

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES FOR MANAGEMENT MAJORS IN A FUTURES CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Management majors at this AACSB accredited School of Business are required to take several courses, such as Management Fundamentals and Organizational Behavior, in which they learn about leadership theories. However, they do not necessarily have a challenging experience in practicing and improving their leadership skills. The Department of Management/ MIS at the University of West Florida has taught a course on Planning for the future for over 15 years. There are multiple experiences in this course for students to practice and improve their leadership skills. A survey of over 50 Management programs did not find such a course in their curriculum. We recommend the course and its specific leadership enhancing exercises for consideration by other Management departments.

INTRODUCTION

Management majors generally follow a prescribed curriculum to attain a management degree. This traditional curriculum includes courses such as Managerial Accounting, Finance, Operations Management, Management Fundamentals (or Principles), and Organizational Behavior. These and other required courses provide many opportunities to learn leadership theories. However, they do not necessarily provide meaningful leadership experiences. Management majors at this institution are required to take a unique course “The Future: Projecting, Planning and Managing” (Futures) which provides them with meaningful opportunities to practice and enhance their leadership skills.

It is well recognized that modern organizations need good leaders. But there are few opportunities in the traditional management curriculum to practice leadership skills. The challenge for educators is to isolate the

leadership skills that are important, and then provide ways for students to practice these skills. The Futures course does not attempt to provide a comprehensive leadership experience. Instead, the course attempts to assist students establish and improve two related leadership skills. The first skill we would like students to achieve is the ability to establish meaningful personal and business goals. The second skill we would like students to achieve is to provide a vision for the future of a selected industry.

Survey

A survey of 54 business colleges from the southeast was conducted to determine the inclusion of a Futures course in their curricula. See Appendix 1. We visited the web sites of the institutions listed in Appendix 1 between September 28, 2005 and September 30, 2005 and found that these institutions do not have a course like the one being used at this university.

The Futures course has been taught at this university for over 15 years and is generally considered by students to be one of the most memorable experiences in their degree program. Typical student comments include the following:

- *I wish I had thought about these goals before now*
- *Thinking about my career and life goals was one of the most important projects I completed. I learned how far I have come in a few years and can see some important future possibilities.*
- *I learned a great deal about the Service (or other pertinent) industry*
- *The industry analysis report showed me how to visualize the future for a specific industry.*

We believe that students of other degree programs are likely to benefit from such a course and hence we describe the course and its learning experiences.

First, we provide background information about essential leadership skills. Then we describe the essential

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elements of the course. This is followed by a description of the Life Plan paper that enhances student ability in goal setting. Next, we describe the group paper on Industry Analysis that enhances student ability to predict the future. Finally, we summarize the benefits and limitations of our approach.

ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Getting things done through others is an accepted definition of leadership. Essentially leaders set goals that facilitate task performance by showing employees how performance can be instrumental in achieving desired rewards (House, 1971; House and Dessler, 1974). Gaining practice in setting meaningful goals then, is an important skill for future business leaders. Toward this end, a life-planning exercise is incorporated into the Futures course that requires students to establish specific, long-term, career and life goals.

A common description of good leaders is their ability to create a vision of where an organization is going and to interpret that vision through organizational goals. Experts (Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991) suggest effective leaders have a high degree of knowledge about the company, industry and technical matters. In depth knowledge of the organization and industry allows effective leaders to recognize the implications of social, environmental, political/legal, technological, environmental and educational activities on the future of their organization and industry. Thus, the Futures course offers students opportunities to visualize the future of selected industries through analysis of an industry.

THE COURSE

All management majors are required to take a course titled “The Future: Projecting, Planning, and Managing” (Futures). The three-credit hour course emphasizes the roles that individuals and organizations have in managing the future. The Futures course is restricted to senior business students. The typical section has 25 students, although, there have been some classes with 35 students.

Two textbooks are employed. The first book, Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard (1996), describes the dimensions of leadership, the unique attributes required to lead in different kinds of organization the actions, skills and strategies leaders will need to sustain a competitive advantage in the future, and descriptions of how to get leaders from where they are now to where they need to be. The second book examines global, economic, social, environmental, and technical trends. Jeremy Rifkin’s *Age of Access* (2000), and Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard’s, *The Leader of the Future* (1996), are two examples of useful books which cover such material. In addition, students are encouraged to read additional information and then supplement the conversation with facts, ideas, and opinions.

LIFE PLANNING PAPER

A life planning paper adapted from Kolb (1991) is the tool for students to formally assess their current situation in life and determine attainable goals for their personal future. This course requirement encourages students to achieve gains in social productivity and human satisfaction as well as assist in taking responsibility for managing their lives and careers. Managers are expected to manage their own careers in a way that helps others to grow into managers.

For this paper, students clarify their goals and then develop clear, definitive steps for a course of action. The specific requirements for this paper are provided in Appendix-2. Many students have never set concrete goals for their personal or professional lives and this assignment is designed to elicit serious reflection from students. The objective is to develop a personal strategic plan. Applying a strategic management-planning model to their personal lives helps the students realize they are already in a leadership role and they are responsible for controlling their destiny. The first step in achieving goals is setting goals. The second step is assigning priorities, or making choices, which is how students can develop their management potential. Goal setting is a lesson of “how to” focus. For each goal, students draw a direct line from where they are currently, to where they hope to be in 20 years. This discipline forces students to look for a realistic link between proposed actions and key life or professional goals.

