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Brent Kice

University of Houston-Clear Lake

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Developing a Supportive Communication Climate for Virtual Task Groups

Brent Kice, PhD

Assistant Professor

University of Houston-Clear Lake

kice@uhcl.edu

Abstract

This class activity places students in virtual teams to assess Gibb's (1961) defensive or supportive behaviors as a means of reinforcing trust among virtual task-group members. A worksheet offering a fictitious online chat transcript is provided for group analysis; student directions for creating unique team names are also given. This activity helps students to establish positive climates for virtual task groups.

Courses

Small-Group Communication, Computer-Mediated Communication, and Basic Communication

Objectives

1. To assess a defensive group-communication climate for an online video-game task group.
2. To develop solutions for a supportive group-communication climate by developing creative team names while interacting through an online chat.

Introduction and Rationale

Students' future professional success requires them to navigate negative and positive climates efficiently in the workplace. Gibb (1961) referred to the communication that establishes these climates within interpersonal relationships as defensive or supportive behaviors. Ideally, individuals should utilize supportive communication strategies to promote positive relationships. In particular, supportive communication generates a positive group climate that, in turn, guides a small task group toward the successful development of solutions for the assigned tasks. The ability to generate positive group climates and to rectify negative group climates is of great value to students because they will participate in small task groups as part of their future careers. In addition, as they engage in more digital interactions, people may find themselves in careers that rely on virtual teams; hence, they must develop the ability to work successfully in computer-mediated task groups.

Gibb (1961) offered six dichotomies to assess a group as having a defensive communication climate or a supportive communication climate. First, the evaluation versus description dichotomy clarifies the use of accusatory defensive statements in contrast to neutral descriptive statements. For example, accusatory statements are identified best by you-statements, such as "You forgot to make copies of the spreadsheet." Second, the control versus problem orientation dichotomy addresses group members' desires to establish control over other group members, as opposed to listening to all group members for mutually beneficial solutions. For example, an oriented group member develops a solution that helps all members, as opposed to a

Brent Kice (PhD, Louisiana State University) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Houston-Clear Lake. He currently teaches courses on public speaking, communication ethics, and environmental communication. His research focuses on narratives of control, from scapegoating tactics to player-control in game design.

controlling member who avoids listening to the other members' concerns and develops solutions that are exclusive to her or his own views. Third, the strategy versus spontaneity dichotomy relies on group members using manipulation or honesty. For example, a group member may strategically withhold information from other members as opposed to revealing information to all members as information unfolds. Fourth, the neutrality versus empathy dichotomy describes group members' emotional connections, or lack thereof, to each other. For example, a neutral group member may appear indifferent to others' concerns, whereas an empathetic group member attempts to understand others' feelings. Fifth, the superiority versus equality dichotomy distinguishes a group member's desire to establish herself or himself as dominant or equal to the other group members. For example, a group member acting in a superior manner portrays herself or himself as better than the other members, whereas a group member who acts in an equal manner displays the opposite behavior, such as avoiding statements like "I'm better at public speaking, so you all sit behind me while I present the material to our boss." Finally, the certainty versus provisionalism dichotomy clarifies group members' willingness, or not, to be open-minded to others' views. For example, a certain member may make statements such as "I'm right." while a provisional member is eager to consider alternative points of view.

These six dichotomies provide small-group communication researchers with the means to assess a group's climate as being supportive or defensive, identifiers about whether group members feel comfortable sharing ideas. A defensive climate reduces the members' comfortableness, thereby resulting in a lack of creative solutions for problems. Supportive communication climates lead to creative solutions, and professionals need to possess the skills to adapt supportive communication techniques for both face-to-face and virtual small task groups in order to meet a digital society's career demands.

However, members of virtual teams face both the positive and negative aspects of group climates, so people need the ability to evolve negative climates into positive ones. Meluch and Walter (2012) posited that individuals who were facing a conflict during computer-mediated communication were less likely to collaborate or compromise than individuals who faced conflict as part of a face-to-face communication. In addition, Johnson, Bettenhausen, and Gibbons (2009) concluded that individuals who rely on computer-mediated communication as the primary means of interaction for work teams felt low affective commitment toward their work teams. Therefore, virtual task groups were susceptible to negative issues, following in the footsteps of face-to-face task groups. In turn, a virtual team's possible lack of collaboration and commitment suggested a defensive communication climate that was in need of remedy. In addition, members of the virtual teams may have faced the problem of being unfamiliar with the other group members, especially when they were unable to rely on the typical nonverbal cues that are utilized in face-to-face interactions. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) found that small virtual groups with high degrees of trust solved problems effectively, so the crux of small task groups that are comprised of members who are unfamiliar with each other was how to establish trust. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) applied Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer's (1996) "swift trust" to virtual groups as a means of resolving this issue. "Swift trust" existed in temporary task groups where members lacked the lengthy relationships that are required for trust development; therefore, the members assumed trust at the onset of the group task and adapted their trust expectations accordingly as the group progressed (Meyerson et al., 1996). Basically, upon the initial formation of computer-mediated task groups, members have no other option than to trust fellow members in order to complete the assigned task in a timely manner. Without positive reinforcement, that assumed trust can dwindle. Therefore, I postulated that Gibb's six aspects of

