

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 20, 1993

DEBRIEFING INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISES: ROAD SIGNS FOR EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

Over the years the use of experiential learning exercises as a vehicle for improving managers knowledge, skills and abilities has steadily increased. And, more recently experiential learning exercises have become natural components in organizational efforts to better prepare their managers to more effectively manage in the international marketplace. This paper discusses the importance of the debriefing phase in international experiential learning exercises by presenting a framework to improve the debriefing phase of such exercises.

INTRODUCTION

Managing people and organizations in a global arena is not a new challenge. As long as there have been empires, global management has been an important skill. Even the Roman Army had to develop a management system to deal with the farflung outposts of its empire (Van Fleet, 1991). However, many companies (and most American companies) have become involved in global management only during the past few decades. One reason for the growth in international trade is quite simple: people can trade more easily around the world than they could in the past, so they do. Astonishing recent improvements in communication and transportation have removed many of the old barriers to international trade. Companies have also increased their involvement in the international arena because it allows them to expand their markets. For example, a company in a small country like Great Britain or Holland needs to sell goods overseas if the company hopes to grow beyond its limited domestic market. The increase in business in the global market place can also be attributed to cheap foreign labor, a trend that worries many American workers.

In spite of the reasons for increased globalization more and more companies have recognized the importance of better preparing their managers to understand that behavior is likely to be different in different cultures. Although the science of global management is relatively young, companies have been hard at work trying to provide their managers with the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes about how organizational behavior varies around the world.

Smart companies have acknowledged that our planet is rapidly becoming one huge community with a global economy. For most organizations, the question is not whether to become a part of the global community, but how. It is vital for anyone making decisions in an organization to understand the dynamics of global management. For example, since managers are such a vital cog in the success of an organization, many companies have undertaken development efforts to ensure that their managers realize that cultural differences within a country are often as sharp as cultural differences between people of different nationalities.

This paper is primarily concerned with the role that experiential learning exercises play in the development of managers (supervisors, middle-level managers, and top-level executives) to be more effective in the global arena. For our purposes, management development focuses on developing in a systematic manner the knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes of the managerial cadre for success in the global arena. We will focus our discussion on the importance of the debriefing phase in intentional experiential learning exercises by presenting a framework to improve the debriefing phase of such exercises.

APPROACHES FOR DEVELOPING MANAGERS FOR GLOBALIZATION

There are numerous management development approaches for globalization available. Brochures, testimonials, books, and articles extol the virtues of the management development approach. The programs offer a number of advantages as expressed by consultants, managers, or others familiar with the particular approach. Unfortunately, few of the approaches have been scientifically evaluated, and there is relatively little known about where to use a particular approach and what kind of managers (personality type, experience, education) is able to derive the most benefit from a particular approach (Ivancevich, 1992).

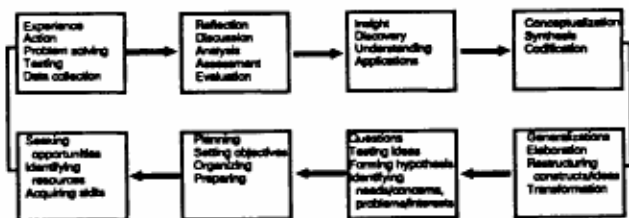
Management development for globalization is an important element as organizations attempt to gain a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. A number of developmental techniques (case methods, role playing, behavioral modeling, internships, simulation and games, and experiential learning exercises) are used in different companies as part of their management development efforts.

Which Development Approach Should Be Used?

Deciding on the development approach or combination of approaches must be done on a basis of weighing various criteria. The choice can be made on the basis of the number of managers to be developed, the relative costs per manager for each method, the availability of development materials in various forms, and the managers' relative efficiency in learning. In general, it is true that the more active the manager, the greater the motivation to learn. The probability of success is higher in that instance. Finally, the method(s) used should include a high degree of active participation by the managers. Keeping in line with the work of others (Warren and Adler, 1977; Fiedler, Mitchell, & Triandis, 1971) it is our belief that experiential learning exercises are the most useful for developing managers for globalization. This assumption is supported by Dr. Albert R. Wight (Harris and Moran, 1991). As a result of his Peace Corps training endeavors on behalf of Denver's Center for Research and Education Dr. Wight suggested the Experiential Learning Model for cross-cultural orientation (see Figure 1). In reviewing the research literature, Dr. Wight confirms that innovative, experience-based training

models are needed to adequately prepare trainees to live and work effectively in another culture. The design of such programs must be structured to achieve increased participant involvement in and responsibility for the learning process. The orientation should be trainee-centered especially on problem solving, in contrast to the memorization of facts.

FIGURE 1
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING MODEL FOR CROSS-CULTURAL ORIENTATION



Originally developed for Peace Corps trainees, Wight's model is particularly relevant for developing managers for globalization.

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Debriefing

While a number of authors write about the debriefing process, not all use the term “debriefing” to mean the same thing (Lederman, 1992). Lederman (1992) notes that debriefing is variously defined as learning through reflection on a simulation experience (Thatcher 1990; Pearson and Smith; 1983; Raths, 1987; Lederman, 1983; Lederman and Stewart, 1985; Lee, 1984); emotional recovery from critical incidents (Bergmann and Queen, 1987; Donovan, 1983; Walker, 1990); work-related tasks, such as appraisal and synthesis of input from focus groups (De Nicola, 1990) or job performance (Bailey, 1990).

Regardless of its definition, debriefing is an integral part of any learning experience that is designed to be experience based. For our purposes, the main function of the debriefing phase of experiential learning exercises is to integrate experiences with concepts and application transferable to “real world” work situations. The facilitators role is to guide the participants in transforming some of the generalizations into more precise statements that can be applied to the ‘real world” (Warrick, Hunsacker, Cook & Altman, 1979).

