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LESSONS LEARNED FROM A CUSTOMIZED MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT SIMULATION

Michael McDonald, Georgia Southern University
Bernard Keys Georgia Southern University

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the development and delivery of a customized management development training program featuring a simulated National Park Guidelines are described for others to consider in designing similar training. Lessons learned by the designers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The National Park Service (NPS) was established in 1916 “to promote and regulate the use of national parks, monuments, and reservations” and "to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and wildlife therein” increasing pressure is being felt by the National Park
Service system, however, by a widening diversity of park visitors, park employees, nearby communities, and the general public, all demanding a voice in Park Service planning. Added to this are the political demands of Congress and special interest groups. Of greatest concern is the growing frequency of visitation to the parks and the accompanying damage caused by people and automobiles (NPCA, 1988).

The National Park Service (NPS) is 70 years old, although Yellowstone- the world’s first national park-is 115 years old. NPS consists of 341 individual park units and is managed from the central office in Washington, DC. One of its ten regional office’s, located in Atlanta, Georgia, provided the opportunity for the project described here, which addresses the complaints among Park Service supervisors that the design of management development programs using concepts, experiences, anti illustrations from business anti industry are simply not N PS-specific enough to allow for sufficient “transference” of learning.

DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

The National Park Service has utilized various management training programs in the past, but none that speaks the Park Service’s language and deals with their unique problems. A steering group was established consisting of supervisors, a superintendent, the regional associate-director and the regional training officer. In the initial discussions, an overview of NPS work and the supervisor’s job was discussed. A plan was then developed in which (1) a representative number of parks (large, medium and small) would be chosen and supervisors at all levels would be interviewed; (2) one thousand questionnaires would be mailed to a representative sample of small and large parks to obtain relevant information; (3) background information on the National Park Service and several representative parks would be collected; and (4) career case studies would be written from extensive interviews with chief rangers, administrative - officers and maintenance supervisors.

A three-step approach to developing simulations was used involving content (new concepts and information) - experience (an opportunity to apply content in an experiential environment such as a simulation), and feedback assessment ‘ exercises and instructor comments) - Experience was provided by the - simulation, content was provided by traditional lectures and discussions (bolstered with fresh National Park Service information anti terms); and feedback was provided by numerous customized assessment exercise’s (Keys, 1989; Lewis, 1987).

The information obtained as described above was analyzed and organized into a delivery mode. An in-basket simulation called SCAMP (Southeastern Coastal and Mountain Park simulation) was developed based on 23 case incidents uncovered in interviews and the questionnaire- and the background information described in item three above. Since none of the Southeast Coastal Parks have both mountains and ocean, some liberties in the simulation were taken to add realism for all geographic locations The simulation was not focused on one role-, as is usually the case, but was developed for an entire - team playing the role of management in a small National Park, A unique element of the simulation was the way in which incidents were addressed. Usually, an in-basket is organized so that participants may deal with any incident first or last, and notes are made at the bottom of each incident about action taken, We preferred to steer participants toward consideration of several alternative solutions. Accordingly, programmed choice’s were provided for each incident and participant teams simply chose the alternative which they consider most useful and were later called upon to explain why they chose a particular solution

LESSONS LEARNED BY THE DESIGNERS

1 A week's activities cannot be organized around the logical development of lecture or cognitive information. In a simulation session, organization gives way to sequencing of experiences; however, integrating themes [Visioning, Empowering, Supporting, Enabling, Rewarding, Transforming] were used,

2. Designers really can’t predict what will happen when participants begin to work through the simulation, An unanticipated problem in this simulation was information overload, One afternoon session, for example, produced some 24 incidents, which were all presented at once.

3. Designers must be flexible and “up front” about the simulation. The initial plan was to acquaint participants with many more learning experiences than they could have personally experienced in the hope that these experiences would surface throughout the week as teachable moments, Participants, however, expressed frustration about the overload created when they were given answers to questions that had not yet been asked.

4, Designers must be willing to modify preplanned activities if its discovered during the simulation that participants will benefit from such changes. For instance, the designers intended for the exercise of writing one’s own case problems to be a minor part of one afternoon, When these cases (which were done for SCAMP) were retyped, copied and distributed for analysis during the week, however, it was found that they took on even more realism and more immediacy of need to the participants. This action apparently caused many participants to ‘‘buy into" the simulation.

5, More realism built into the simulation results in higher participant involvement, satisfaction and learning, An example of such realism occurred at the time of the training program when a major forest fire was raging at Yosemite National Park and a hurricane hit Fort Sumter National Park near Charleston, South Carolina,

6, The closer the simulation actually approximates reality, then the better the result will be, In the design of this simulation a thousand surveys (40% of returns were useable) were sent to N PS personnel throughout the Southeast. From these surveys were - obtained incidents real data, comparisons, critical concern 5, etc.

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