a supportive communication climate can be adapted to foster trust in virtual-group climates. If virtual members trust each other consistently throughout the completion of their task, then they, more than likely, will develop successful solutions for their problems.

Thus, the aim of the following class activity is to enhance students' abilities to recognize defensive communication in action and to improve their abilities to provide solutions that could transition defensive communication climates into supportive communication climates for the virtual teams. In addition, this activity forces students to consider particular word choices because some virtual task groups do not permit all forms of nonverbal communication to which many people have become accustomed in typical face-to-face task groups.

Description of the Activity

The following in-class activity addresses the need to enhance supportive communication skills for members of virtual task groups. The assignment should take place in a computer lab. After a lecture about Gibb's (1961) supportive or defensive communication climates, students are handed a worksheet regarding a fictitious computer-mediated group that is in the midst of conflict while playing a fictitious, multiplayer online game: *Swordcraft*. Refer to Appendix A for a copy of the worksheet. The fictitious virtual-game team members do not know each other, making it a prime example to analyze the establishment of trust and a supportive communication climate. Next, the students are assigned to virtual groups with three to five people and are instructed to use a chat room in order to communicate for the entire activity. Students are asked to identify examples of Gibb's six forms of defensive communication within the fictitious virtual-task group. Refer to Appendix B for answers to the worksheet's first item. Then, students develop team names to instill supportive climates.

Chat Room

Because this activity assesses computer-mediated communication within small groups, it requires the use of chat rooms for students to communicate. Several free chat-room websites, such as chatzy.com, are available. Instructors may also elect to have students set up group chats via Facebook. If using chatzy.com, instructors should set up the chat rooms before class. On the site's home page, simply type in a screen name, provide a title for the chat room, enter the email addresses for the students associated with the group, and click the "create my chat" button. Group members will have the option of changing the text color to differentiate among members. Repeat this process for the total number of groups that are needed.

Worksheet

Print enough copies of the Appendix A worksheet so that every student has one. First, the worksheet provides an assessment artifact in the form of a transcript for an in-game chat among members of a team who are playing an online video game. Second, the worksheet provides three items for student groups: a way (a) to apply Gibb's (1961) dichotomies to the gaming transcript, (b) to develop a solution for the online-game group's lack of trust by creating a team name, and (c) to witness their own creation of trust and positive dichotomies by establishing a team name for their student group. Appendix B provides answers for question number one on the worksheet.

Team Names

Groups are asked to develop two team names, one for the fictitious group and one for their own group. Groups create an acronym to serve as the fictitious group's team name, with each fictitious group member referenced implicitly in the acronym. Students are instructed that the acronym should be creative and inspirational for the fictitious team as a means of welcoming a supportive communication climate. Then, the groups are asked to develop an acronym to serve as their team's name, with each group member referenced implicitly in the acronym and by following the same creative and inspirational instructions that were used for the fictitious team name. Each student should have a letter of the acronym that corresponds with some aspect about herself or himself. For example, a group may decide to use the letter H for "hula hoop" to represent one member. The development of creative acronyms is a means for students to steer the impact of the neutrality versus empathy and superiority versus equality dichotomies in order to foster a supportive climate. Using implicit references to each group member in the acronym forces students to appreciate all group members' contributions while the including each group member in a team name establishes the members' equality. In turn, these supportive behaviors reinforce the "swift trust" (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Meyerson et al., 1996) that group members assume at the onset of a virtual-task group as opposed to the negative behaviors that reduce any assumed trust. Group trust allows individuals to willingly accept ideas and information from other members, thereby encouraging creative discussions. Also, groups are informed that they will present their fictitious team name and their own team name, along with a brief explanation about how the acronyms inspired a supportive group climate, orally to the class.

