

WORKING PAPER NO: 529

**CAREER DECISION MAKING: COPS IN THE HEAD
A CASE BASED EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY TO
FACILITATE AUTHENTIC CAREER CRAFTING**

Supriya Rakesh

Doctoral Student

Organizational Behaviour & Human Resource Management

Indian Institute of Management Bangalore

Bannerghatta Road, Bangalore – 5600 76

supriya.rakesh@iimb.ernet.in

Ramya Ranganathan

Visiting Faculty

Organizational Behaviour & Human Resource Management

Indian Institute of Management Bangalore

Bannerghatta Road, Bangalore – 5600 76

Ph: 080-26993699

ramya.ranganathan@iimb.ernet.in

Year of Publication – November 2016

CAREER DECISION MAKING: COPS IN THE HEAD
A CASE BASED EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY TO FACILITATE AUTHENTIC
CAREER CRAFTING

Abstract

This is a write up of a case that can be used to conduct an experiential theatre activity in a class on the subject of career decision making. The exercise involves three stages. In the first stage where students have to identify the ‘voices in the head’ of the protagonist in the case. In the second stage students (with help from the instructor), act out these voices theatrically. In the third stage the students reflect on the stakeholders present in their own lives and process the voices related to them. A detailed teaching note is appended to the case that can be used to conduct this exercise in class.

Keywords: Career Decision Making, Stakeholders, Voices of Judgment

Rajesh is a student at one of the top management institutes in the country. Just about to finish his MBA, he is looking forward to his placements with some amount of anticipation as well as apprehension. He wants to make his family proud, and fulfill the expectations of all the important people in his life.

Rajesh hails from a middle class family - his father was in Government service and has worked hard all his life to save for his and his brother's education. His mother is a school-teacher and a devoted homemaker. Rajesh knows that his parents have sacrificed a lot of their comfort to bring up their children and educate them well. It is only natural that now his Father wants to see him settled in a secure job with a reputed company.

Like Rajesh, his older brother Shantanu is also an engineer. He went on to the US to pursue his Masters and is now settled there in a well-paying job. Rajesh did not feel a strong interest in the technical field, and hence decided that management was best for him. However, his older brother insists that Raj follow in his footsteps and migrate to the States for a better life.

Rajesh feels a little differently about this, as he wants to be near his mother, and especially his grand-mother, whom he is deeply attached to. It was his grand-mother who practically brought him up in his younger days, when his mother was busy with her school. She told him stories and sang him songs, of young heroes who conquered the world and achieved great things. 'One day you will also grow up and become a hero...' she would say fondly to 5-year old Raj and his would light up in excitement.

Raj always got good grades through his school and college years. His Father was a disciplinarian, so it was best to study hard and avoid the angry confrontations that would follow if one came home with a poor report card. Mother was more easy-going about marks- she believed that learning and human values were more important. 'Be a good person, Raj. It doesn't matter how well you do, but do good to the world.' 'These ideals are good, but don't work in the real world.' Father was usually quick to add, lest the children get confused.

Raj's Uncle Promod was the exact opposite of his Father. At a young age, he had run away from home to become an actor. He had struggled for years and now did small parts in theatre and television. He didn't come by that often, sensing his older brother's obvious disapproval. 'Loser, never worked hard, if you don't study, you'll become like him.' Father would often remark. Raj never said what he thought- that it didn't seem like such a bad proposition, considering how carefree and happy his Uncle always looked.

He liked people like his Uncle- who were always energetic and full of life. That was the quality that drew him to Radhika when he met her in the first month of his MBA-that and the fact that she was really pretty! For the past year and half, she had been a most supportive girl-friend, always encouraging Raj to believe in himself. He was lucky to have her. However these days the stress of placements was getting to her as well and she no longer had the time or inclination to motivate him. She was more interested in bringing up the topic of marriage,

how it would be important to get placed in good jobs, and in a common location to make their relationship work.

Thinking about all this usually makes Rajesh confused and a bit uneasy- so he just prefers to go about his daily activities and follow whatever his other class-mates are going to do. Of late, he hears people around talking more and more about things like 'follow your passion', 'do what you love'- alumni, professors, some best-selling authors, some friends. However, the more Rajesh hears this the more he gets confused. Sometimes all this even feels foreign to him, and he wonders what is his role amidst all the many stakeholders in his life.

I. INTRODUCTION

Career decisions and plans often involve messages from multiple ‘*stake-holders*’ in the individual’s life. These could be communicated beliefs, expectations, prescriptions or demands. These could also be more subtle and implicit- nevertheless influencing the individual in one direction or other. These messages can relate to specific career directions or goals, or point to criteria that are important in making these choices.

