

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

## ENACTING THE LINGUISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE MODERN MANAGERIAL MIND: POSTMODERNISM AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

This workshop presents a word association exercise and discussion, which can be used to explore the existential value system of modernity. The words used in the exercise help “frame” (1) the values involved in the dialectic between traditional and emerging management thought, as well as (2) the values involved in the dialectic between traditional and experiential teaching methods. Participants first complete the word association exercise and provide interpretations of the results. Discussion then focuses on how the exercise may be applied to current topics such as the management of diversity, emotions at work, and experiential learning.

### INTRODUCTION

Recent writings in management reflect a growing interest in the relevance of postmodern perspectives to the world of work (Smircich, Calas, & Morgan, 1992). Though by nature varied, these postmodern perspectives do at least four things. First, these perspectives focus on the linguistic nature of consciousness and thus management thought is examined as a language game (Knights 1992). Second, these perspectives propose that managerial language games involve a dialectic between binary linguistic oppositions that is enacted in such a way that some values (e. g., worker, and female) are dialectically dominated by other values (e.g. management and male, respectively). Third, these perspectives promote an emancipatory agenda whereby exploration of managerial language games involves liberating the dominated values so as to create more expressive and synthetic organizational praxis (Smircich et al., 1992). Fourth, some of these perspectives recognize the existential nature of the value dialectic (Knights, 1992). The purpose of this paper is to describe a word association exercise for exploring these postmodern views.

### SEMANTIC MODEL

The word association exercise is based on Wilber’s (1986) theoretical model. A summary consists of the following two semantic equations: (1) archetypal masculine=father=up=heaven=light=white=mind=manager=order=conquer=life=good and (2) archetypal feminine=mother=down=hell=dark=black=body=laborer=chaos=surrender=death=evil. The equal signs should be seen as epistemic correlations of varying magnitudes and the two equations should be seen as symbolizing the dialectic between value systems that characterize modern consciousness. The application to modern management thought and practice involves examining the tradition of white, managers working up in the organizational hierarchy and using their minds to conquer and control nature so as to create a good “heaven” on earth. Whereas, in contrast, females and other minorities traditionally have worked with their bodies down in the hierarchy where darkness, and surrender to authority have both literal and metaphorical meaning (e.g., the early industrial workplace).

### THE EXERCISE

The exercise consists of four steps. First, participants are asked to free associate with a set of stimulus words selected from the first semantic equation such as ‘up,’ ‘good,’ and so on. This step usually takes about five minutes. Second, the two equations are recreated by having participants share their responses to the stimulus words. This step also takes about five minutes. Third, participants are asked to interpret, through discussion, what they think the two semantic equations mean. This step may take fifteen minutes or so. Fourth, given selected prompts, participants are asked to discuss the relationship of the two equations to such current topics as the management of diversity, emotions at work, and experiential learning. Depending upon instructor objectives and time limitations, this step may vary from 20 minutes on up. We have devoted fifty-minute class periods to selected topics.

### APPLICATIONS

As shown above, the results of the exercise clearly can be applied to the topic of managing diversity. For example, the existential nature of the glass ceiling can be framed as male managers up in the hierarchy resisting the black and female workers down in the hierarchy. The nature of stereotyping in the maintenance of the glass ceiling takes on a new meaning within this existential framework. Moreover, managing diversity becomes, from a Jungian perspective, a problem in facing the shadow side (down=dark=evil=death),

Experientially oriented teachers may also apply the exercise to experiential methodology itself. For example, traditional teaching can be framed as a lecture, which involves a teacher who stands in front of the class and uses his mind to reason with students. In contrast, experiential learning requires teachers to step down, surrender control, and let the students get their bodies into an exercise, which often is experienced, as chaotic and emotional for students. Is this the existential source of learner resistance to experiential methods? Is experiential learning the postmodern methodology?

### REFERENCES

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