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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE VALIDITY OF A RECOMMENDATION FOR EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE DEBRIEFING*

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ABSTRACT

Experiential exercises have become commonly used as instructional tools in various business courses throughout the country. This study investigates one such principles of management exercise for the purpose of validating a recommendation for exercise administration made by the authors of the exercise. The study concludes with empirically based recommendations for exercise administration/design.

INTRODUCTION

An experiential exercise is somewhat narrowly defined for organizational behavior situations as a task designed with specific circumstances to generate trainee behavior which can be observed, discussed, and evaluated against interpersonal theory (I). This definition can be easily adopted for more general management training by defining an experiential exercise as a task designed with specific circumstances to generate trainee behavior which can be observed, discussed, and evaluated against management theory. Several recently published instructional packages intended for use in schools of business include a wealth of various sorts of experiential exercises. Such materials have been specifically designed for use in courses like principles of management (2, 3, 4), personnel (5), organizational behavior (6), organization theory (7), and organization development (8).

Although the use of experiential exercises has apparently become quite commonplace in schools of business, there is a general lack of experimentation aimed at investigating them. This study is such an investigation focusing on an experiential exercise called Chairman of the Dance Committee (9). The exercise begins with an incident which states that the Student Executive Council of State College is responsible for planning and running four major dances for the student body during the academic year. According to the exercise, the Student Executive Council must consider selling tickets, hiring a band, refreshments, as well as all other relevant issues. The incident ends by indicating that the reader of the exercise has been elected as chairperson of the Student Executive Council. The newly elected chairperson is then given the task of classifying by management function (planning, organizing, influencing, and controlling) the issues which must be faced if he/ she is to be successful as chairperson (10).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the validity of a recommendation made for the administration of Chairman of the Dance Committee (11). This recommendation is that, when debriefing, instructors should stress the point to students that all four management functions must be integrated and practiced as one if a manager is to be successful. In effect, this study explores how the relative independence of planning, organizing, influencing, and controlling is perceived in carrying out the role of manager.

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METHOD

To investigate the appropriateness of this recommendation for exercise administration, one hundred subjects who were employed on a part-time basis were initially identified. They were selected from a junior level principles of management course at a major midwestern state university.

Subjects were asked to complete a questionnaire in which each item attempted to ascertain a perceived level of the existence of planning, organizing, influencing, or controlling, in their work organization. Each of the 56 items was scored by subjects on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (meaning never true of the work organization) to 7 (meaning always true of the work organization). Sample items for each function are shown in Figure 1.

The questionnaire was developed, tested, and then revised to ensure that each of the fifty-six items addressed only one of the four management functions.

FIGURE 1
TYPICAL ITEMS FOR THE MANAGEMENT FUNCTIONS:
PLANNING, ORGANIZING, INFLUENCING, AND CONTROLLING⁺

- 1) ---people have little input on planning decisions which affect them (planning)
- 2) ---managers are unable to influence workers because of poor working conditions (influencing)
- 2) ---due to poor organizing it is unclear who has the authority to get things done (organizing)
- 3) ---people are told when their work rate needs improvement (controlling)

⁺A complete copy of the questionnaire may be obtained from the authors.

To investigate the dimensionality of the questionnaire, (or at least the responses to the questionnaire) a factor analysis using principal component analysis with varimax rotation on four factors was used (12). The suspicion was that the instrument responses would be one dimensional if planning, organizing, influencing, and controlling were perceived to be highly integrated. On the other hand, factor analysis would group the items in a four dimensional array if each management function was perceived to be somewhat unique. The

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authors felt that if the responses to the questionnaire were found to be unidimensional, the value of the recommendation for exercise administration being investigated would be supported.

