ARE WE ADDRESSING THE REAL PROBLEM?
A TILE GAME EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE.

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ABSTRACT

Experienced based learning is being more prominently utilized within industry and within the academic arena. This paper provides an exercise that can be utilized within a number of classroom settings to help students learn about themselves and how they attack a problem or situation within a group setting. The exercise is entitled the "tile game". The paper introduces the rationale for the game, provides detailed information on how to set it up, score it and evaluate it. Students that have taken part in the exercise

INTRODUCTION

After attending the ABSEL presentation by Robert J. Gilbert from the University of Pittsburg on "Managing Client-Based Learning: Insights from Successful Teaching Project courses in Marketing" (Gilbert, 2011), I became interested in applying some of the ideas into a module of one of strategic management courses. I have always believed that students learn and retain knowledge better when they are actively involved in the learning process. The results obtained from the University of Pittsburgh on the project course in Marketing substantiate this view. Experience based learning is being used very prominently by business and educational trainers as it yields a higher level of learning outcome that can change behaviors (Gilbert, 2011; Silberman, 2007)) obtaining additional insights into experienced based learning.

The exercise I have introduced into the class is entitled "the tile game" and it relates to project management and on how well a team can prepare to obtain the desired results. In preparation for the game, I present some information on project management. This information is summarized in the following paragraphs.

WHAT IS PROJECT MANAGEMENT?

According to the Project Management institute (PMI), the professional organization that will confer on individuals the Project Management Professional PMP) designation, Project Management is:

The application of knowledge, skills, tools, and

techniquest to project activities to achieve project requirements. Project management is accomplished through the application and integration of the project management processes of initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling and closing. (Heagney, 2011, Page 4)

It is interesting to note that nearly every course taught on project management starts with the project already decided and usually already funded. It appears that the key role of the project manager is to ensure the project is delivered on time and within budget.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE REAL PROBLEM

Throughout my career in the petroleum industry, I attended a number of project seminars. The seminars were very practical and provided detailed tools on how to effectively execute a project. However, I was dismayed to find that many project management courses start at project planning. (Attachment 1 provides a sample advertisement of a project management course) with the assumption that the project has been approved and that what was approved will resolve the problem or create the opportunity that management wants to achieve.

Consequently, I developed a one page project guide (see attachment 2) that provides an overview of project planning. The most important step is the problem identification. Through experience, I've discovered that we are so anxious to get started that we don't fully explore the real problem – This is step 1. Prior to hitting the road running on the project implementation, it is critical, that one examines the objectives of the project and determines whether the project as currently designed will resolve the problem. One way that can be done is by asking the "why" questions five or more times. As we ask "why", we can move from symptoms to the real problem

If we are not solving the real problem and only solving a symptom to the problem, we would be wasting valuable time and resources. After we obtain a good understanding of the problem or issue, we will next need to move on to step 2 which is to determine the objectives or desired outcomes. In other words, we need to comprehend what outcomes management would expect from the resolution of

the problem. Step 3 is the identification and evaluation of alternative to resolve the situation (problem); and step 4 is the selection of the best alternative and the obtaining of the necessary approvals to continue. Steps 1 through 4 (problem identification through to making a decision on how to resolve) are virtually ignored.

Having worked within project management for over a decade, I have found that doing a thorough review of steps 1 through 4 can provide the greatest benefit to management. It can determine if the planned project will solve the real problem or whether the project is designed only to solve a symptom of the problem. On a number of occasions, management had come up with a proposal that they felt would resolve their problem. However, after additional review of the first four steps, it was determined that that the project as initially planned would only solve a symptom to the problem and not the real problem.

AN ACADEMIC APPLICATION
OF PROJECT PLANNING
AS IT RELATES TO A TILE GAME

As I worked with co-workers and as I began to teach students at the university level, it became apparent to me that as a society, we want to just get on with what we are doing. We don't want to take the necessary time to plan, we are anxious to do. As an example if we buy a new piece of furniture that needs to be assembled, how often do we meticulously go through the instructions? Many of us just lay out the pieces and start assembling. When we are nearly finished we discover, that we have some screws or bolts left over. Do we then take the item apart or do we assume, they must have given us extra pieces.

Additionally, I found that we are reluctant to challenge an authority figure. If the boss asks us to do something, it is easier to get on with it than it is to question the boss. However, if we don't understand the why and the what of the requirement, we can sometimes deliver a product that does not meet the organizational needs. This stresses the important of asking why so that we obtain a better understanding of requirements. To resolve this paradox and to help student understand how they work, I designed a teaching module and a game that students have found to be very enlightening. During the course, I teach that we need to go through 4 steps within project planning, before we actually start doing (See attachment 2). Students learn this and say they say they understand. However, what I have them do, as a group, during one class period is play a tile game. The purpose of the game is to ascertain their project management processes and provide them with insight on how they approach an actual problem. It provides them with an experiental exercise that can highlight and display some of their current working processes.

The rules to the game are slightly changed from semester to semester, to avoid students learning from previous students and perhaps losing out on the learning potential.

