in a leaderless group discussion (10 minutes). Group reflection on the exercise (10 minutes) will be followed by a discussion on how the exercise might be integrated into both undergraduate and graduate courses in leadership or management. Suggestions for improving or modifying the exercise will be encouraged.

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## Appendix 1

### Recommended Reading List on Leader Emergence

1. Côté, S., Lopes, P. N., Salovey, P., & Miners, C. H. (2010). Emotional intelligence and leadership emergence in small groups. *Leadership Quarterly*, *21*(3), 496-508.
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## Appendix 2

### Individual Roles

<b>CEO</b>	You are the CEO of a large organization and have 30 years of business experience. You have survived a plane crash over the ocean and have made it to shore along with the other members in your group. You believe a leader must be selected from among the survivors and a survival plan must be developed. Based on your background you believe you should lead the group.
<b>Former Senator</b>	You are a former senator. You have served in the US Senate for your home state of California for 2 consecutive terms. You believe a leader must be selected from among the survivors and a survival plan must be developed. Based on your background you believe you should lead the group.
<b>Former Army Sergeant</b>	You are a former army sergeant. You have survived a plane crash over the ocean and have made it to shore along with the other members in your group. You believe a leader must be selected from among the survivors and a survival plan must be developed. Based on your military background and knowledge of wilderness survival, you believe you should lead the group.
<b>Protestant Minister</b>	You are a protestant minister. You have lead a large church and served as a counselor for the local hotline for the past 10 years. You are concerned about the spiritual welfare of the group. You believe a leader must be selected from among the survivors and a survival plan must be developed. You are willing to lead the group.
<b>MBA Student</b>	You are a full-time MBA student. You have survived a plane crash over the ocean and have made it to shore along with the other members in your group. Your goal is to stay alive until rescued. You know a little about wilderness survival but you know a lot about leadership. In addition, you have a lighter in your possession and you believe you can use the lighter to influence who becomes the leader of the group.

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Survival Scenario**

You and four other people have survived a plane crash over the ocean and have made it to the shore of what appears to be a deserted island. Among the survivors are a CEO of a large corporation, a former senator, a former army sergeant, a protestant minister, and a 26 year old MBA student. You join your fellow survivors and begin to *prioritize* what needs done in order to survive. You have 20 minutes to complete your discussion.

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## Appendix 4

### How to Survive on a Deserted Island

Here is the list, in order, of what you should be doing in order of priority

1. Find a source of drinking water.
2. Find/build a shelter.
3. Build a fire.
4. Create rescue signals.
5. Find a source of food.
6. Create tools for catching food.
7. Fashion weapons for self defense.
8. Create a raft to leave the island.

<http://www.survivenature.com/island.php>

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