

## JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH: AN ENABLING OTHERS TO ACT ACTIVITY

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### ABSTRACT

“Journey to the Center of the Earth” is a leadership training activity designed by University of Central Missouri management students enrolled in Management 4320 - Leading in Teams and Organizations. It is an entirely original learning activity based on Kouzes and Posner’s idea of “Enabling Others to Act.” In a nutshell, teams of three learners negotiate an obstacle course while some are blindfolded, some are “mute”, and all are tied together by rope. Sounds easy, right? To find out, you will need to take part and be lead by undergraduates who designed this learning activity.

**Keywords: Leadership Training**

### PLANNING DETAILS

Proposed audience:	Leadership Instructors, Training Managers, Management Development Trainers, Management Instructors, Organizational Behavior Instructors
Maximum number of participants:	Any number
Type of session:	Activity-based with debrief afterwards
Special requirements:	<b>Hallway</b> , “obstacles” (blindfolds, chairs, tables, rope, tape, garbage cans, etc.)
Length:	90 minutes
Proposal level:	Course & Student

## INTRODUCTION

“Journey to the Center of the Earth” is a leadership training activity designed by University of Central Missouri management students enrolled in Management 4320 - Leading in Teams and Organizations. It is an original learning activity based on Kouzes and Posner’s idea of “Enabling Others to Act.” Teams of three learners negotiate an obstacle course while some are blindfolded, some are “mute”, and all are tied together by rope.

**Activity Purpose:** To promote joint effort, foster collaboration, develop interdependence, and create a climate of trust.

There are two aspects to the activity that make “Journey to the Center of the Earth” pedagogically sound: 1) there are many layers to the set-up of the activity which lead to discussion questions about the activity itself (*activity debrief*), and 2) learners will do and say many things that connect the activity to the work world (*content debrief*).

## THEORETICAL GROUNDING

“Journey to the Center of the Earth” is an entirely original learning activity based on Kouzes and Posner’s idea of Enabling Others to Act. James Kouzes and Barry Posner have been involved in leadership research for over 30 years resulting in a set of leadership practices centered on “what leaders do and what constituents expect (2007, pg vii).” Enabling Others to Act is one of the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership that Kouzes and Posner have identified as being key behaviors (actions) of every-day leaders in today’s work world. To enable others to act, leaders must make two commitments: Foster Collaboration and Strengthen Others. The content covered by “Journey to the Center of the Earth” includes, but is not limited to:

- 1.) Fostering Collaboration
  - a. Building trust by coordinating within groups accomplishing tasks, creating a climate of trust and facilitating relationships.
  - b. Develop interdependence, learn to give away personal power, foster collaboration.
- 2.) Strengthening Others
  - a. Being open to influence, sharing information and sharing resources.
  - b. Learn how to lead silently- competence and confidence.
  - c. Learn to follow, even though one cannot always see where they are going.

At the University of Central Missouri, it is the task of the facilitation team (students) to design and deliver training activities that connect the content of “The Leadership Challenge” to the work world. Over the past 5 years of coaching this workshop format, we have found that when students design their own activities the resultant debrief and conversation is much richer than when students find “ready-made” activities. We have also found that these self-designed activities need to very clearly state the content that will be covered in the workshop or students will struggle; for example, the above content list was generated by students prior to their Fall 2009 workshop.

At the core of the workshop approach to leadership is a belief that learners will internalize material most deeply if they can experience the content in some “live” setting. We are proponents of experiential learning which, to us, means applying material to a work world setting in as timely manner as possible. For example, “Journey to the Center of the Earth” was designed in mid-September, 2009. It

was delivered as an in-class experience in mid-September by the design team at which time the team learned what they did and did not understand about the content material. The activity then served as the basis for a leadership training workshop put on for a local bank in mid-October by a separate delivery team. Finally, “Journey” was one of four activities used in a training workshop held for Warrensburg Middle Schools in early November, when it was delivered by all of our Fall 2009 leadership students.

A key element to our workshop process is that both participants and facilitators are learning about leadership. Participants respond to a set of stimuli that the facilitators designed to foster discussion around a specific leadership topic while facilitators are still very much learning about the content as they prepare the workshops. The workshop format we have adapted as our pedagogy to leadership development is very much an example of Joseph Joubert’s idea that “to teach is to learn twice.” We find that very few teams will embarrass themselves by putting on a “poor” workshop, rather many teams feel that they owe it to their classmates to create a truly memorable, hands-on (minds-on) learning experience. Research has shown that good leaders are good teachers, so the workshop format was developed as a practice ground for students to learn about teaching (and coaching). As a result, all of our workshops have two sets of learning objectives: objectives for the participants and objectives for the facilitators.

