Class Activities

# Chapter 8: Establishing a Constructive Climate

## Guide to the Class Activities

Each activity is designed based on Fink’s Learning Taxonomy and is tagged with the following tags under the taxonomy’s learning and assessment structure:

1. Foundational Knowledge (F)
2. Application (A)
3. Integration (I)
4. Human Dimension (H)
5. Caring (C)
6. Learning How to Learn (L)

These activities may be used in either small-group or large-group settings, depending on class size and time available. Some may also be suitable as homework.

## Activities

### Constructive Feedback Role Play (A, I, H)

Use the scenarios provided or create your own. Ask for volunteers to act out the various roles and practice giving constructive feedback to improve a person’s work performance. The rest of the class observes the interaction and afterwards points out what feedback was effective or not. Afterwards, discuss: How comfortable are you in using the strategies enacted in the role play? How realistic was the response of the person receiving feedback in the role play? How would you change your approach if the person receiving feedback from you became defensive? What else could have been done in the role play to make the conversation more satisfying for both parties? What feedback is hardest for you to give? To receive?

1. Susan was recently hired as a project manager for a car battery plant. She and her team are charged with developing a longer lasting battery for electric cars. Her supervisor estimates the project will take about 14 months. Because this is a growing industry, there is great competition with rival companies but also potentially great reward for developing an excellent product. A few weeks into the project, the supervisor runs into a member of Susan’s team and asks him how things are going. He replies that things are a bit tense. At a recent brainstorming session Susan chided the engineers for not coming up with more creative designs. She told the lead engineer she worked with better designers in her previous company. Susan comes in early and stays late every day. She often assigns work to team members after 4 in the afternoon and expects them to stay late to finish, even if they have other evening commitments. How would you engage Susan in conversation about her behavior: If you were her supervisor? If you were her team member?
2. Your small group is working on a community service project for your leadership class. Unfortunately, one of your group members is not doing his share of the work. He doesn’t follow through on tasks that he volunteers for, won’t return phone calls or respond to your emails, and misses some of the group’s meetings. You go to your professor to complain about the student, but the professor tells you to resolve the problem yourselves. How would you confront this group member constructively?

### Marshmallow Tower (A, L)

This activity requires a bag of marshmallows and a box of toothpicks per small group. (Other supplies can be substituted, e.g. straws and tape, Tinkertoys, construction paper and scissors, but may require more time to assemble). Assign students into groups of at least 7. Give instructions first before allowing students to ask questions, see the supplies or strategize together. Take one of the small groups aside; they will receive different instructions. Explain to the others that each group is charged to build as tall a tower as possible, using the supplies you will give them. Tell them that once the supplies are given to them, they have three minutes (or more, instructor’s choice) to strategize how best to construct the tower *without touching any of the supplies while they are talking*, then one minute (or more, depending on the number of marshmallows) to build the tower. The tower must be free-standing. The group with the tallest tower wins a prize (extra credit points, candy, etc.). This sets up a competitive atmosphere. The extra group is told (out of earshot of the others) to observe each of the other groups (aim for at least 2 observers per group) and how the members interact with each other. How does leadership emerge? What is the group climate like? Are members collaborating? What language are members using to address one another? Start the competition. After time is up, compare and measure results and announce the winner. Then ask observers to report their findings about group process to the group. Discuss: Who emerged as leader in each group? What leader behaviors provided structure, built cohesiveness, or promoted standards of excellence? Was constructive feedback given? Did any norms emerge? How? How did the competitive nature of the task affect cohesiveness?

### Create Your Own Group Project (A, C)

Form students into groups of 4-5 and ask them to use the principles discussed in this chapter to create the guidelines for a group project related to this course. They should address each of the elements: structure, norms, cohesiveness, and standards of excellence. Have each group present their guidelines to the class and ask the class to evaluate them by providing constructive feedback. During class discussion, reach consensus regarding the most effective set of guidelines. Then use the selected guidelines for an actual group project. At the conclusion of the project, ask students to reflect upon how well the guidelines worked.

### Advice Columns (A, I)

Advice columns are a good resource for discussing how to manage difficult co-workers. The instructor can bring a column to class, read the letter to the columnist and then ask the class how they would advise the letter writer, using concepts from the chapter on setting the tone. After reading the columnist’s response to the letter writer, does the class agree with the advice given? Where does the advice fall short, or does it offer new insights the class had not considered?

