AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO
BEHAVIORAL SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an approach to integrating conceptual teaching and learning in an organizational behavior course with a highly experiential and group-oriented course design in order to help students develop both cognitive understanding and the behavioral skills needed to be successful as managers. Students take active responsibility for their own learning both as individuals and as members of groups and have the opportunity to reflect on their learning through written assignments that develop principles to guide their behavior in future situations.

INTRODUCTION

An increased focus on social science subject matter in undergraduate business programs has been reflected in continuing attempts to upgrade curricula. A study by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) completed in 1988 (commonly referred to as the Porter-McKibbin Report based on its authors' names) called for increased attention to the development of interpersonal and leadership skills among business students without diminishing the attention given to traditional business subjects (Porter and McKibbin, 1988). Several ongoing trends in society and developments in business practices have resulted in the need for this attention.

Increased Use of Groups in Organizations

Greater interest in skill development is one outgrowth of concern for effective management in organizations utilizing groups organized around production processes, self-managed teams, cross-functional task forces, or other group-based arrangements. All of these organizational approaches necessitate increased interpersonal and leadership skills for managers and subordinates

Increased Diversity in Organizations

The 1990's have been described as "a decade where organizations will have to learn to manage diversity" (Robbins, p.632). As a perhaps extreme example, the 350 employees in one Digital Electronics Corporation plant in Boston include people from 44 countries speaking 19 different languages. Plant announcements in this firm are routinely issued in English, Chinese, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, and Haitian Creole (Wagner & Hollenbeck, p.302).

Increasing diversity results from a number of ongoing changes in society that are significantly altering the nature of the work force and consequently making the management of diversity a major issue (Dreyfus, p. 12). The predominance of white males in the work force is coming to an end as the participation of women and minorities increases rapidly. By the year 2000 only 15 percent of new entrants to the U.S. labor force will consist of native white males (Wagner & Hollenbeck, p.302).

Dual-career couples are becoming much more common. Many new entrants to the work force have attained higher educational levels than ever before, while at the same time a significant number of others cannot perform basic reading, writing, and computational tasks. As members of the baby boom generation approach retirement they are being replaced by fewer new entrants to the work force, thus increasing competition for skilled workers. Each succeeding generation of workers, raised under different circumstances and feeling its own pressures, brings additional

Differing values and attitudes into the work setting. Meanwhile, the globalization of business introduces yet other diverse elements into enterprises operating on a multi-national basis. All of these trends will continue for the foreseeable future and all pose new problems for managers in organizations.

A fundamental issue introduced into all organizations, as they become more divers is how to deal with the resulting value and attitude differences. This is of major concern in the education of future managers as reflected in increased attention given to the impact of diversity in business school curricula. In organizational behavior courses this concern is often focused on the impact diverse values and attitudes have within the firm. One of our educational challenges is to impart an appreciation for and sensitivity toward these differences. Since most individuals tend to take their own values and attitudes for granted, they are not aware of the often subtle effects resulting from their assumptions and the impact they have on others, particularly others who are different. It is essential as instructors that we transfer a clear understanding of these concepts to students who will manage organizations that embody divers values and attitudes.

Increased Involvement in Decision Making

The quality of decision making influences the long-term success (or failure) of an organization. The decisions themselves, as well as the processes through which they are created, influence how employees perceive the organization and how committed they are to the decisions.

Decision making skills become particularly important in acclimate of organizational downsizing because, as staff in an organization is reduced, organizational members increasingly engage in decision making (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 1994, p.473). Decision making skills are especially relevant when decisions are being made in risky and uncertain environments where the decision maker is not totally aware of the possible outcomes of various problem-solving alternatives (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn, 1995, p.185). The issue is how to improve the decision-making skills of our students to enhance their effectiveness as future managers and decision makers.

As instructors we should not settle for merely teaching the principles of decision making-defining the problem, generating alternatives for resolution, evaluating these alternatives, and choosing and implementing the solution. Rather, in addition to providing a thorough coverage of the concepts, it is essential that we offer students of management opportunities to actually engage in decision making that involves implementing and practicing these concepts, and that we make provisions for students to receive feedback on their decision capabilities.