Procedure

1. Present a lecture on Gibb's (1961) six dichotomies: evaluation versus description, control versus problem orientation, strategy versus spontaneity, neutrality versus empathy, superiority versus equality, and certainty versus provisionalism (5-15 minutes).
2. Pass out copies of the Appendix A worksheet to each student, and read the worksheet instructions. Then, establish the student groups by instructing students to click the chat-room invitation link that was sent to their email accounts (5 minutes).
3. Tell students to work in their groups via chat in order to provide answers for questions one, two, and three on the worksheet (30 minutes).
4. Have the groups present their team names to the class, and reveal the correct answers for question number one on the worksheet (5-10 minutes).

Debriefing

After each group presents its team names, the instructor asks the students to browse through the group's chat history individually in order to reflect on the defensive and supportive communication usage within their groups. Students should be given approximately 5 to 10 minutes for individual reflection. Finally, the instructor leads the class in a short discussion about the groups' uses of defensive or supportive communication while engaging in the activity. In particular, the instructor should gear the discussion toward reflection on how different group

members approached each other when creating the acronyms and how their communication would have differed if the groups had communicated face-to-face instead.

Appraisal

Although this activity revolves around a fictitious video game, it forces students to be cognizant of how supportive or defensive climates are created in computer-mediated communication in an effort to provide realistic solutions for improving virtual, small task groups through a creative team name. In general, students are receptive to the computer-mediated assignment, with only a minority of students having issues with the assignment's creative aspects. Working together, most groups answer the examples of defensive communication for question one of the worksheet correctly. While some groups develop creative acronyms, several students require clarity about acronyms. Those students are hung up on explicitly using the first letter of a group member's name in the acronym, as opposed to implicitly referencing the fictitious group member with an adjective or descriptive phrase. However, students seem to be more creative and enjoy developing the acronyms that represent their actual groups as opposed to the fictitious groups. Last, several students tend to be unaware of their own supportive or defensive statements until they are required to reflect on the chats individually. Thus, the assignment forces them to consider how they communicate online along with the impact that negative comments can have on their trust of virtual group members.

Most importantly, after analyzing the defensive communication for the virtual group mentioned on the worksheet, students seem appreciative of applying supportive communication through creative team names. This activity's experience provides students an actionable example of working efficiently in small task groups. In turn, this activity prepares students to become successful contributors for virtual task groups, an ability that future employers will find quite valuable.

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Appendix A

Swordcraft Activity Worksheet

Directions: In small groups of 3-5, read the following transcript between five members of a small group that rely on computer-mediated communication while playing the fictitious multiplayer video game Swordcraft. Then, complete items one (1), two (2), and three (3).

Group members: Samantha, Lance, Natalya, Buddy, and Nate

Background: The group is having difficulty getting past a particular part of the game...

Lance: “Why did you go around the corner, Samantha, you’re not waiting for everyone.”

Buddy: “He’s right. Slow down.”

Samantha: “Let’s go around the corner faster right now. Lance, Buddy, move it!”

Lance: “Wait!”

Samantha: “I’m right, move on.”

Nate: “Well, I managed to clobber that monster while we got separated, and it dropped treasure.”

Buddy: “What’d you get?”

Nate: “Don’t worry about it.”

Buddy: “Just tell me.”

Nate: “It doesn’t matter. Let’s go. I’m the only one that knows how to make the most of this treasure anyway.”

Natalya: “Come on. We’re so close.”

Samantha: “Whatever, it’s just a game.”

1. Identify specific examples from the transcript that illustrate the following types of defensive communication.

- a) evaluation:
- b) control:
- c) strategy:
- d) neutrality:
- e) superiority:
- f) certainty:

2. Develop a group name that inspires the fictitious group to establish a supportive communication climate. Also, the group name should act as an acronym that incorporates each fictitious group member’s name into a component of the acronym implicitly.

3. Develop a group name that inspires your group to establish a supportive communication climate. Also, the group name should act as an acronym that incorporates each group member’s name into a component of the acronym implicitly.

Appendix B

Swordcraft Activity Answer Key

1. Identify specific examples from the text that illustrate the following types of defensive communication.
 - a) evaluation: *Lance*: “Why did you go around the corner, Samantha, you’re not waiting for everyone.”
 - b) control: *Samantha*: “Let’s go around the corner faster right now. Lance, Buddy, move it!”
 - c) strategy: *Nate*: “Don’t worry about it... It doesn’t matter. Let’s go.”
 - d) neutrality: *Samantha*: “Whatever, it’s just a game.”
 - e) superiority: *Nate*: “I’m the only one that knows how to make the most of this treasure anyway.”
 - f) certainty: *Samantha*: “I’m right, move on.”