The Toxic Node

TEACHING NOTE

This simulation, developed from a real-life case, has been used in undergraduate, graduate courses, and executive education courses. The simulation focuses on decision-making, resource allocation, and conflict management within a collaborative setting, and is appropriate for classes in public administration, nonprofit management, and educational administration, and for modules in problem solving, network management, collaborative governance, negotiation, and conflict resolution.

The scenario involves a grant that has been awarded to partners representing public schools, private schools, local nonprofits, and city government to improve student educational and socio-emotional outcomes. Students receive a common scenario, instructions for the simulation, and an introduction to all participants, along with confidential instructions for each participant that reveals the participant goals and motivations. Students participate in both structured meetings – as facilitated by the network manager – to present their ideas in the group as well as unstructured time during which they are free to speak with any other participant that they wish. The group "wins" the simulation if they can come up with a plan to allocate the program funding among all its partners in the time allotted.

Learning Outcomes

This simulation is designed to address the following learning outcomes:

1. Students are able to identify toxic node behavior and the potential outcomes of this behavior.
2. Students will describe and enact strategies to contain the influence of the toxic node on the effectiveness of collaboration.
3. Students are able to identify different types of conflict and distinguish the bases for different types of conflict.
4. Students will identify the alternatives to toxic node behavior when collaboration is not in their best interest.
5. Students will gain experience in managing the tension between individual and collaborative goals (e.g., the network dilemma).

Participants

Students can participate as individuals or can be broken into groups of 4-7 people that represent a single participant. Students should review the shared scenario as well as their confidential, individual instructions prior to class time.

Note: If there are not enough students to fill all participant roles, the facilitator may omit the roles of either Hank (special education) or Andy (social worker). The role of the network facilitator can be played by a student or by the instructor.

Time

The above simulation requires a 2-hour block of time. If participants have a 3-hour block, they can structure the simulation as follows:

- Meeting 1: 3-hour option- 20 minutes; 2-hour option- 15 minutes
- Breakout 1: 3-hour option- 30 minutes; 2-hour option-15 minutes
- Meeting 2: 3-hour option- 20 minutes; 2-hour option- 20 minutes
- Breakout 2: 3-hour option-30 minutes; 2-hour option- 20 minutes
- Meeting 3: 3-hour option- 30 minutes; 2-hour option- 20 minutes
- Discussion and debrief: 3-hour option- 50 minutes; 2-hour option- 30 minutes

Alternatively, the simulation can be conducted over the course of a quarter-or semester-long course.

Readings:

The following is a list of readings that may be useful to give students additional context prior to the simulation or for instructor lecture material.[1]

+ Heath, R. G, & Isbell, M. G. (2017). *Interorganizational Collaboration: Complexity, Ethics, and Communication.* Chapters 6 ([Shared] Power) and 10 (Communication Oriented Toward Conflict). pp. 119-140 & 249-268.

$ Huxham, C and N. Beech (2008). "Inter-Organizational Power." In S. Cropper, M. Ebers, M.C. Huxham and P.S. Ring, (Eds.) *The Handbook of Inter-organizational relations, pp 555-579.*

! Huxham, C. and S. Vangen (2005) *Managing to Collaborate: The Theory and Practice of Collaborative Advantage.* New York: Routledge. Chapter 7 pp. 107-124.

$ Huxham, C. and S. Vangen (2009) "Doing Things Collaboratively: Realising the Advantage or Succumbing to Inertia? *Collaborative Governance - A New Era of Public Policy in Australia?* The Australian National University, pp 29-44.
http://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/13452/

$ Page, S.B, M.M. Stone, J.M. Bryson, B.C. Crosby (2018) "Coping With Value Conflicts in Interorganizational Collaborations." *Perspectives on Public Management and Governance*, 239-255.

! Popp, J.K., H.B. Milward, G. MacKean, A. Casebeer, R. Lindstrom (2014) *Inter-Organizational Networks: A Review of the Literature to Inform Practice.* IBM Center for the Business of Government, pp 64-66.

+ Schuessler, J. (2018, November 14). 'Toxic' Is Oxford's word of the year. No, we're not gaslighting you. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/14/arts/toxic-oxford-word-of-theyear-2018.html

Discussion and Debrief (30 minutes)

This section provides the instructor with a general script for debriefing the simulation.

