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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AS THE CORNERSTONE OF AN INTRODUCTORY MANAGEMENT COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a realistic replication of a functioning organization as the cornerstone of an Introductory Management course. It suggests that such an approach is an excellent vehicle to use in introducing the study of management to very diverse student population.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1984-85 academic year, the Management Faculty at our school began a rigorous examination of both the objectives and effectiveness of the Introductory Management course. Prompted to a large degree by the growing perception among students and faculty alike that the course as constituted was of limited value, and influenced by the flourishing debate concerning the appropriate content and role of Management Instruction at the college level, the faculty endorsed the following course objectives:

Each student will:

1. Be introduced to the historical development of managerial thought.

2. Examine how management knowledge is applied to modern production and service organizations.

3. Be aware that managing modern and future organizations is a very demanding task whereby the manager attempts to integrate very powerful internal and external forces using available processes and techniques.

4. Understand that management is not a unidimensional concept, but that management entails different behaviors, perceptions and actions depending upon whether you are a first line supervisor, department head, division chief, vice president, or chairman of the board.

5. Come to feel the excitement, the challenge, the power, and the possible rewards of becoming a senior manager in any type of organization.

6. Experience managing processes as he or she interacts with peers as they strive to achieve some task.

7. Take from the course an appreciation of the complexity of modern management, a knowledge of various theories and techniques, a sense of the evolutionary nature of managerial thought, some experiences that have "made real" the act of managing, and a feel for how exciting it all can be.

The course design described in this paper is the result of efforts made to meet these objectives.

SETTING

The University serves a student population of approximately 7,000 who are drawn predominantly from a rural, mountainous region. Even though they possess the diversity of backgrounds common to all universities, the bucolic home environment of many of the students offers limited exposure to major organization settings prior to their enrollment. As a unit of the "core curriculum," Introductory Management is a required prerequisite for all Business School majors. It is also a required course, and in most cases the only required management course, for students majoring in seven programs of study outside of the business school Furthermore, the course is frequently taken as an elective by students who typically express a need to improve their management ability as their rationale. Due to the number of students involved, the majority of students are taught in an auditorium environment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The course design is an adaptation of a project-based learning model that has been successful at Bucknell University. It incorporates the "traditional" theoretical approach to management education with the opportunity to acquire basic management skills through active engagement in the process of management.

Students are given the opportunity to form a functioning organization that is capable of performing both profit-making and service-related projects successfully. The entire organizational process -- from the election of a governing board to the direction and control of actual project work, parallels class discussions. The primary focus of the course is on the basic management functions - Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Communicating, Decision-Making, and Controlling, but within this framework the students are also given the opportunity to explore the Historical Development of Management Thought, the question of Social Responsibility in Management, and special problems associated with managing in a NonProfit and a Highly Regulated Environment. The course concludes with a discussion of the applicability of basic management skills to the conduct of the student's personal affairs and chosen career path.

The design of the course allows for the reinforcement and/or expansion of topical areas as students encounter a need for this in their project activities. Since many of the topics raised are also dealt with thoroughly in subsequent business courses, students are encouraged to keep diaries of their project experiences to use as lab material in these later courses.

It is felt that this approach more appropriately addresses the needs of the two general categories of students we attempt to serve:

1. Business students are introduced to the field of management and provided with the basic theoretical underpinnings for their future studies. They also are given extensive exposure to the complexities of organizational performance and are made

explicitly aware of the role that subsequent courses available to them in the business curriculum will have in further preparing them for a business career.

2. Non-business students who will have little, if any, other formal management education, and who hope to gain some practical benefit from the course before they are expected to assume managerial responsibilities are provided a sound, well-focused, foundation in management theory and an initial exposure to a relatively broad array of management topics and skills.