As a result of attending this session, participants will:

1. Allow those who are not in higher up leadership positions to step up and those who are in high leadership positions to take a step back (develop interdependence, learn to give away personal power, and foster collaboration).
2. Experience that sometimes being outspoken means one can communicate without saying a word (learn how to lead silently- competence and confidence).
3. Build trust amongst group members and encourage people to become familiar with one another rather quickly, if they aren’t already (build trust by coordinating within groups accomplishing tasks, create a climate of trust, and facilitate relationships).

As a result of preparing and leading this activity, facilitators will:

1. Observe different ways of communicating and evaluate which communication techniques worked and which did not.
2. Determine who the true leaders of each group are and compare differences between groups.
3. Lead a discussion about leadership by determining the reactions from group members, writing down these reactions and discussing them through a debrief.
4. Demonstrate the connections between Enabling Others to Act, Fostering Collaboration, and Strengthening Others.

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

At OBTC, we plan to run “Journey to the Center of the Earth” in about 70 to 75 minutes, leaving approximately 15 to 20 minutes to discuss the University of Central Missouri’s workshop format for learning about leadership.

### **Set-up and Directions** (10 minutes)

1. *Select Teams of Three* - teams of three learners are determined by facilitators prior to training session.
2. *Select Middle Person* – person in the middle has no blindfold, is not allowed to speak or make audible signals (except a little laughter).
3. People on the outside can talk, but must wear blindfolds at all times.
4. *Tie Feet Together* – teams tie together by the feet with the center individual having one leg tied to each person on their left and right
5. The teams must then negotiate an obstacle course set by the facilitators.
6. Teams must complete all tasks properly as determined by the facilitators.
7. All members must stop immediately if any facilitator says “STOP.” (safety)

### **Activity Time!** (15 to 20 Minutes)

#### *Activity Debrief* (30 Minutes)

*Select Teams of Three.* We recommend putting together disparate teams. The more diverse the make-up of each team, the better. When this activity is used in the classroom or in the workplace, facilitators should plan out teams ahead of time. We plan to break up OBTC attendees by looking at physical characteristics such as race, gender, hair color, and asking questions about background, religion, family and any other variables that might make participants think about what we are doing in the selection process. In short, we want to build a feeling of “being with new people” among participants. When running “Journey to the Center of the Earth” facilitators should take care to combine people of different backgrounds, or from different branches/departments, because it allows facilitators to ask questions around diversity issues at work:

Discussion Questions	Leadership Challenge Content
1) What did you notice about the make-up of your team?	Facilitate Relationships

2) When looking at our leaders, why do you think we picked these individuals?	Enhance Self-determination
a. Who led your group and what did they do?	
3) What did it feel like to be reliant on someone that you hardly know?	Create a Climate of Trust
4) Did you specialize in your roles?	Get People Interacting
a. Who became your experts?	
b. How did you treat them?	
5) Did the leader of the group have to be the one who could see? Why or why not?	Develop Competence and Confidence
6) How did you feel when you were completing this activity?	Get People Interacting
a. How many of you felt dependent on one another? Powerless? Confident? Uncertain? Why, why, why?	

Select Middle Person. We are very careful when we select the center teammate since this individual will be critical in communicating the obstacles that the team will be facing. We recommend using less experienced personnel or people who are normally not as vocal in this position. For example, in a training workshop UCM students ran for a local bank, we put experienced top managers on the outside with newer junior staffers as center team mates. This approach allowed us to ask questions such as:

Discussion Questions	Leadership Challenge Content
1) Blindfolded team mates, what did it feel like to be led by someone younger/less experienced/quiet/ than you?	Offer Visible Support
a. Did you really trust the person in the middle?	
b. As leaders, what can we do truly trust our subordinates?	
c. Do you feel that your constituents trust you?	
d. What advice do we have for each other (or specifically name the person) that would help us to build trust?	
2) Center team mates, how did it feel to know that people would be depending on you?	Enhance Self-Determination
a. Do you trust yourself?	
b. Do you trust others?	
c. How do you build trust?	

3) How do you think communication would have been different if the roles were switched and only the person in the middle was blindfolded?	Facilitate Relationships & Foster Interdependence
a. Who do feel stepped up as a leader? Why?	
b. Have you seen this person step up before?	