RESULTS

Table 1 strongly indicates that the responses to the questionnaire are one dimensional. Of the thirteen items tapping planning (Plan 1 to Plan 13), 9 have values > to .50. Of the thirteen items tapping organizing (Org. 2 to Org. 13), 8 have values to .50. Of the nineteen items tapping influencing (Infl. 1 to Infl. 19), 14 have values > to .50. Of the eleven items tapping controlling (Cont. 1 to Cont. 11), 6 have values a to .50. In addition the average absolute loading between factor I and the items tapping planning was .52; that between factor 1 and the items tapping organizing was .56; that between factor 1 and the items tapping influencing was .55; and that between factor 1 and items tapping controlling was .51. These loadings indicate that factor 1 is quite equally correlated with items supposedly tapping different dimensions. Factor I obviously does not isolate one function to the exclusion of another. Also, Factor 2 only has two loadings greater than .5, indicating that which is left is primarily residual correlation. The eigenvalue of the first factor was 17.58, while that of the second was down to 3.87. There was no discernable pattern in the factor loadings on the second factor, i.e., factor 2 did not seem more highly correlated with one function than another. The rotation of 4 factors using varimax rotation did not identify or isolate any of the four functions (13), nor did it succeed in identifying any other construct.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The individuals who responded to the questionnaire were employed on a part-time basis. One possible study limitation might be that part-time employees may have difficulty in distinguishing among the four management functions. However, given that all subjects were members of a principles of management course and that the study questionnaire was administered near the end of the course, this limitation may be somewhat discounted. As another limitation, these part-time employees could be responding only to an overall feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the firm rather than to perceptions regarding the management functions themselves. In so far as the part-time employees are capable of discriminating among and reporting on the management functions, study results strongly support validity of the experiential exercise being investigated. However, in so far as the part-time employees are not capable of differentiating among and reporting on the four management functions, study results might be confounded.

The authors are of the opinion that relatively inexperienced part-time employees may not be as capable of differentiating among and reporting on the management functions as well as more experienced full-time employees. However, the authors are also of the opinion that the strength of the unidimensionality of the instrument responses cannot entirely be explained by the alleged lack of sophistication of the subject group. Rather to a reasonable extent this unidimensionality seems more related to the integration of the functions themselves.

TABLE 1
FACTOR SCORE LOADINGS OF THE FIRST TWO FACTORS USING PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS

Factor 1*	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 1	Factor 2
Plan.1	---	Org.1	---	Infl.1	.55	Cont.1	.58
Plan.2	.77	Org.2	.54	Infl.2	.61	Cont.2	.65
Plan.3	.72	Org.3	.55	Infl.3	---	Cont.3	.58
Plan.4	.63	Org.4	.71	Infl.4	-.64	Cont.4	.68
Plan.5	---	Org.5	---	Infl.5	---	Cont.5	-.57
Plan.6	.69	Org.6	.80	Infl.6	---	Cont.6	.78
Plan.7	.60	Org.7	-.60	Infl.7	-.66	Cont.7	---
Plan.8	.72	Org.8	---	Infl.8	---	Cont.8	---
Plan.9	.61	Org.9	---	Infl.9	.61	Cont.9	---
Plan.10	.57	Org.10	---	Infl.10	-.57	Cont.10	---
Plan.11	---	Org.11	-.58	Infl.11	.75	Cont.11	---
Plan.12	---	Org.12	-.67	Infl.12	-.53		
Plan.13	-.56	Org.13	.67	Infl.13	.73		
				Infl.14	---		
				Infl.15	.65		
				Infl.16	-.50	.57	
				Infl.17	-.59	---	
				Infl.18	.61	---	
				Infl.19	-.52	---	

*Only values equal to or greater than .5 are given.

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IMPLICATIONS

Based upon the results of this study, planning, organizing, influencing, and controlling are perceived not as separate and distinct management activities, but as highly related management activities. Therefore, the argument can be made that classroom activities which accentuate this integration of the management functions are affording students a more realistic exposure to the practice of management. Not only should instructors using the Chairman of the Dance Committee exercise stress this integration of the management functions to students, but the case could reasonably be made that Instructors emphasize a similar integration emphasis in administering other experiential exercises. Further, research in this area should focus on issues such as how an instructor can best debrief an experiential exercise to accomplish this integration emphasis, and how best to structure experiential exercises to afford students such functionally integrative experiences. In addition, replication of the present study would certainly be worthwhile.

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