This application and transfer stage is comparable to the active experimentation stage as described by Kolb, Rubin and Osland (1991). The focus in the debrief is on actively influencing people and changing situations. It emphasizes practical applications, pragmatic with what works, and an emphasis on doing. This stage implies some risk to achieve objectives, which could include testing a new model. The importance of active experimentation is reinforced in Wights model. In fact, active experimentation forms the bulk of Wight’s model. Of the eight phases of his scheme, the lower four are targeted to active experimentation.

Often the debriefing does not progress to this level. Instead, the learning ends at another level as described by Kolb et al (1991):

- Abstract Conceptualization. The debriefing would relate concepts from the readings and lecture to the experience. An original model or theory could be created.

Reflective Observation. Here the experience is viewed from different points of view. These perspectives add more meaning to the event. This approach values patience, impartiality, and considered, thoughtful judgment.

- Concrete Experience. The participants objectively describe the experience-who, what, when, where, how. They also subjectively describe their feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that occurred (not after) the experience.

The richness and strength of the experiential learning exercise can be enhanced if the debriefing can proceed from concrete experience to reflective observation to abstract conceptualization and hopefully to active experimentation. Hoopes (1979) offers a comparable intercultural learning process, which progresses, from awareness to understanding to acceptance to appreciation. Each step results in greater intercultural learning. In this paper we will refer to both Kolb et al. as well as Hoopes to provide a conceptual base for our presentation.

International Exercise

Participants are briefed on the exercise. They are told they will participate in an international communication exercise in-groups of five. The specific information provided to participants is:

PURPOSE:

- In micro fashion, examine communication within organizations...
 - Impact on productivity
 - Impact on human factors (morale, teamwork, response, commitment, etc.)
- Awareness of the phenomenon.... . Thence, avoiding some of the pitfalls.
 - A simulated management exercise
 - Highly competitive (your goal is to beat the other teams!)
 - Severely time constrained

RULES:

- No talking
- Communicate in writing
- Moderator will deliver messages

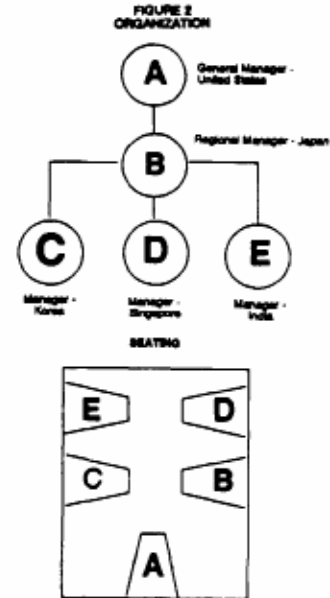
OBJECTIVES:

- Beat the clock and beat the other teams
- Reach your team objectives

WRAP-UP:

- Reflections and reactions
 - Discussion and learning points
- Figure 2 presents the organization chart that accompanies the exercise.

Each participant is given a sheet of instructions. All participants are given the following information:



Persons A & B may exchange notes.
 Persons C, D, & E may exchange notes with Person B
No other communication is permitted.

Only Person A is given this information:

Each of you has a sheet with symbols on it. On each sheet there are five or six familiar symbols. Your job is to determine which one of the six symbols is held in common.

To elaborate:

There are 5 symbols on each person’s sheet. There are 4 copies of 5 of the symbols.

- There are 5 copies of 1 of the symbols.
- You are to determine which one particular symbol is held by all five people.
 When you have made this determination, notify the person who is facilitating this exercise.

To enhance the international dimension of the exercise, participants could be alerted to country profiles, which suggest typical behaviors of the countries that they represent. For example, Hofstede (1980) has indicated that people from different countries differ in terms of such behaviors as individualism, power distances, risk-taking and assertiveness.

The exercise is held until the objective is reached but no longer than 20 minutes.

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Debriefing the Exercise

The debrief has proven particularly effective if each participant responds to the following questions:

1. Did you complete your assignment? Allowed responses: Yes, or I do not know.
2. Did you know what the assignment was? Allowed responses: Yes, No, I am not sure.
3. How did you feel? Allowed responses: 1 or 2 descriptive words. After further discussion the exercise is summarized with these points:
 - Do not assume:
 - That meaning/perception has transferred.
 - That organizational goals are known by all.
 - That people are involved, aware, committed and are being properly utilized.
 - Know the organization's communication networks.
 - . . Regular feedback.
 - Ask why.
 - Realize that it has to happen at the operator level to happen at the organizational level.
 - Expect change.
Know that all people want to contribute...And recognize the role that poor communication plays re: Organization "drop outs."
Manages at a distance with great risk.
Determine cultural differences on an on-going basis.
Special attention to Person B-Regional Manager from Japan.

Comments on Debriefing

The debrief can cover Hoopes intercultural learning sequence from awareness to understanding to acceptance to appreciation of cultural differences. The debrief can also include Kolb's concrete experience, reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization. But to address the active experimentation process, a different approach is needed. The following questions have proven effective immediately following the exercise as a extension of the exercise.

How would you re-design this organization?

How would you improve the managing at a distance in this organization?

- How could you use cultural differences and similarities among the representatives of the four countries to enhance communication?

These and other questions would also be extended to Wight's model.

CONCLUSION

As organizations expand into international arenas, the need for global management development also grows. Experiential learning exercises have proven to be efficient and effective for developing managers for globalization. To obtain the optimum pay-off in the experiential exercise, close attention must be paid to the debriefing. To develop active experimentation in an international experiential learning exercise requires a planned approach both immediately after the exercise or as an extension of the exercise.

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