

# “When’s the Lunch Break?”: Group Interactions and Experiential Learning

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**Abstract:** When teaching continuing education, I promise students they will walk away with practical skills and tools. This reflection shows the reader how I keep my promise. Using what’s right there in the classroom, I model, explain, and implement skills. This real-life example from one of my workshops demonstrates how and why my method is effective, making a strong case for experiential learning and practical application.

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When teaching continuing education, I focus on practical application and experiential learning. Skills and tools are modeled, practiced, and given a context that demonstrates how and why they are useful. Real-life examples are an excellent resource and I often find them right there in the classroom. In this reflection, I share one of those real-life examples. A group interaction provided a beautiful opportunity to teach and model a skill.

It’s Saturday morning and I’m leading a continuing education workshop called “You’re in Charge! How to Effectively Lead Meetings.” The group—10 executive-level professionals—have gathered to increase and hone their team leadership skills. Today’s work targets meetings: agenda, purpose, getting buy-in, time management. These professionals work in both nonprofit and for-profit organizations where meetings are a necessary piece of the routine and path to productivity for all.

We are sitting around a table and I begin with a short intro and explanation of the agenda and plans for the day. We’ll be working together from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., so we’ll need to schedule lunch. When do we take the break and how long should the break be? The group is leaning toward a later lunch—around 1:00 p.m.—and I agree. We can get the bulk of the work done early and then break. I suggest,

Let’s play it by ear—this way, if you’re starving or need an earlier break, we can adjust.

Heads nod and we move on to how long lunch break should be. “Jane” asks,

If we take half an hour for lunch, can we leave early?

This creates a stir; many are excited by the possibility of an early release. “Sure,” I say. Most of the group begins chatting and making plans:

*This is great—I can get some errands done.... I can beat the traffic going home.... Where should we eat? Need a place that is quick.*

I scan the group and prepare to wrap this up and move to the work. As I turn to my left I see “Joe”—sitting with his arms crossed, brows furrowed and a huge frown on his face. I say to the group:

Joe’s not on board with this.

They all turn to look at Joe. He says,

Well, I just don’t like to be rushed.

The group responds immediately,

*Oh, okay—we can go an hour. That’s fine. No problem. We didn’t know.*

I suggest we shoot for 45 minutes. If everyone is back, we get started. If not, we wait the 15 minutes and start promptly after an hour. This is met with approval and we get started on the work.

Fast forward to post-lunch break. (We stick to the 1:00 p.m. time and take the full hour.) At this point we are talking about group roles and dynamics. What about negative or disengaged members? It occurs to me that Joe was exactly that this morning, so I take the opportunity to offer a real-life example.

I ask,

Remember what happened this morning when we talked about how long the lunch break should be?

Group members nod, some saying,

*Yes, uh-huh.*

They’re not quite sure where I’m going. I recap—the group was happily chatting about a shorter lunch break and Joe was silent and frowning. Negative and disengaged group member. They say:

*We didn’t know Joe was upset.*

Joe says (to me),

I made a face and I hoped you would see it.

Aha! I did see it and I shared with the group:

Joe’s not on board.

The skill I used—which I now teach—is called Amplify a Subtle Message. When a group

member's behavior is incongruous, or doesn't fit with the rest of the group (Joe's frown when all are happy), *and* the group doesn't notice, it is the leader's job to alert group members. To literally “amplify” the silent member's message. In this example, Joe was clearly sending a message that he wanted/needed me to notice and share with the group (Middleman & Wood, 1990).

As we discuss this, group members share their thoughts on how I handled the situation. Jane starts,

I was surprised you did that. You called him out.

But then, from the other side, “Scott” says,

No, she didn't. Well, actually, she did call him out, but it was okay. We had a rapport and so we were fine with it.

We talk more about the negative connotations of “calling out”: unwanted spotlight, upsetting, and shaming. Group leaders often assume that the silent person doesn't want to be noticed. But as we so clearly saw with Joe—sometimes people actually *want* to be noticed.

The group takes this in and follows up with other possible scenarios:

*What if Joe didn't want to be noticed?*

Well, then he could just say, “No, I'm fine,” or shake his head and wave me off. I would acknowledge that, and we would move on. No spotlight, no interrogation.

*What if we weren't kind to Joe when you told us he wasn't on board? What if we didn't care what he had to say?*

Well, then I would need to use another set of skills to manage the conflict and get the lunch break set so we could get to the work. The point is—I saw Joe and needed to amplify his message. I can't predict the response and I can't shy away from sharing the message because of fear for what might happen. I have to take the risk and amplify the message.

Now I ask,

What would have happened if I didn't amplify Joe's message?

In other words, what if I had seen his face but felt uncomfortable calling him out? Joe says,

I would have lost confidence in you and I probably would have checked out for the session.

The group takes this in and adds,

*We would never have known Joe was unhappy.*

YES. Doing nothing is also a risk—lose Joe, deprive the group of the opportunity to hear and include Joe.

Group members now begin to connect the skill to their specific experience with team meetings. Scott shares,

My staff is pretty unified, but “Debbie” can be resistant.

What does “resistant” look like?

She’s quiet, detached, doesn’t weigh in when I ask for feedback and we make decisions.

The group sits with this. Joe breaks the silence:

So, kind of like me this morning.

Aha! The conversation deepens as participants see Debbie’s behavior in a new light.

*Maybe she doesn’t agree but can’t go against her co-workers. She’s the only one—not easy to speak up.*

Scott reflects,

Never saw it this way. I wrote Debbie off as negative. Didn’t want her attitude to impact the team, so I ignored her.

This resonates with many; they have seen their own “negative Debbie” and have made similar conclusions:

*What if... Maybe Debbie needed... Team didn’t see... Could I call her out like you did with Joe?*

All this—and more—was shared as we collectively brainstormed to help Scott amplify Debbie’s message. Not only did members help Scott, they connected the specifics to their own unique situations and found ways to apply the skill to their team meetings.

I love this story. It is a real-life example of the skill Amplify a Subtle Message and demonstrates beautifully where and how the skill is effective. This is invaluable for continuing education students. They want and need practical application. Every time I tell this story, I can actually see the light going on, the “aha” moment, the “now I see” look on their faces. The story is also an excellent example of experiential learning—taking what is right there in the room and using it as a teaching tool. Totally practical and relatable; students were there in the moment. The skill was modeled, as was direct confrontation, risk-taking, and active investment in both individual and group. No better way to learn and retain long-term.

Learning is also enriched by the group's cohesion and investment. In this example, students strengthened their connection with Joe and each other when Joe's message was amplified and later when we revisited and discussed. Diverse views on what happened, how I handled it, how they reacted, “What if...” All this deepened the discussion and provided a level of expertise beyond mine as the instructor. Group members individually and collectively became a valuable resource as they challenged, responded, and shared their unique experience.

I enjoy teaching this way and find that it keeps me on my toes (never a dull moment!), keeps my skills fresh, and increases my confidence in what I am teaching. Every time I trust my instincts and take the risk to “call out” and name what I see, I model direct and authentic engagement. This raw use of self and willingness to confront whatever is there in the room goes a long way in demonstrating my investment in the group and commitment to all members. Amplify the message—however subtle it may be—and welcome the authentic response from the group. Not easy, but always worth the risk.

### **References**

Middleman, R. R., & Wood, G. G. (1990). *Skills for direct practice in social work*. Columbia University Press.

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