THE CORE STORIES EXERCISE

Teaching Note

Synopsis

The core stories exercise is a classroom activity designed to give students a visceral experience with empathy and storytelling, and to generate personal insights into relationships, group dynamics and leadership. It involves having small groups of students share personal stories from their lives, and then reflecting together, as a class, on the meaning of the experience of sharing these stories. In the courses in which the exercise is used, many students consider it to be the peak experience of the course. However, it is also a highly sensitive activity, and should only be undertaken with great care and authenticity on the part of the instructor, and usually only after earlier coursework has been done to prepare students for the experience.

Objectives

This case can be used for many pedagogical purposes. Some of these include

- understanding how storytelling and empathy to change perceptions and relationships,
- developing skills for perspective taking,
- understanding the impact of quashing one’s own empathy,
- comprehending the role of genuine concern in leading others, and
- applying empathy and storytelling to diverse contexts.

Class Preparation

Before the class session in which instructors use the core stories exercise, instructors may want to have class sessions that cover topics such as integrity, personal change, rationalization, conflict, and empathy. For example, one type of class that is useful as a prelude to the core stories exercise is to teach a case study in which co-workers have a personal conflict (in other words, a conflict that goes beyond the task, and involves hurt feelings, negative attributions about the other individual rather than just about what the individual did, and perhaps even personal attacks), and to analyze it using a model such as the one presented in the book, Leadership and Self-Deception (Arbinger Institute, 2010, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler). This gives students an opportunity to reflect about others’ insecurities, rationalizations, and interpersonal failures in a way that allows them to at least feign being objective and dispassionate. Of course, people cannot talk about others’ insecurities, rationalizations, and interpersonal failures without considering their own, but in this way, students can consider their own in an internal, personal way first.
Another type of class that may be useful to teach before the core stories exercise is a class that introduces a personal life timeline. (An example can be found here.) Typically, this involves something like asking students to list their ten best and ten worst experiences so far on a timeline, look the timeline in its entirety, and then ask themselves what their life so far has prepared them to do. This is useful for conversations about vision and purpose in leadership. If instructors have students complete this exercise, then personal stories are fresh on their mind when they participate in the core stories exercise.

When instructors use other class sessions or activities to prepare students to participate in the core stories exercise, it is important to teach those sessions in a way that promotes psychological safety and removes interpersonal judgment for students in the class. That way, if people bring up personal perspectives during the case discussion (which they may do without presenting them to others as personal issues), they can see that it is safe for them to do so, and thus be better prepared for the core stories exercise.

There is one other consideration that should go into preparing for this activity. Most students will not be comfortable with an activity that involves sharing personal stories. That is okay. Discomfort is sometimes an important part of learning. However, on rare occasions, an instructor may be aware of a student who may have extreme issues with such an activity. If you are aware of such a person in advance, you may wish to approach them individually and privately, tell them what will be occurring in the activity, and give them the option to do something different. This is very rarely done. Often, instructors do not know of students’ issues, students participate, and they still have a good experience in class. In fact, people often end up sharing extreme stories as part of the exercise, and things work out fine. However, each instructor needs to be aware of students and, if you have any concerns, there is nothing wrong with speaking privately to a student about the exercise in advance.

Reading and Assignment Questions

If instructors teach about a topic such as using empathy to lead others through conflict in the previous class session, it is often useful to assign a heavier reading load for the previous class, and no reading before the class in which the core story exercise is performed. This will enable the instructor to focus on understanding the academic concepts in the previous class session, and on applying those concepts in the session with the core stories exercise. Examples of useful reading assignments, with some proposed assignment questions for the previous session include:


Assignment questions:

- Toward whom is it easy for you to feel empathy in your life right now?
• Toward whom is it difficult for you to feel empathy in your life right now? Can you use the readings for this class to explain why it is hard?
• What impact does your empathy (or lack thereof) toward these people have on your leadership?
• Any additional assignment questions as necessary, if the previous class also includes a case discussion.

Proposed Timeline

Assuming a 75-minute class period, we recommend breaking up the core stories activity class as follows:

10 mins.  Transition from previous class and discussion of the reading
10 mins.  Set up and model the activity
30 mins.  The core stories activity
25 mins.  Debrief the activity

Instructions

Transition from the Previous Class and Discussion of the Reading

If the instructor covered topics related to empathy and leadership in the previous class session, it will useful to refresh students’ memories of what was covered and to transition to the activity for this session. For example, if a case study on empathy during conflict was discussed in the previous class, the instructor can ask students to recap the key points of the previous class, and also what they took away from that class both in terms of academic content, and on a personal level. Students may bring up questions, concerns, or ideas, which will be useful to address up front. Make sure to help them see the benefits of empathy for leadership in particular, and for life more generally.

