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USING REAL WORLD EXPERIENCES AS AN EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY: THE PAGE TECHNIQUE

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ABSTRACT

One of the challenges for the practicing manager and for the student of management is to develop the skill necessary to be the reflective planners and leaders that normative theory would have them be. The following paper presents an experiential activity that can assist both the manager and the student to gain the necessary knowledge to be reflective. Equally important, this activity also helps make the experience of reflective analysis a meaningful and an enjoyable one, and therefore, one that the participants will want to repeat in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Originating with the early work by Fayol [3] management educators have proposed that the manager should be a reflective planner, organizer, controller, etc. Recent research [6], [7], however, tends to show that practicing managers are not reflective, but rather are action oriented in their performance of several specific roles. Mintzberg [6], for example, has developed an action approach for examining the roles and skills necessary for successful performance. Given the observation that managers are not the reflective planners and commanders that normative theory would have them be, one might question why they are not. Jack Duncan [2] and Jack Bologna [13] indicate that two significant reasons for this lack of reflective activity are (1) a knowledge deficiency (they do not know how) and (2) an attitude deficiency (they do not enjoy the process). As one possible answer for this situation, the following paper presents an approach that can provide the knowledge and skill necessary to increase the reflective ness of managers, and at the same time, this approach provides significant rewards in the form of positive feedback so that managers can enjoy the reflective process.

In addition, one of the major problems encountered in successfully teaching the topics of management is the problem of transferring the knowledge from the training situation to the job situation. Both in the university classroom setting and in the job site training setting, the challenge is to have the knowledge developed in such a way so that people can internalize it and then use it in their actual day-to-day work. One approach for meeting this challenge is found in the many excellent experiential activities that have been developed and that lead to a set of behaviors that the participants can analyze and from which they can learn. However, my experience in using these activities indicates that participants often tend to overly discount the conclusions reached in the debriefing of these activities. The reason for this discounting is that the activity was treated as a game and was not actually representative of the "real world."

A solution to this problem is to use "real world"

activities as the basis of the experiential exercise. These activities could be the completion of a series of planning meetings in a large corporation, or the completion of a marketing campaign or, in the classroom, the completion of a group research paper. Upon completion of the "real world" activity, the PAGE technique can then be used.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAGE TECHNIQUE

The Process Analysis of Group Experience (PAGE) technique is a team activity in which the members of the group reflect together on the current and potential strengths of the group. The direction of the activity is strictly positive, looking at what the group does well and what the group can do better. The PAGE technique is appropriate after the completion of any group task or any significant segment of a group task. It generally takes two to three hours and should be conducted in a relaxed supportive friendly atmosphere.

There are a number of general guidelines to follow in using the PAGE technique. The first guideline is to structure the group discussion around current and future strengths by answering the following two general questions, "In the completion of this task, what did we do particularly well?" and, "If we were to do the project again, how could we improve our already successful performance?" Notice the positive direction implicit in both questions.

Within the context of these two general questions, the team should discuss specific areas of group experience. These areas often include leadership, motivation, commitment, decision making, conflict management, task structure, individual strengths, and interpersonal relations. The amount of discussion for each of these areas depends on their relevance to the specific group experience and their perceived importance. For example, if a group has experienced a dramatic increase in performance after a change in the assignment of tasks to group members then a more thorough discussion of task structure and task assignment would be appropriate. Also, if one or more members of the group perceives that the level of commitment could be increased by engaging in a new set of specific behaviors, then the topic of contentment could be beneficially discussed within the context of the second general question of how to improve for future work.

The second guideline for the PAGE technique is to recognize the value and importance of being *as* specific as possible. Specific names and specific activities or incidents are highly valuable in gaining the most from the process analysis. Vague generalities only create fluff without substance, while specific examples lead to a meaningful reflective experience. Instead of saying that Mark was a real asset to the group

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(a vague generality) say that when Mark brought in the additional research about the Higgins account, he helped the team to build a sales approach tailor-made for the Higgins firm. By being specific, members of the group are better able to see the contributions they are making toward the group's success, as well as the contributions that might be made in the future.