Increase Need for Leadership and Empowerment

The literature on leadership is increasingly attending to two aspects of power-abuse of power and empowerment. The study of McCall and Lombardo (1983) is highly interesting in this regard. They identified approximately twenty executives who had risen to the top of their firms and matched them with a smaller group of twenty executives who had risen to the top of their firms and matched them with a smaller group of twenty executives who had failed to reach their career aspirations. Those "unsuccessful" executives were described as insensitive, cold, and unable to delegate to others or build a team (cf. Whetten and Cameron, 1991, p. 280), while the "successful" executive had used their power to "empower" others and to accomplish exceptional organizational objectives. That is, they used their influence in positive ways, and in doing so they gained more power and formal organizational authority, creating positive, upward spiral that carried them up the organizational career ladder (cf. Whetten and Cameron, 1991, p. 281).

Thus, empowerment, or the processes by which managers help others acquire and use the power needed to make decisions affecting them at work, is essential for effective leadership. As noted by

Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (1994, p. 473) "more than ever before, managers in progressive organizations are expected to be good at-and highly comfortable at-empowering the people with whom they work. Rather than considering power to be something held only at higher levels in the traditional "pyramid" of organizations, this view considers power to be something that can be shard by everyone working in flatter and more collegial structures.

Empowerment is becoming increasingly important in today's organizations due to some of the side effects of downsizing. That is, as the number of employees or staff in an organization is cute back, fewer people share more power. Thus, throughout the organization, at the top levels as well as at the lower organizational levels, organizational members engage in more decision making. Ideally, satisfaction is enhanced through participative processes that allow high involvement of workers or/and staff.

One of our educational challenges is to impart an appreciation for and sensitivity to empowering others. As instructors, it is essential that (a) we transmit a clear understanding of this concept to students; (b) we provide students of management with opportunities to engage in decision making that allow the implementation and practice of these concepts; and (c) we create classroom opportunities for feedback on student's leadership styles and the extent to which they are receptive or reluctant to engage others in their decision-making process.

Hence, the case has been sufficiently made for the increased need for a number of management skills to manage in today's organizations. The issue now is to determine how to impart these needed skills to students of management.

MANAGEMENT CURRICULUM

Attention dedicated to skill development in the typical curriculum is still often fairly minimal. Special courses dedicated solely to skills are not commonly required in undergraduate programs of business and are not specifically required for accreditation of undergraduate programs.

Core courses in organizational behavior are usually base on one of a fairly large number of available texts. Currently, we happen to be using *Managing Organizational Behavior* by Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (1994), a text taught in many schools of business. In essentially all of these texts, however, the basic approach to the topics is cognitive in nature, leaving any emphasis on skill development largely up to the individual instructor.

As a consequence of what is, in our opinion, a limited emphasis on skills, we feel it is beneficial to complement whatever text material is chosen with an experiential learning approach. This approach requires students to perform certain exercise and complete assignments that give the student an opportunity to take an active part in the learning process and generate from this experience the rule and principles that guide behavior in real situations.

This experiential involvement increases the probability of developing the interpersonal skills needed to actually manage as well as the cognitive knowledge to understand interpersonal and group behavior. Michael Polanyi (1966) suggests that skills are responsive in nature and a product of the subconscious. What this means is that "skill cannot be taught in [an] 'external' fashion…. It is knowledge that one learns and then applies….Skills can be learned only from experience," and "experiences, not the instructor, are the true teachers." (McKnight, 1995, pp. 192, 204). Thus, participation in experiential activity is needed to foster interpersonal skill development in students.

INTEGRATED SKILL DEVELOPMENT

In order to facilitate developments of management skills among business students, particularly students of management, we use the experiential learning approach of Cameron and Whetten (1995). The focus is on teaching management skills that research has identified as most important. These skills are classified by the

authors into two categories: (a)Personal Skills-increasing self-awareness, managing stress, and solving problems creatively, and (b)Interpersonal Skills-communicating supportively, gaining power and influence, motivating others, managing conflicts, using empowered delegation, and building effective teams. The teaching of each of these skills relies on the following sequence.