1. Script: *This simulation required you to negotiate in order to achieve a shared agreement. In doing so, each of you faced goals operating on three different levels that were in tension. At the individual level, the people that you were playing had various goals that*

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[1]

+	indicates a reading appropriate for an executive education session or an undergraduate course
$	indicates a reading appropriate for a deeper understanding, as in preparation for a graduate course.
!	indicates an essential reading for all levels.

they were trying to achieve on behalf of themselves. These could be career goals, belonging goals, or other personal goals. At the organizational level, the individuals who were organizing were trying to make gains for the organizations that they represent. Sometimes these are resources, legitimacy, or increasing the power of these organizations. Finally, as a network, the group was trying to negotiate common terms and goals of the grant.

- *What were some of the individual goals that you were trying to achieve in this simulation?*

Potential discussion notes: See Board Plan 1 for some potential answers.

- *Great, now what are some of the organizational goals you were trying to achieve?*

Potential discussion notes: See Board Plan 1 for some potential answers.

- *Finally, what were some of the network goals?*

Potential discussion notes: See Board Plan 1 for some potential answers:

Board Plan 1

Individual	Organizational	Network
Examples might include: ● Andy (and several others) wanted to stay on Sarah's good side. ● Father Jaime wants to learn from Sarah, Hank, Andy, and Ruby.	Examples might include: ● Sarah wants to control resources and make sure that programs are run through the public schools. ● Elsa wants to advocate for more health funding.	Examples might include: ● Ruby wants a better referral network between the school district, the city, and nonprofits. ● Several participants want to ensure that no one dominates the group.

2. Script: *Sometimes partner goals are out in the open and sometimes these goals are "hidden agendas." When you look at this list, which of these goals were "hidden agendas" during your meetings?*

> Potential discussion notes: Sarah's goals are part of her hidden agenda. Students may also identify other unspoken agendas, and the instructor should distinguish between those goals that are intentionally hidden from the group as opposed to those goals that may not surface on their own.

3. Script: *Were these hidden agendas productive or counterproductive in your negotiations?*

> Potential discussion notes: Use probing questions here *(e.g., productive or counterproductive for whom? Why might someone hide an agenda?)* Students should come away convinced that hidden agendas are toxic to getting to a collaborative agreement. Sarah, in particular, could have sabotaged the agreement all together (and perhaps for your students she did).

4. Script: *Was there a particular organization or individual that seemed to be sabotaging the collaboration? Who was it? What were they doing to sabotage the collaboration?*

Potential discussion notes: This question is designed to elicit behaviors that Sarah, the toxic node, might exhibit. These include withdrawing from the discussion, countering every proposal, or threatening to withdraw support from the collaborative or other organizations. Use probing questions here: What are clues that Sarah was sabotaging the agreement instead of a participant with strong opinions?

5. (Direct this question to the "Sarah" character.) Script: *Was collaboration in your best interest? If not, what were your alternatives to collaboration?*

Potential discussion notes: Sarah may feel she didn't have a choice and had to come to agreement. If so, elicit others in the class to put themselves in her shoes and suggest alternatives. These include "no deal," or trying to separate the collaboration into minimally interdependent parts, making deep collaboration less likely.

6. Script: *In creating a negotiated agreement, collaborating groups often have to manage three elements of conflict:*

- *Substance-based conflict is often focused on the tasks, information, and key issues that need to be addressed. What were some examples of key issues you addressed in your groups?*

    Potential discussion notes: There are a number of examples possible here. For example, students might say the percentage of resources that each program might receive.

- *Procedural conflict is often based around the ways that decisions will be made. These may include questions of who has jurisdiction over a program area, or whether there are sufficient resources to support the collaboration. What are some examples of procedural issues you addressed in your group?*

    Potential discussion notes: Again, there are multiple possible answers here. Some examples of answers include managing discussion so that no organization dominated, or whether decisions would be made via consensus or voting.

- *Relational conflict refers to the ways that different parties in the group relate to one another. Different worldviews, power positions, and values or challenging relational histories can all can be the basis of conflict. What kinds of relational conflicts were evident in your groups?*

Potential discussion notes: The lack of history between the parochial and public schools is one example of a relational conflict. In addition, efforts by Sarah to make sure the public school dominates the outcomes is an example of a relational conflict.