*Tie Feet Together.* We recommend letting teams tie themselves together. A variety of different knots and techniques to tie legs together will come about by letting the teams tie themselves. Some teams will tie at the knees, some at the ankles, leading facilitators to ask discussion questions such as:

Discussion Questions	Leadership Challenge Content
1) We saw a lot of laughing going on during the tying together and during the whole activity. What were you thinking?	Get People Interacting & Offer Visible Support
a. So, it's enjoyable to "have fun". What can we, as leaders, do to make work fun?	
b. Give examples of what you have seen at work that added to the "fun".	
c. How can we have fun and still accomplish all our tasks?	
d. What can we, as leaders, do to build organizational culture? Does one person actually have an impact on this culture? Why should we try anyhow?	
2) We thought our directions were pretty clear, why were the directions interpreted so differently?	Enhance Self-Determination
a. As leaders, how are our directions interpreted at work?	
b. Does anyone have examples from their workplace where either your own, or your manager's directions were interpreted in a way that was inconsistent from the intended message?	
c. What can we do to ensure that our message is clear?	
d. Does it matter how people accomplish a set task?	
e. What can we do to "let go" and enable people to accomplish their tasks?	
3) Why did you tie so loosely?	Increase Individual Accountability
a. Were you trying to "get an edge" on the competition?	
b. We saw some knots just come apart and you kept right on going. Where are your ethics?	
c. How do we know people are doing their jobs in an ethical manner?	
d. Do we have to "control" to ensure high ethical	

standards? What else works?	
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*Content Debrief (20 Minutes)*

At the University of Central Missouri, when we debrief our leadership activities, it is the task of the facilitation team (students) to connect the activity to the work world. We have found that asking facilitators to write down “quotable quotes” in a publically viewable space makes for a fairly disciplined approach to connecting the activity to the content of “The Leadership Challenge” and, in turn, to the work world. For example, in “Journey to the Center of the Earth” our facilitators were focusing on Enabling Others to Act. As such, they listened for comments to that effect, creating the list of comments and descriptions of actions relating to the topic listed below:

<u>Quotable Quote</u>	<u>Enabling Others Concept</u>
"We need to coordinate, fast!"-Erica	Create a Climate of Trust & Facilitate Relationships
"I have a feeling this is a bad idea."-Andrew	Develop Confidence and Competence
"I don't know what the heck that was."-Andrew	Show Trust to Build Trust
"Don't be an overachiever Andrew!"-Erica	Enhance Self-Determination
"That was the wrong side you tapped on, just so you know."-Andrew	Increase Individual Accountability
"I feel SO special." -Erica	Offer Visible Support
"What the hell is going on?" -Andy	Offer Visible Support
"Let's just go over it (table)."-Andy	Offer Visible Support
"What are we going to do now?" -Levi	Say We, Ask Questions, Listen, Take Advice
"I'm getting tired."- Curtis	Enhance Self-Determination
"Oh Becky can you see?!?"- Amber	Offer Visible Support
"step, nice, perfect, were really good"- Jonny	Offer Visible Support
"Whoa Becky what are you doing, she's pulling on my shirt"-Jonny	Get People Interacting
"Can we go?"- Jonny	Say We, Ask Questions, Listen, Take Advice
"We need to slow down."- Amber	Increase Individual Accountability
"Let's pick him up." - Jarrod	Offer Visible Support
"This is a workout." - Derrick	Develop Competence and Confidence
"I hear feet, are we going up stairs?" Jay	Say We, Ask Questions, Listen, Take Advice
"This is a little easier." - Lorissa	Create a Climate of Trust
"The OTHER left!" Stephen	Show Trust to Build Trust

Facilitators immediately write down which content areas they feel the comments relate to. Sometimes, facilitators will write down the comments and then ask the learner team (class) how they think the comments relate to the content. We have found either approach to be effective provided facilitators ask follow up questions relating the comment to the work world.

The quotable quotes approach enables facilitators to show how learners are actually using the content of “The Leadership Challenge” on a day-to-day basis. It does require a facilitation team that can think on their feet since it is difficult to predict what the quotes will be. We ask facilitators to compile a bullet point list of all of the points they would like to cover and then fill in those aspects that a specific activity debrief may not cover with quotable quotes.

As an applied practice, leadership happens all around us, and sometimes we simply need to slow down and realize that at any given time we are being led or are leading. The “quotable quotes” approach makes a direct link between daily conversation (albeit directly connected to a leadership learning activity) and leading. It requires quick thinking on the part of the facilitators.

## APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME AND SUB-THEME(S)

As leaders, we need to *create connections* with all of our constituents, even if sometimes this means working with people who are very different from us. When setting up “Journey to the Center of the Earth,” facilitators purposefully develop teams comprised of members that are as different from each other as possible (see Activity Debrief - Select Teams of Three & Select Middle Person). The early debrief questions of this leadership training activity center around a variety of potential differences in the work place.

## REFERENCES

Kouzes, J. & Posner, B. (2007) *The Leadership Challenge*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. San Francisco: Wiley.