As the students recap concepts from the previous class session, it is useful to ask the students about whether they have seen any of those concepts applied, or have applied them themselves, since the previous session. This gives the instructor an opportunity to see if the concepts and their application are understood correctly. Also, as the students describe their experiences, it provides the instructor an opportunity to talk about how stories influence empathy. For example, stories invite empathy by helping us to understand others’ points of view. When people do things that hurt, annoy, irritate, scare, or sadden us, imagining possible stories that explain their behavior from their point of view can help us feel empathy for them when we would not otherwise. Stories can also impede empathy. For example, as the readings suggest, rationalizations are stories we tell ourselves to make ourselves look better than we actually were and to make others look worse than they actually were, justifying our lack of empathy for others. Help students to see how interrelated stories are with their ability to empathize.

Set Up and Model the Activity
As instructors transition to the core stories activity, it is important to be careful and explicit. Begin by telling the students that first, you will give them instructions. Then you will model the instructions for them. Then they will do the activity.

Begin by asking the students to stand up and walk to find one of the people in the room with whom they are least familiar, and stand by that person. This will be their first partner. Allow them a minute to complete the task. Then, tell each pair in the room to find one other pair. It does not matter who is in the second pair. Give them one minute to do this as well. They should end with groups of four. In classes in which the number of students is not divisible by four, help them to organize into groups of three or five, but never more than five or less than three. The reason to organize groups this way is to ensure that everyone in each group is getting to know at least one person whom they do not know well. Have them sit with their groups.

Tell the students that they will be participating in an activity called the “core stories activity.” A core story is a story from your life that explains why you are the person you are today. Thus, it is not just a funny story or a story of interest, but one that is fundamentally about who you are: a story about why you act the way you do, why you think the way you do, why you feel the way you do. Tell the students that they are going to tell these stories from their lives to the other members of their group.

The way this storytelling happens is as follows:

1. The group finds a place to meet. You can leave the classroom, but the group must return by the appointed time.

2. Assign a group member to keep track of time. Each person gets two minutes to tell a story. If a person takes a few seconds more or less than two minutes to tell a story, that is fine, but they need to keep it as close to two minutes as possible. If not, they will run out of time, and people speaking at the end will not get the time they need.

3. One person volunteers to go first. They tell a core story from their life in two minutes. When they tell the story, there are rules for the other three members of the group. These rules are
   a. No laughing.
   b. No crying.
   c. No hugging.
   d. No other emotions expressed.
   e. No short-term feedback, comments, or discussion about the story. When one person finishes, simply look at the next person and allow them to share.
   f. Listen with your full attention

4. When the first person finishes his or her story, the second person tells a story, then the third, then the fourth, until each group member has told one story. When the last one has had a turn, the cycle begins again, with each person telling a second core story. Then the last one has told a second core story, the process begins again, so that when the group is done, everyone in the group has told three stories.
5. When everyone has told three stories, the group returns to their original seats in the classroom.

   At this point, the instructor should ask the students if they have any questions. Sometimes students have some logistical questions, but usually they simply express surprise or intimidation about the assignment. It is important to be reassuring and firm. Tell them that no one will be forced to participate, but that of all the times in which this activity has been performed, every single individual of whom we are aware reports it being a powerful and important life experience for them, so we encourage them to participate. If they say that people from their nationality, culture, or other social group do not do things like this, tell them that we have never encountered any social group that does this. It is counter-cultural, but it tends to be counter-cultural in a positive way. Also remind them of norms for safety, such as not sharing other people’s stories outside of the group, and listening to understand others’ stories, not to judge them.

   After answering their questions, the instructor should model for them what is meant by core stories, because instructors should not ask students to do things that they would not be willing to do themselves. Then, you should tell them three core stories from your own life. Of course, this requires the instructor to be willing to be vulnerable with students. It is important to do, because it creates more safety, sets the tone, sets the example, and inspires the students.

The Core Stories Activity

   When you are done telling three core stories, tell the students what time it is now, what time it will be in thirty minutes, and to return to their original seats in thirty minutes. Tell them you will be floating between groups to listen. Then send them off. Pay attention to where each group goes. Spend a few minutes listening in on each group. Try not to distract. When you listen, pay attention to key themes, such as the trials people experienced, how they grew from those trials, where people engaged in leadership, what facial expressions people are exhibiting as they listen, or how the details in one story may affect the details that another person includes in the next story.