Typical Schedule of Course Activities

	Primary Class Topics	Project Activity
Week 1	Course Introduction. Introduction to the Functions and Roles of Management	Distribution of Job Descriptions. Solicitation and Collection of Board and Officer Applications.
Week 2	Historical Development of Management Thought.	Election of Board. Selection of Top Officers. (first board meeting)
Week 3	The Planning Process	Open Board Meeting (what do we want to accomplish?)
Week 4	The Organizing Process	Open Board Meeting (how are we going to organize?)
Week 5	Staffing and Interviewing	Presentation of Staffing Plan. Distribution of Applications/ Interview times. Selection of Personnel.
Week 6	Directing (Communicating) The Control Function.	Coaching session with all Managers and Board Members.
Week 7	Directing (Motivating) (Leading)	Meetings with individual managers (as required).
Week 8	Review for Exam Mid-Term Exam	Officer's Report (work time table from each manager and explanation of control mechanisms that will be utilized.)
Week 9	Fall Break Exam Review/Preview of remaining course activities.	Project Work
Week 10	Decision-Making.	Project Work
Week 11	Social Responsibility. Managing in a Regulated Environment.	Project Work
Week 12	Catch-up/Reflection	Project Work
Week 13	Managing in a Non-Profit Environment.	Project Work
Week 14	Final Project Report. Thanksgiving Holiday.	
Week 15	Review and Reflection on Project Experiences. Application of Skills Learned to Future Endeavors.	
Week 16	Management in the Future. Course Wrap-Up.	

Course Grading Scheme

The course grade is typically determined in the following manner:

Mid-term	30%
Final	30%
Class Diary	10%
Participation	10%
Project or Term Paper	20%

The Project (or Term Paper) portion of the grade is purposely kept relatively small so that poor managerial performance or failure of any kind in the project will not, in itself cause a student to fail the course. On the other hand, the Project Grade offers much greater positive benefit than 20% since some salary ranges exceed the equivalent of 100 points on this portion of the overall grade.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project experience simulates the actual formation of a business organization to the greatest extent possible. For example, a governing board, elected by class members, assumes the responsibility of establishing the scope of the project(s) and the requisite organizational design. This board also selects the CEO and other top officers of the company, and works in concert with these officers to insure the goals of the organization are achieved. A staffing plan and a realistic selection process (i.e. , applications, inter- views, and employment decisions at each level of management) is used to staff the remaining organizational hierarchy. As in the real world, every participant is not selected for the position they desire and only a few have the opportunity to fill one of the more lucrative (and challenging) managerial positions. On a similar note, a few who would like to participate in the project are usually unable to secure job offers. This problem is dealt with by requiring the Personnel Department to develop and implement an unemployment program that provides minimum grade protection to class members in this category. (Note: class members can elect to write a term paper in lieu of participation In the project at any time up until an established date at the mid-point of the semester.)

The Board of Directors is encouraged to select a project (or projects) that incorporate the broadest range of business functions, including a production element and a marketing requirement. Since it is understood that all positions in the organization must be justified by job analysis procedures, the governing body is also charged with the responsibility of selecting a project with enough complexity to accommodate the employment of most of the students who wish to participate in the project.

Realism is stressed throughout the project. Not only are employees selected and their fair treatment assured by personnel policies that the students develop and administer through a personnel department, but also their performance is evaluated and their pay determined by evaluation and budgetary procedures developed and administered through a finance department. Managers at every level are coached extensively by the instructor, but it is stressed continuously and every effort is made to give the appearance that the success or failure of the project is solely in their hands.

As a concluding event, the company presents a "Final Report" of their activities to interested faculty and guests from throughout the university. These guests are then asked to give their evaluation of the success of the project on the basis of criteria developed by the company's board of directors.

PROJECTS TO DATE

1. The Development, Production, and Test Marketing of a University Trivia Game

2. The Design and Development of comprehensive Well- ness Programs for eight distinct service populations, and the actual implementation of a program designed for high school students.

3. The Development and Implementation of a "Match- Making Service" for University Students.

4. The Development and Delivery of "Success Unlimited"--a Motivational Program designed to assist high school students as they deal with the

pressures of growing-up.

DETERMINATION OF PROJECT GRADE

The grade that an individual receives on his or her project work is based on the salary range (in Mgt. 300 Dollars) established for the position held and the evaluation of that individual's performance by his or her superior.

One thousand Mgt. 300 Dollars equals one point towards the project grade. To maintain some sense of realism in the salary ranges, a multiplier of four is used to calculate the final project grade. For example: a salary of $20,000 would equal 20 points to be multiplied by four for a project grade of 80.