The third guideline for the PAGE technique is to ensure that the group discussion is focused on controllable behavior and performance. When the focus is on behavior that can be controlled, then positive constructive behavior is more likely to be repeated (it has been reinforced by the PAGE discussion) and other controllable behavior can be improved.

Three additional characteristics of the PAGE technique should be noted. First, the discussion should maintain a consistently positive and constructive direction. Most people readily respond to praise and positive feedback, while criticism often causes defensive barriers to be raised and successful communication is hurt if not killed.

Furthermore, the discussion participants should consistently claim ownership of their opinions. Instead of saying, "The main improvement is....," say, "As I see it, the main improvement is...." In the first statement, an opinion is being stated as though it were a fact, although in reality, it is opinion. This generally leads to either an excessive discounting of the statement or to an unprofitable discussion regarding the "factualness" of the statement. In the second statement, the opinion is openly recognized as an opinion. This generally leads to a consensual validation or agreement with the opinion (one of the values obtained through group membership [4]) or to a statement of other opinions which are then discussed as opinions.

By claiming ownership of opinions, the team naturally does not avoid disagreement, but is successful in avoiding the loss of time and team resources that results when perceptions and opinions are confused with solid facts.

A final characteristic of the PAGE technique is that the activity should be fun and enjoyable. It should be a unique learning experience based upon reflective insight shared with a group of friends that have already successfully completed a meaningful group task.

AN EXAMPLE OF THE PAGE TECHNIQUE

The PAGE technique can be used successfully in both industry and classroom applications. It has proven valuable during the past five years of its development in courses including business policy, executive decision making, organizational behavior and principles of management. The technique has also been very useful in building teams in industry. An example of its use in the classroom might be beneficial.

The goals of the PAGE technique in the classroom are to enable the participants to internalize the concepts being

taught, to help them have a positive and successful group experience, and to learn to use the technique. These goals are accomplished in the following manner.

First, the students are randomly divided into groups of five. They are assigned to write a short six to ten page research paper showing expertise in one of the topics of the course. As soon as the groups are formed, the class has a general discussion of a positive and negative group experience to highlight what should occur and what should be avoided in the groups. After this discussion, a written description of the PAGE technique is distributed to the class members. Following a discussion of the handout, the group members recognize that after successfully completing the assigned research paper, they will participate in the PAGE technique, using the group research experience as the raw data for analysis. The students then proceed with their assigned task, creating observable experience that will be the basis for later analysis.

After successfully completing the group research paper, the students are ready for the PAGE discussion. They are asked to reserve a block of time, generally two to three hours in length, for the discussion. The atmosphere should be comfortable and informal, allowing a positive, friendly free-flowing discussion to ensue. Most students report that this is one of the best feedback sessions of their college career. Since the feedback is consistently positive and constructive, the attitudinal impact is consistently favorable, and the student's experience is good.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The PAGE technique delivers a number of very valuable results. First, because of its simplicity, it can easily be taught to the participants, and it is through their understanding of the technique that much of the motivational power is created. Also because of its simplicity, after it has been learned, the technique can be used in industry without the need for a highly skilled and expensive training leader. This allows a more frequent use of the technique in the job setting, resulting in a greater improvement in performance on the group task, and resulting in greater member satisfaction.

In addition, the process analysis technique leads to greater commitment, higher satisfaction, and better performance. It assists the participants to learn from their experience, to gather greater insights and to thereby increase the probability of success on future group tasks. By knowing in advance that he or she will be participating in a reflective group analysis of the recently completed task, the group member tends to recognize greater individual accountability for his or her own contribution. This perception of greater accountability has been demonstrated to lead to more commitment and better performance [5].

The process analysis also tends to develop a greater appreciation of the group's potential. A

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positive direction is consistently maintained by focusing attention first on the current strengths of the group and secondly on the future strengths of the group. This focus tends to lead toward higher opinions of individuals and of the group, resulting in an increased appreciation of membership in that group.

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