Often these messages, especially from significant others, are internalized within the individual’s thought and belief systems as ‘*voices of judgment*’. These could be acquired in early childhood, or inferred by the individual and become parts of their thinking. These multiple, often contradictory voices can co-exist leading to confusion and ambivalence about career decisions or a feeling of being over-whelmed by expectations from multiple stake-holders.

This exercise aims at helping individuals recognize and separate these internalized messages, identify their sources (sometimes in childhood) and owners (whose voice is it), and recognize their impact on the career decision-making/ planning process. Through role playing technique, this tool also facilitates the individual to be able to respond appropriately to these voices and gain clarity on his or her own beliefs about career.

We have drawn upon experiences shared by MBA students in previous sessions on this topic to develop a fictional case that represents a typical situation of a MBA student. In order to teach this case in the class we have adopted an experiential pedagogy based on Boal’s work in educational theatre.

Based on our own experience in teaching this case over the last three years in an experiential format we have put together this teaching note. In the following sections we present the theoretical basis and pedagogical basis that underlie the design of the experiential activity, guidelines for an instructor to conduct the activity in class, as well as a worksheet that can be used to accompany the activity. This exercise is ideally suited for a 90 minute session in a course on careers.

II. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This case was originally written as a teaching aid for a MBA course on “Personal Values, Goals and Career Options” in the module on “Breaking out of Conformity”.

The objectives of this exercise were:

- To initiate an understanding into the concept of ‘*Voices of Judgment*’ (see supporting reading material ‘*Destroy Judgement Create Curiosity*’)

- To enable the students to identify potential ‘*stake-holders*’ in their own life in the context of career decisions (see supporting reading material ‘*Feeling Stuck and Doubting Ourselves*’)
- To enable the students to appreciate the multiple, contradictory and influential nature of the messages of significant stake-holders
- To enable the students to ‘enact’ and observe possible responses to each voice of judgment
- To facilitate greater self-awareness of one’s own voices of judgment
- To open the possibility of productive internal dialogue to resolve contradictions and identify resolutions

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This case builds on the theoretical concepts of ‘stakeholders’ and ‘voices of judgements’. We suggest that the following two readings can be shared with the students as pre-readings before the class in which this exercise is conducted. However, in our experience we have found that this exercise works well even when participants have come to class without doing the pre-readings. In the latter case it is useful for the instructor to briefly introduce the idea of stakeholders and voices of judgements to the students before starting the exercise.

1. Feeling Stuck and Doubting Ourselves – Chapter 2 from Butler, T. (2007). *Getting unstuck: How dead ends become new paths*. Harvard Business Press.
2. Destroy Judgement Create Curiosity – Chapter 3 from Ray, M. L., & Myers, R. (1986). *Creativity in business* (pp. 106-07). New York: Doubleday.

Stakeholders: When deliberating over a major life decision; such as about career; there are significant others in one’s life who have a point of view about the decision. These usually include highly influential figures from our youth such as immediate family, parents, siblings, grandparents, teachers and even ancestors. They continue to unconsciously provide their opinions on what is good work, their definitions of achievement and success, their work values- even when they are not actually present in the room. Timothy Butler describes the presence of these people in our lives as ‘stakeholders’ and we adopt the usage of that term for conducting this exercise.

According to Butler it is important to identify who are the stakeholders in a particular decision- What is their message? How strong or clear is the message? What is their tone? It is also important to understand the background and world-view of each of these stakeholders- what were their life dreams, heroes, successes and failures, unfinished business, and understanding of career.

Butler goes on to argue that while it is almost impossible to free ourselves from the influence of these stakeholders, it is possible to increase awareness and acknowledge their presence and the powerful nature of their influence. When we let the stakeholders ‘have their say’ i.e. their

opinions are acknowledged; it is possible to separate them and evaluate them against one's own authentic voice.

Voices of Judgement: This terminology was initially introduced by Ray and Myers in their discussion on mental chatter in *'Creativity in Business'*, but has since then been used and developed further by other scholars as well. The premise behind the voices of judgement is that human beings construct their own realities (albeit unconsciously) through their mental chatter i.e. the constant monologue going on in their heads. This mental chatter is often negative, judgemental (towards self and others) and tends to be a constant companion, determining one's emotional experiences and ability to take decisions.

This unending monologue in one's head has its unique patterns, one of the strongest and most prevalent being the inner 'Voice of judgement' or VOJ. The VOJ can work in different ways- putting one down, subtle comparisons with others, reminding one of their weaknesses and failures, as well as cautioning against possible future catastrophes.

