

Chapter 12

Using Role-Playing And Coaching In Virtual Worlds To Promote Team Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines the need for team members to transform distorted assumptions about team members who are in some way different from them. In our increasingly diverse teams, this transformation is essential. The chapter fully explains transformative learning and how to foster it in role playing and coaching. The chapter argues that a virtual reality is an ideal place to foster transformative learning because it creates a “real” space for teams to interact. This space is safer than a physical space because participants are distant from one another and also because participants can use avatars as representatives of themselves. Having an avatar representative allows participants to switch identities during role play, giving it an advantage over physical space. It also allows for the expression of emotion, neither of which would be as easy in another virtual space. Johnson and Johnson (2006) correctly stated that “small groups almost always contain a diverse selection of individuals, and in order for a team to be successful and effective, diversity must be faced and eventually valued” (p. 444). Johnson and Johnson (2006) defined diversity as differences in culture, gender, skills, and social team membership, among others. In the future, as teams who had been marginalized continue taking their rightful places in organizations and as organizations increasingly establish operations in multiple nations, Johnson and Johnson’s remark will ring even truer. This diversity will have positive consequences for some teams because they will enjoy the greater depth of creativity and productivity that Johnson and Johnson (2006) claimed is the result of embracing diversity. Not only will the team as a whole reap the benefits, moreover; the members of the team will gain a greater level of sophistication in working with people different from them, a skill that they can take with them to future teams. Not all teams will embrace their diversity. In fact, most will not, or it will take a long time before team members will be able to work together efficiently and effectively. Those that do not embrace their diversity will likely suffer decreased productivity and morale as well as giving into “fight or flight” impulses that will drive members to either withdraw from the team, doing only what they have to do in

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order to survive, or engage in destructive conflict with other team members. Jones (2007) described what happened when two such teams did not embrace diversity as manifested by gender, culture and skill levels and consequently failed to form the social cohesion necessary for the teams to do their work. Instead, members of each team either stopped communicating with one another, or they engaged in sometimes vicious fighting. The consequence for both teams was a product that lacked creativity and many hard feelings. In many instances, team members fail to embrace their team's diversity because individuals on the team stereotype their peers. Men assign characteristics to women and women assign them to men. Members of different races assign characteristics to each other as do members of different cultures. These stereotypes can lead to prejudice and even bigotry, an act of mental violence towards another. These habits of mind called "distorted assumptions" by Mezirow (1991) can be so ingrained in people that they think that these attitudes are normal and right. Indeed, they may vehemently oppose any accusation of their bigotry, claiming that they are not bigoted in any way, but the behavior that illustrates their "theories-in-use" sharply contradicts their "espoused theories" (Argyris and Schon, 1974). Teams that suffer from members who work from a basis of distorted assumptions generally fall into a hierarchical, punitive structure where democratic collaboration gives way to the more powerful telling the less powerful what to do, what Argyris and Schon (1974) referred to as Model I behavior. The challenge for team trainers is to foster the development of these teams into ones that express Model II behavior, defined by Argyris and Schon (1974) as being "minimally defensive and open to learning." In these teams, "people will tend to help others, have more open discussions, exhibit reciprocity, and feel free to explore different views and express risky ideas (91). To achieve this level of team functioning, the trainer must promote the growth of a Model II mental framework within the individuals of the team. Fundamentally, the transformation of individuals practicing Model I behavior into ones practicing Model II behavior will occur as they become emancipated from "distorted assumptions" (Mezirow, 1991) through critical self-reflection of their "frames of reference," defined by Mezirow (2000) as: the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions . . . Frames of reference are the results of ways of interpreting experience . . . Many of our most guarded beliefs about ourselves and our world—that we are smart or dumb, good or bad, winners or losers—are inferred from repetitive affective experience outside of awareness (p. 16). Through a process of transformative learning, frames of reference can be changed from those that reflect bigotry, rigid mindedness, prejudice and negative perceptions of self into ones that embrace "respect for others, self-respect, willingness to accept responsibility for the common good, willingness to welcome diversity and [willingness] to approach others with openness" (Cranton, 2001, p. 231). Despite the challenges to teams operating in cyberspace, Ritke-Jones (2008) contended that cyberspace offers a fertile environment for transformative learning in collaborative teams. In this article, I claimed that although racial, cultural, gender, and other status-related power differentials are not extinguished in cyberspace . . . [it] is a good thing because asynchronous communication especially makes it easier to archive, confront, and reflect on assumptions and biases as they act to thwart the team's efforts. Thus, for a person who is committed to her or his personal growth and to the success of a collaborative enterprise, [cyberspace] provides an outstanding tool for transformative learning. This chapter will extend this idea by asserting that a 3-D virtual environment provides an even more fecund environment for transformative learning by offering not only all of the tools of asynchronous communication but also the capacity for role playing with avatars, thus allowing for safe distance but also for personal interaction in real time. Thus, team members have opportunities for reflecting critically on their behaviors and the underlying assumptions dictating those behaviors, an endeavor that could lead to a transformation of personal frames of references to ones more democratic. Consequently, if all team members change, the team itself may grow into one that exhibits Model II characteristics, and this change may promote a more democratic culture in the whole organization.

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