   When there are five minutes left, go to each group and let them know how much time is left. When there is one minute left, tell each group to please wrap it up and return to class.

Debrief

   Typically, the debrief for this activity is structured around some version of the following three questions (but these questions can also be adapted to specific teaching purposes):

1. Without revealing any details about other people’s stories that may not be appropriate, what did your stories have in common?

2. How are the members of your group different now, as a group, from how you were before you engaged in this activity?
3. What should you take away from this activity that will help you be better at practicing leadership?

However, sometimes, when the debrief begins, students ask questions. If they do, there is nothing wrong with starting the conversation with the questions the students ask. For example, one common question that students ask is, “Why did you make the rule about no laughing, crying, hugging, and so forth?” Questions like these are often met with shouts of affirmation from other class members. Let the students talk about their questions if they bring them up. However, if they bring up questions, it is useful to turn those questions back on them and their classmates. So, if a student asks why that rule was created, you might say, “Good question. Do you have any thoughts about why I might have asked that of you?” Invariably, students will have ideas, and some will confess to breaking the rules, and some will argue vociferously for why it was important for them to break the rules. Do not judge them, but ask other students of any of them kept the rules, and then ask them to compare their experiences. What did you get out of breaking the rules? Okay. What did you get out of keeping the rules? Some of the answers that tend to emerge include:

1. We influenced how the storyteller told their story less, so they were free to tell it the way they wanted.

2. Some storytellers feel more comfortable when others do not express their emotions, such that they tell more details, and sometimes more authentically, when they do not have to worry about others’ emotions.

3. The emotion that you think is appropriate may not be appropriate in the storyteller’s culture.

4. Having to withhold your emotional impulses teaches us, viscerally, what we do to our own bodies when we refuse others our empathy.

There are other possible answers as well. As students generate answers like these, remember to ask them how these principles might apply to leadership, and how it should affect their own leadership practice.

When you ask people what their stories have in common, the most common response is that the stories that explain who they are today are usually stories of trial, affliction, and challenge. This helps students to see how the negative things in their life may be some of their most important defining experiences. It also helps them to see how they are not so different from others. Even though the specific form that their trials, afflictions, or challenges took were different, most of their identity-forging experiences shared the same emotions and struggle. It can be helpful for students to see that the stories which we most tend to keep to ourselves, because we feel ashamed or think that others will not understand, may actually be the ones that we most have in common with others.

This commonality then leads naturally into the next question about how the group is different because of the activity, because the common response to this question is that the group
feels surprisingly close to each other as a result of the activity. By sharing what we thought made us different—and what we may have even been afraid to share—we not only discovered that we have more in common with others than we thought, we also feel closer to others than we thought. Our stories create empathy, and this exercise gives the students an experience of extreme empathy. Some students even comment on how they have not even shared stories like these with friends or family before. At this point, it can be useful to derive some of the implications of extreme empathy. For example, the instructor can ask students to imagine a person in their work or their life, right now, toward who they do not feel empathy, and toward whom it may even be hard to imagine feeling empathy. Give them a few moments to come up with the person in their minds. Then ask them to imagine how their feelings toward this person might change if they knew this person’s stories in the same way that they now know their team mates’ stories. (It may be important to tell them that they should not share or seek core stories unless it is in a controlled setting like the one in this classroom. This question is hypothetical, not a recommendation.) Just imagine feeling toward that person the way you feel right now toward your team mates. If you felt that way, what would change in your life.

Some students in the class will be deeply moved by that question. Other students will react quite negatively to it. Where appropriate, ask them to compare their thoughts on the matter with each other. Perhaps also tie their thoughts back into one of the suggested readings.

Having students consider a practical application like this is also a good segue into the final question about what leadership principles they can derive from this activity. What could they apply to their lives from this exercise in the next 24 hours? Again, sharing core stories in an uncontrolled setting is most likely not a good takeaway. However, imagining others stories, asking to understand people better, trying to understand others’ cultures, questioning one’s own rationalizations, and many other takeaways would all be very appropriate. As they share these takeaways, be sure to tie them back into the assigned readings, and also into the class more broadly. If leadership begins with virtue that exceeds convention, then what areas of their lives would benefit most from exhibiting more empathy than people typically exhibit in their activities?

**Leadership Amplifier**

Finally, if you are using the *Leadership Amplifier* mobile phone application as part of your course, be sure to give students time to make plans for how they can practice empathy, or other virtues related to caring for others in between class sessions.