Board Plan 2

Substance

Procedure

Relationship
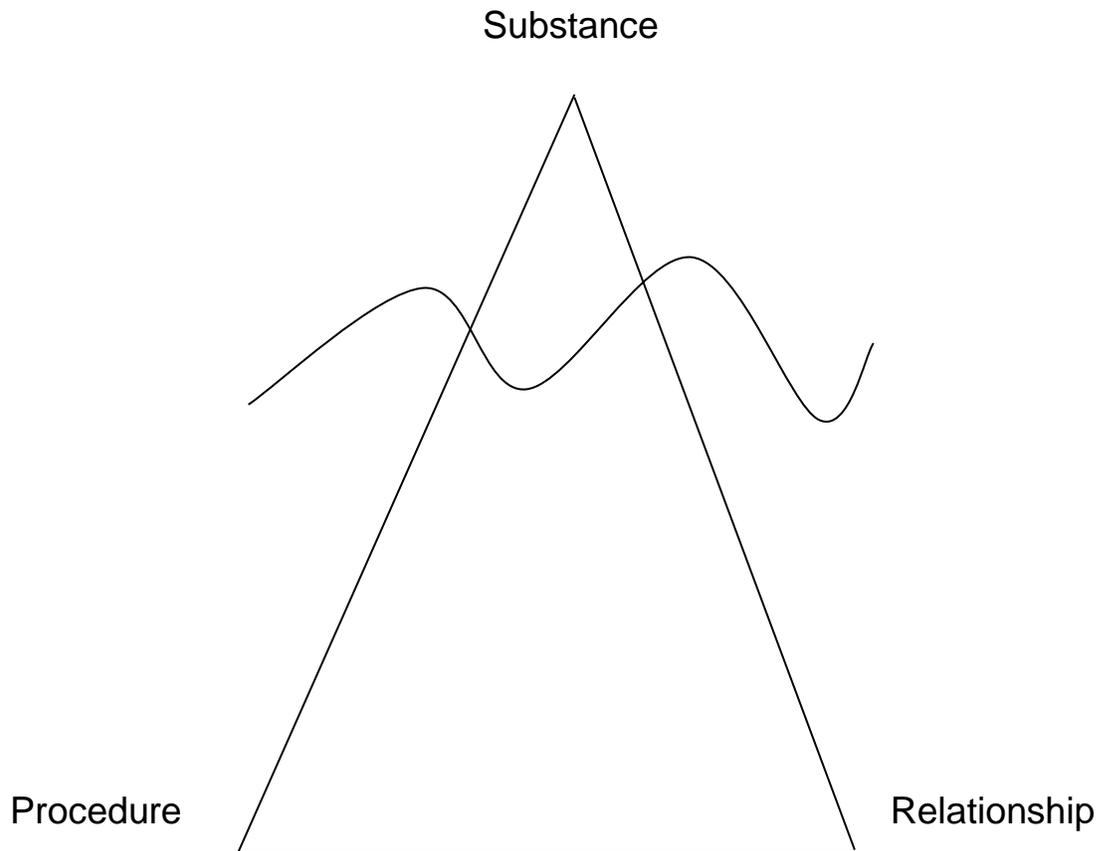
Adapted from Heath & Isbell (2017)

Script: *One of the key takeaways from this simulation is that procedure and relational conflict are often hidden. Instead, substance-based conflict is the tip of the iceberg. Unless you've taken some time to consider the aims of individuals and organizations in the network, you can miss what the conflict is really about.*

7. Script: *Research suggests several possibilities for responding to interorganizational conflict:*

- *Avoiding - Ignoring the conflict.*

- *Integration/Reframing - Similar to a mutual gains approach, conflict is reframed so that participant aims are complementary.*
- *Compromise - Parties make concessions in order to move forward to an agreement.*
- *Side payments - Parties are compensated for lending their support to the agreement.*
- *Trade-offs - Parties give in to a position in order to move forward with other elements in the agreement.*
- *Coercion - Using threats to encourage party agreement.*

Did you use any of these conflict management strategies in your group to get to an agreement (or did you use others)? Did it work? What do you think might have been the long-term consequences of an agreement negotiated using this tactic?

Potential discussion notes: Encourage students to give multiple examples here from their simulation. Some students may report that they enacted different strategies given their role in the network for the same issue. In particular, try to draw out the network manager, Kelly, to unpack her role in managing conflict in the network.

8. Script: *Returning to our "toxic node," what strategies do you think would be most effective in addressing their aims and behaviors? Are these different from the strategies that you would use in most negotiated agreements? If so, how?*

Potential discussion notes: Here, it is important to demonstrate to the group that mutual gains approaches, like integration and reframing, are unlikely to be helpful in dealing with a toxic node (though they are often preferable in genuine conflict). Instead, side payments and coercion, which don't sound like "good" conflict management strategies, might be what is required. In addition, students might point out other helpful strategies, such as digging into the "hidden agenda" to bring the real conflict to the surface.