Since some positions in the organization command relatively high salaries, it is possible for individuals in these positions to earn a grade much higher than 100 on the project portion of their course grade.

Typical Salary Ranges

Board Members	$30,000
President	$45,000-$55,000
Vice Presidents	$35,000-$45,000
Division Heads	$25,000-$35,000
Supervisors	$20,000-$30,000
Workers	$15,000-$25,000
Unemployment Insurance*	$15,000

*payable only if an individual complies with the Unemployment Insurance policy established by the Board of Directors.

The total amount of money available for salaries is based on the following formula:

(80% x position salary range x number of individuals in position)

Project Bonus

In order to replicate the profit incentive and provide a vested interest in the success of the project for all class members, a possible bonus of up to 10% on the course grade is available to all class members if an acceptable project evaluation plan is developed by the Board of Directors, and through the use of that plan, the project is evaluated as being successful by the guests attending the Final Report.

DISCUSSION

The course design and the project that serves as the cornerstone of that design have characteristics unique to a course of this nature. First, textural and conceptual content coverage are significantly affected by the needs of project participants during the latter portion of the course. An effort Is made to insure that the fundamental concepts commonly dealt with in an introductory course are covered, but only what is judged to be fundamental and/or essential as a foundation for subsequent business courses. Topics that are covered to any greater depth are done so because of the relevance that can be attributed to project activities or the personal interests of class participants.

Second, the project is unique in terms of its size, complexity, and realism. Approximately 140 students have been "employed" by the project each semester. In order to insure meaningful jobs for this number of participants, it has been necessary to pursue projects of substantial complexity -- more so than typically appears to be the case in undergraduate course projects. Moreover, realism is stressed in every possible detail. From the employment process to the very real possibility of failure, students are challenged to think of themselves and function as members of an actual, moderate-size, company.

The results of this course design have been very re- warding to date, and I believe that each of the course objectives established by the management faculty have been substantially met. Not only have we seen the development of a broader understanding of management and the definite enhancement of certain managerial skills, but we have also witnessed a very discernable maturation process among the students as they work through the uncertainties and frustrations associated with such complicated projects. Perhaps more tangible results are the comments of other faculty members who report that the students do in fact use the course experience as a frame of reference for other studies-- even to the extent of adopting the mantle of experienced managers willing to be of assistance to other students.

There are, however, a number of problems associated with this approach. First of all, the extensive personal involvement that this design demands of the course instructor is both a blessing and curse. The positive aspect is the 'coaching relationship' that evolves in which students at all managerial levels of the project seek insights and assistance as they face their responsibilities. The range of topics that are addressed in this manner far exceed that which could be addressed in the traditional classroom format, and it is indeed a delight to be able to share the relevance of course material to actual operational requirements.

The primary negative aspect, of course, is the tremendous amount of time and emotional involvement that this approach commands. In our particular situation, with only one faculty member and a graduate assistant allocated to the course, obligations to the students easily stretch into six and seven day work weeks during the main thrust of the project. This, and the emotional strain that occurs when you invariably become ego-involved in the success of the project are extremely draining and an obvious detriment to other forms of academic productivity.

The emotional effect of the project on certain students is also worrisome. Even though I take great pains to repeatedly stress that the project is a learning experience, and, as such, the only real sin is lack of effort, the specter of failure hangs very heavily over some students. Indeed there have been two vice presidents, to date, who have been asked to resign, and other "managers" at various levels who have been painfully inept in their roles. In the cases where the student will permit it, I become personally (and many times confidentially) involved in either assisting the student in the development of a problem-resolution strategy, or, in cases where problems are beyond resolution, the fabrication of pride and grade "parachutes" for the student to use to exit the situation. There is, however, the possibility that some students will be demoralized, and otherwise negatively affected by the project experience.

Obviously, these negative aspects, especially professional time demands, could be addressed by the allocation of additional resources. The question then becomes -- "Is such an allocation justified by the

results it can achieve?" Based on my experience with this approach, I would say the answer to that question is an emphatic yes!

A Typical Project Flow Chart