Step 1: Skill Pre-assessment

The teaching process starts with a skill pre-assessment assignment instructing students to respond to a diagnostic survey of the skill being studied prior to reading the chapter. Responding to the survey instruments and scoring them allow the students to assess their own current level of skill development and, thus, focus attention on areas of personal competence as well as areas needing improvement in both knowledge and performance. This diagnostic survey also can be repeated as a post-test by the individual student.

In teaching this first step of the model, we attempt to foster a class culture of openness and trust as we guide students' attention to the nature of the scoring of the pre-assessment measures. Students are made aware that everyone can obtain top scores on the measures since they are based on self-report. We note that all scores- high or low-are neither good nor bad. Rather, all scores are valuable as long as they enhance one's awareness of the levels of competencies. We encourage students to feel comfortable in class and make it a safe environment for themselves and their peers to share personal experiences and receive constructive feedback.

Going over the scores in small groups, students are encouraged to discuss the reasons for differences in individual scores. Is there anything consistently unique about people scoring especially high or especially low on any certain measure? How can a person change the level of present performance? Discussions of these issues facilitate the transition from this self-evaluation step to the next step of considering theory and research findings.

Step 2: Skill Learning

The Skill Learning section contains conceptual material. In addition to presenting theory and research, it provides students with a set of behavioral guidelines-concise action steps that serve as the basis for practicing each skill.

In teaching this material, students are reminded that these are not absolute rules. Furthermore, they are encouraged to adapt and modify these guidelines to situational conditions.

Step 3: Skill Analysis

This section of the model consists of cases or case histories that illustrate appropriate and/or inappropriate applications of the behavioral guidelines. Analyzing these cases allows students to begin applying the behavioral guidelines (Step 2 of the model) to specific situations.

In teaching these cases we encourage students to share their individual case analyses with others in their learning teams, which are formed at the very beginning of the semester. Each learning team tries to reach its own consensus, which is then shared with the rest of the class.

Step 4: Skill Practice

This section consists of role-play assignments calling for the application and use of the focused skill. For this purpose, the class is divided into role-play teams consisting of *3-5* members. Two members in each team are assigned to engage in role play. They are provided with written descriptions of their roles while the other members of the team are assigned to be observers. The observers are provided with feedback forms, which relate specifically to the skill under consideration. Using this form, they rate the extent to which each of the role players follows the behavioral guidelines. Feedback

sessions in the small groups are followed by class discussion focusing on the difficulties experienced in playing the role and the effectiveness of the behavioral guidelines.

Step 5: Skill Application

This section requires that students apply what they have learned to everyday experiences that are outside of the classroom. Since the course presents management skills as personal and interpersonal skills, even students without managerial experience are able to link their new skill learning to immediate application opportunities, which are provided via application assignments. For example, following the teaching of self-awareness, students are given an application assignment of answering the following four questions: (1)Who am I? (2)What are my main strengths and weaknesses? (3)What do I want to achieve in my life? (4)What legacy do I want to leave? Following the teaching of Managing Stress the students are asked to systematically analyze the stressors they face in their job, family, school, and social life, and identify strategies to eliminate or sharply reduce them.

Since a basic underlying assumption of the course is that the learning and mastery of management skills are highly facilitated through interactions with others, the course design calls for "high involvement" of students in the teaching process. In the very first session of the course, students are assigned to groups that work together throughout the semester both in class and outside of class on a variety of group assignments. Even exams call for group interactions. After completing the exam on an individual basis, team members retake it as a learning team. Time is given for group members to discuss each answer and reach consensus. The group grade on projects and exams become an important part of each student's grade.

Student evaluations of this course have been highly favorable. Students perceive the course as stimulating and relevant in today's workplace. It is often characterized as the most useful course they have taken.

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