This VOJ is constructed out of all the ideas, beliefs and attitudes acquired from significant others- family, teachers, friends; as well as the larger society and media; and absorbed without examination. Over time, these individual judgements tend to accumulate and form a barrier to a healthy, functional life and constructive personal change.

However, becoming aware of the VOJs- the repetitive patterns, the emotional undertones, and effect of external events can be an important first step to change the mental chatter; and thus one's experienced reality.

IV. PEDAGOGICAL BACKGROUND

Theatre is a form of knowledge... --Augusto Boal (2002) (do we place this in beginning somewhere?)

This experiential activity is based on the *Cop in the Head* technique, which forms a part of 'Theatre of the oppressed' techniques developed by Augusto Boal.

'Theatre of the Oppressed' (TO) was originally developed out of Augusto Boal's work with the Brazilian peasant and worker populations in the 1950s and 60s. TO is a form of community based education that uses theatre as a tool for transformation.

TO envisages theatre as a form of self-expression, and role-playing as a method of self-exploration- leading to a transforming experience for the actor and the audience. It is one of the many forms of participatory theatre that have bridged the divide between actors and audience; and channeled the inherent potential in theatre to be a medium of personal and social change.

TO consists of a system of interactive exercises and games; and involves “enacting” rather than discussion- the audience is not made of spectators but “spect-actors”. Through the language of theatre, everyone is invited to share their opinion on the issues at hand (Boal, 1993).

The objective of the carefully designed and structured games is for the ‘spect-actors’ to ‘get out of our minds and into their bodies’, unfreeze, break out of old patterns and ‘discover their body’s’ potential to teach them about the self and the world’. The notion of dialogue is present in every game in TO. These games start a process of dialogue; reflection and action, thus changing the way individuals think, respond and interact with others (Boal, 2002).

TO activities and structures are at present extensively used in education, community building and training of educators. Use of theatre as a tool in educational settings is based in the principles of “Experiential Learning” (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). The term “experiential” emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process; and is used to differentiate this form of learning from more cognitive theories and approaches.

Experiential learning theory defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience"(Kolb et al., 2001). This type of learning involves reflection on doing.

The most important aspect of experiential learning is that the learners are encouraged to directly involve themselves in the experience, and then to reflect on their experiences using analytic skills, so that they gain a better understanding of the new knowledge and retain it for a longer time. Reflection is a crucial part of the experiential learning process, and can be either facilitated or independent.

The guidelines in this teaching note are based on the principles of experiential learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). While it would help if the facilitator is trained in or exposed to applied theatre or experiential learning; we have found this technique relatively easy to apply, and most of our students enthusiastic to participate.

V. FACILITATION PLAN

This activity can be conducted with a minimum of 12 participants. It works better with smaller class sizes, and we have used it in a class size of up to 40 participants. For a larger group, it may help to have more than one facilitator. Ideally, the activity needs to be conducted in an open space or a class-room which provides some space in the centre, sufficient for 8 to 12 actors to stand in a semi-circle facing the larger group; and to move about as they dialogue.

Total time: This activity can be done in a 90 minute session if all activities suggested are included, from introduction of concepts to debrief. In case there is shortage of time, we

suggest assigning reading of the case and concepts as a pre-session activity and filling up of the worksheet as a take home exercise to complete after class. It is possible to also leave out Step 5 from experiential activity. However sufficient time must be allowed for debrief.

Here is a suggested sequence of activities to use with this case.

I. Introduction:

- Students read the case.
- Introduce the concept of ‘stakeholders’ and ‘voices of judgement’ (refer to supporting reading material and section on conceptual background).
- It might be useful for the facilitator to emphasize at this stage that a stakeholder can be anyone who influences decisions related to their career (implicitly or explicitly). Messages from these stakeholders are typically manifested as voices in the head. These voices may create internal conflict and they often lead to confusion and indecision.
- During the activity we also refer to these voices as ‘cops in the head’. Each cop may have elements that influence the protagonist in various ways. It is up to each person to recognize the voices and decide how to deal with them.

II. Experiential activity:

Step 1: Name the cops:

- Students go through the case (individually or in groups of 3 to 4), and identify the stakeholders in Rajesh’s life.
- The list of important stake-holders is provided by students and noted down by the facilitators (on a board visible to all), in order of approximate importance.
- At this stage, students may be invited to add potential stake-holders from their own experiences, over and above those mentioned in the case. During our sessions, students made some insightful contributions by listing banks and social media as powerful stake-holders.