I provide each group with instructions (attachment 3) and tiles that contain letters. The tiles are taken from scrabble games where I will combine a couple of scrabble games together to obtain a sufficient number of tiles (attachment 4 shows the number of tiles utilized for each team). I have three sets of tiles and I divide the students up into three teams. I let them know that this is a tile game and the rules of scrabble do not apply. I let the students know that the points on the tiles do not matter. I ask them to make as many four to six letter words as they can. I also let them know that any tiles left over would count against them. The instructions are fairly vague as the purpose of the exercise is to get students to come up with questions and ask the "why" type questions to obtain additional information on what is the real objective. This exercise is given after reiterating over and over again about the importance of understanding the problem prior to getting down to work.

HOW THE GAME IS SCORED

4 letter words are worth 1 point each. 5 and 6 letter words are worth 1 point each for the first 10 words for each of the categories. Afterwards, 5 letter words are worth 2 points and 6 letter words are worth 3 points. Words can be formed diagonally as well as horizontally or vertically. A point is taken off for each left over tile. All tiles used in the exercise must be part of a word. In other words, you can't just hide a letter behind a legitimate word.

I provide a 10 point bonus for palindrome words such as kayak or radar where the word is the same word whether spelled forward or backward.

I provide a 5 point bonus for words that are not the same word, but is a legitimate word when read from the back to the front. An example of this is animal which when read from the back is lamina. Other examples are:

- diaper and repaid
- recaps and spacer
- reknit and tinker
- avid and diva
- devil and lived
- denim and mined

One can have also have a word within a word. This only counts if the word within the word is different than the original word. In other words, it can just be stop and stops. An example of this would be mile and smile. Words of these types would obtain an extra 5 point bonus.

From year to year, I will modify the rules, so the game doesn't get discovered and students miss out on the learning opportunity.

CONCLUSION

After the exercise is completed and I've had the opportunity to score the results, I ask students the following types of questions:

1. Do we take sufficient time to truly analyze the real problem or are we too motivated to solve what we believe is the problem?
2. Was there sufficient communication within your team and between the team and the instructor?
3. Do we always have all the information we need from our manager when he/she asks us to accomplish a certain task?
4. What could you have done better?
5. What did you learn about yourself on how you strive to achieve an objective?

In the debrief, I have found that many students have learned a lot about themselves and their propensity to get on with the task without fully understanding the problem or issue. Other comments were:

That was one of the most useful exercises I've ever done.

1. I thought I knew what was required, but I just realized I need to ask more questions
2. I found that we needed to spend more time in planning, rather than just starting on the execution.
3. As team members, we were working at cross purposes. I see now, why planning is so important.

You should give us all the requirements up front, I don't think the exercise is fair. To this I reply, do you think you have perfect knowledge in real life? They pause and after some reflection admit that they do not. This is when I reiterate that this is why communication is so important. Even though a boss may say, do "such and such", you need to clarify what he/she means by the "such and such". It is a great learning experience for students and I love it when I get this type of question. Students have found this to be a wonderful learning opportunity

REFERENCES

Gilbert, R.J. (2011) Managing Client-Based Learning: Insights from Successful Teaching Project courses in Marketing. Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, (*Bernie Keys Library). Volume 38, 36-44*

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Silberman, M. (2007) "Changing Attitudes and Behaviors Through Experiential Activity" *The Handbook of Experiential Learning,* San Francisco, John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

ATTACHMENT 1
A TYPICAL ADVERTISEMENT FOR A PROJECT MANAGEMENT COURSE
FREDPRYER.COM

ATTACHMENT 2
PROJECT PLANNING

Step	
1	Problem Identification
2	Objectives and Desired Outcomes
3	Alternatives to resolve problems
4	Decision and Approval
5	Planning (Identify tasks, Assign responsibilities and deadlines)
6	Control and Monitoring (including monitoring of change orders)
7	Execution
8	Project Delivery and Review

NOTE: Throughout the whole process, a key aspect for each step is communication.

The first four steps are key steps to ensure the project we intend on delivering will resolve the concerns management is attempting to resolve

Make sure you have identified the real problem and not just a symptom to the problem. Next ensure you understand the objectives and expected outcomes from a successful project completion.

You next can utilize your team and clients to brainstorm alternative and come up with the best decision on how to resolve. This solution will need to be approved by the appropriate level of planning.

After this step, one can utilize the training from project management courses in relation to planning, control, implementation and review.

ATTACHMENT 3
INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TILE GAME

Date_____

The object of this game is to **obtain more points than the other teams** by joining a series of four, five and six letter words together.

For the first 10 words, five/six letter words are worth the same as four letter words. All words must be in English and included within the English dictionary. Proper names or abbreviated words are not allowed. Strive to utilize all the tiles as there is a penalty of one point for each unused tile.

This is not a scrabble game, but a tile game! Consequently, points on the tiles are meaningless and rules of scrabble do not apply.

Teams that have won this game in the past are those that understand the real problem and objective and have organized themselves to have an effective execution.

You have one hour to complete the task. Make good use of your time.

If you have questions, come to the front and I will answer any questions you may have. Good luck and have FUN

Sincerely;

Dr. _____

ATTACHMENT 4
THE NUMBER OF TILES UTILIZED IN THE TILE GAME

	#		#
a	18	n	12
b	4	o	16
c	4	p	4
d	8	q	2
e	24	r	12
f	4	s	8
g	6	t	12
h	4	u	8
i	18	v	4
j	2	w	4
k	2	x	2
l	8	y	4
m	4	z	2

To obtain three sets of tiles, I took apart 6 scrabble games. There are 2 sets of scrabble pieces in each of the groups letters.

 I do not use the scrabble board, but ask the students to make words on a table top.