### Standards of Excellence (A)

In small groups, have students discuss how each of the six factors of promoting standards of excellence applies to a group they are currently part of – at college or work:

* What group members need to know and what skills they need to acquire
* How much initiative and effort they need to demonstrate
* How group members are expected to treat one another
* The extent to which deadlines are significant
* What goals they need to achieve
* What the consequences are if they achieve or fail to achieve these goals

After these have been thoroughly discussed, ask whether there are “hiding places” in the classroom, in the course requirements, on the job or on the sports team, where their performance is NOT measured, and where they can get away with doing less or nothing? How does this affect the overall success of the group? What opportunity might they have, as a group member or leader, to improve group performance?

### Sketch-noting (F, A, I)

Sketch-noting is described in the Class Activities for chapter 1. Making sketch notes is not about drawing, or artistry, but about making marks on paper (or a white board) to help oneself think. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Everyone will do it differently.

Option #1) For chapter 8 ask students to map out the people in their lives they would consider their support network. They should put themselves in the center of the map (within a box, circle, or other shape) ) and then place other shapes around them indicating the people who listen to them, offer good advice, coach or mentor, etc. These can be family members, co-workers, sports team members, and so on. This should take about 10 minutes.

Have them share in pairs what they have (directly or indirectly) learned from their supporters about earning trust, being fully present with others, respecting different opinions, and accepting each other’s idiosyncrasies. Ask students whether they are “paying it forward” by showing the same kind of support to others in their work or school networks?

Option #2) For chapter 8 have students map out the people in their lives who have the most effect on their performance – in college, at work, on a sports team, volunteer organization, or other area. Once the relationships have been diagrammed, have students consider the following questions: What kind of influence does each individual have (e.g. reward power, coercive power, and so on)? Does the individual have positional power (a coach, a supervisor) or referent power (role mode, good example) that affects the student’s performance? What strengths (from chapter 8) does each individual have? What weaknesses? Do any exert too much influence? Who is the most helpful? Answers can be noted on the sketch.

### Personas – Act II (A, I, H)

How to develop a user profile or persona is explained in the Class Activities for chapter 3. This is a common technique used in marketing for thinking about potential customers and clients. The profiles are then used as “target audiences” for developing new products and testing marketing campaigns.

If you have done this earlier, ask students to bring the visual representation of their persona to class, along with descriptive details. Sample profile:

Photo (from magazine or web)

Jim, American

Age 30

Retail manager

Baseball fan

Strengths: Achiever, Command, Self-Assurance, Futuristic

Weakness: Includer

Likable: Handles stress well, self-deprecating humor

In groups of 4 or 5, have students share their profiles with each other and imagine them as a team working together. Which persona is likely to emerge as the leader of the team? What norms might be present in this team? Where are the opportunities for synergy among this unique combination of profiles? What challenges might there be to developing cohesiveness? Around what shared interests might they be able to develop positive feelings toward one another? How much initiative will they take to meet group goals? If the students were leading a team made of these personas, what leadership decisions and tasks would be most challenging for them to undertake?

## Writing Assignments

### Setting the Tone in Film (F, A, I)

Have students write a 2- to 3-page reaction paper to a contemporary film showing how a leader sets the tone for a group, either positively or negatively. Students should identify which of the four factors are present in the film, supporting their points with specific examples. Examples: Remember the Titans, The Devil Wears Prada, and Invictus.

### Managing Up (A, H, L)

In this chapter, setting the tone is presented as a leadership responsibility. Ask students to imagine a bottoms-up approach to encouraging a more positive tone in the workplace, athletic team or volunteer group. How might a subordinate encourage his or her manager to improve the tone in the group – e.g. to clarify norms or build cohesiveness?

### One-minute Paper Topics (F, A, I)

How does providing an agenda for a group constitute leadership? Are there any drawbacks to providing structure for a group? (A, L)

Is it possible to have too much cohesiveness in a group? What are the outcomes? (A, L)

How comfortable are you confronting inadequate performance by group members? What skill(s) do you need to develop to do this more effectively? (A, L)

What rewards for good performance do you most appreciate receiving (email, verbal thanks, extra attention from the group leader, etc.? Which rewards or signs of appreciation are you most comfortable giving to others?