Step 2: Bring them to life:

Students are invited to volunteer themselves to play various characters: the ‘protagonist’ Rajesh and his stakeholders i.e. the ‘cops’ listed in the previous step. The protagonist stands in middle and cops stand on both sides in a semi-circle.

Step 3: Signature line/ gesture:

- With inputs from students and the actor playing the part; the group comes up with one signature line and gesture for each cop. This is supposed to represent the message of the voice in protagonist’s head.
For instance: For father- “I sacrificed so much for you”, for brother-“ Just follow my footsteps”, for girlfriend-“ it’s our future together” etc.

- These signature lines are noted down by the facilitators against the name of each cop.
- Each of the actors playing the ‘cop’ steps in the front and dramatizes the line and gesture, addressing it to the protagonist.
- After this, all the cops dramatize their lines/gestures together, so the group can appreciate the combined effect of all the voices of judgement and their impact on the protagonist.
- Finally, with inputs from students and the actor, the group chooses a line and gesture for the protagonist, which indicates his mental state as a result of these voices, for eg: (in frustration) “I don’t know what to do!”

Step 4: Responding to the cops:

- The group selects the most influential cops (3 to 4) who the protagonist needs to deal with.
- Now, each cop comes ahead and establishes a dialogue with the protagonist, remaining true to character (This will be based on case provided and their own experiences, but facilitators need to prompt them not to give up their position)
- The dialogue begins with the cop’s signature line/gesture, and continues from there. Protagonist responds to each cop, while the cop continues to make strong arguments based on their perspective.
- At this time, we can invite other students from the audience, who are willing to replace the protagonist and make better responses to counter or address the cop (Optional).
- The best responses are noted down against the name of the cop on the board.

Step 5: Arguments between the cops:

- At this stage, we re-emphasize that each cop is not really a person, but a representation of the person in the protagonist’s head (internalized voice). So, it is possible that these voices can actually talk to each other, and better handle opposing arguments. We emphasize that all this discussion is taking place within the person’s mind, and is an internal dialogue rather than conversation with the actual person in the individual’s life.
- Based on suggestions from students, the facilitator invites 2 cops at a time to have a dialogue. In order for this technique to be effective, it is best to start with strong, opposing voices.
- The actors (Cops) start with their signature lines and then proceed with the dialogue while staying in character, responding to each others’ arguments. It is possible that one or both soften their stand. The protagonist can intervene in the end to address both.
- This process can be continued with other pairs of cops, till the possibilities of dialogue seem to be exhausted.

III. Debrief with actors

- The facilitators conclude the exercise and invite each cop (from steps 4, 5) to share their experience. Some of the questions could be around- how did they feel about the character, could they relate to the character, how did they experience the dialogue with protagonist and then with the other cops, did they feel their perspective (as the character) changing or remaining the same etc.
- The facilitators then ask the students for their views of each cop. Some of the questions could be around- - how did they feel about the character, could they relate to the character, what was the best way to respond to this character, which other character could dialogue effectively with this characters, could they see the cop's position changing etc.
- Finally, we invite the protagonist (and all those played substitute protagonists) to share their views on - how did they experience each step, and their final feelings.

IV. General debrief: Connecting with student's experiences

- At this stage, we emphasize that each individual faces a unique conflict, and their own set of cops, whose positions and signature lines may vary.
- The students are invited to use their experience with this exercise to reflect on their own stake-holders, their voices and possible responses to each (use work-sheet from Section VI).

VI. WORKSHEET

Exploring Stakeholders in My Life

Use the Sheet Below to List the Various Stakeholders that you can identify in your life at this point in time. Write short phrases that might represent their voices in your head. In the third column list possible responses and or reflections that you might have for each of these voices. (Remember the response is your thought-response. It is not something you actually tell this other person. *(This is an inner world exercise and there is no need to confront the other person in the outer world).*)

My Stakeholders	Their Voices (Signature lines)	My Possible Responses /Reflections

VII. SUPPORTING READING MATERIAL FOR INSTRUCTORS (References)

Boal, A. (1993). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. NY: Theatre Communications Group.

Boal, A. (2002). *Games for actor and non-actors*. London: Routledge.

Butler, T. (2007). *Getting unstuck: How dead ends become new paths*. Harvard Business Press.

Kolb, D. A., Boyatzis, R. E., & Mainemelis, C. (2001). Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. *Perspectives on thinking, learning, and cognitive styles, 1*, 227-247.

Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of management learning & education, 4*(2), 193-212.

Ray, M. L., & Myers, R. (1986). *Creativity in business* (pp. 106-07). New York: Doubleday.