Goal setting allows students to establish confidence in prior and future achievements, motivates them to continue to achieve, and provides an example of how students can relate to other issues. This simple but powerful process assists students with achieving focus quickly and effectively. Business leaders are confronted with making decisions on a daily basis. Focusing on goals allows leaders to make these decisions based on whether the proposed activity is a direct link to a specific business goal (Stevens 2001).

The following are requirements for the life planning exercise. The life planning paper will consist of: a lifeline, a description of “who am I,” a creative letter about the student’s future, and finally, a life inventory and a formal life plan. The lifeline is a simple line, which may be of any shape and should include highlights of potentially important life events. The formal “life plan” should include a description of the next 20 years in three sections: a) Goal determination – specific set of three major goals; b) Detailed plans for reaching goals – plans for 3 major goals; and, c) A control system for monitoring progress and evaluating success along with appropriate contingency plans where necessary.

The formal life plan should begin with a lifeline. The lifeline will creatively depict the student’s past experience, current circumstances, and future expectations in their personal life including the areas of recreation, education, personal relationships and career. There is room for creativity in this part of the assignment. The student may

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draw a picture, or graph, or use a line. One student may choose to omit relationship history while another is completely candid. Students are encouraged to be honest while refraining from disclosure of family secrets.

The lifeline clearly demonstrates to the student where they started, what they have accomplished and where they are heading. This emphasizes the past and how it has created expectations for students and how it influences their current lives. The present is where students spend their time. It includes daily life activities and provides a framework from which goals and future decisions are developed. In this section students can acknowledge talents and skills and determine potential for future achievements.

“Who Am I” is a list of the student’s description of themselves with ten descriptive “I am ...” statements. These statements will be listed in order of importance with the ranking explained. This assignment should take no more than 20 minutes. Thoughtful consideration of their internal environment is the goal, and will allow the student to quickly assess who they are.

The creative letter is written as if the student is living 20 years in the future. Some goals have been achieved while others may have been reassessed. All aspects of the life inventory will be addressed here. This exercise will encourage the students to create a visual image of themselves achieving their goals and attaining success in all aspects of their lives.

The letter may be written to a friend, a family member or a significant other. The student should assess problems and opportunities they are encountering in a changing world. This is an opportunity for students to think about all the things they might accomplish.

The life inventory provides a detailed description of the student’s current condition in the following areas: career satisfaction, status and respect, personal relationships, leisure satisfaction, learning and education, spiritual growth and religion, and any other area the student may wish to include. The student will approach each of the areas as separate and distinct with specific goals to apply that are reasonably attainable. Students are encouraged to determine three specific goals for each of the areas; however, they should spend the bulk of time on the career goals. Students should examine the career goals and address potential conflicts in another area.

The next step in the assignment is to design an action plan to follow in order to achieve the goals. This is where the model comes in. Any decision making model will do for this step. The students will examine personal shortcomings to be overcome, obstacles in the world to overcome, actions that must be taken to achieve goals, and help they can get from others.

The final step in the Formal Life Plan is to develop a control system for monitoring progress and evaluating success. A series of checks and balances must be in place in order to keep the plan on track. Contingency plans are also requested in the discussion.

Discussion

An important skill for all leaders is to be able to set realistic goals (House, 1971; House and Dessler, 1974). If goals are realistic in relation to the resources available and constraints of the firm, goals are more likely to be achieved. The paper described above gives students an opportunity to practice this difficult skill. They are required to identify goals, identify constraints such as personal shortcomings or real world obstacles, and identify an action plan to achieve the goals. This is exactly what they will be expected to do when they perform as leaders. Thus the exercise of the life planning paper gives students a comprehensive experience in goal setting and planning for goal achievement.

GROUP PROJECT: INDUSTRY ANALYSIS/STRATEGIC PLAN FORECAST

The second learning experience that students complete is an industry analysis followed by formulation of a strategic plan.

Students, working in groups, select an industry, e.g. telecommunications, computers, aviation, electronics, banking, and public sector entities to research and report on. Working independently and as a group the students will conduct a literature search relative to their industry. Students will apply an accepted management and organization theory model to support group suppositions about the future of their chosen business.

At the end of their literature search, student groups submit a report. The specific expectations of the report are detailed in Appendix 3. The report will include a definition and description of the industry, its primary markets and also a short summary of its birth, growth and development. Also required is a description of the current market and an environmental scan. They need to explain current conditions as well as any predicted changes and how the changes will affect the industry. They need to discuss the future of the business, including important trends, paradigm shifts, driving forces, and countervailing forces for the following themes:

- a. Socio-cultural changes, values, beliefs, demographics, and lifestyle of population
- b. Economic changes – general economic conditions and specific activity affecting the market or stockholders
- c. Political/legal changes – global, national and local government conditions
- d. Technological changes – the nature and impact of technology; important trends
- e. Educational changes – the changes in the role of education in both the market and the workforce
- f. Environmental changes – the impact increased environmental regulation will have on a business in general
- g. From the information gathered and reported on above, they need to develop a clear statement forecasting what this industry will face ten years in the future. They

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describe specific goals and the clear logical steps in order to meet these goals in the future. They need to include evidence and reasons that defend the group's predictions. These comments will be prepared as a team in the role of consultants hired to help the leaders in this particular business.

Each group presents findings related to their industry. In the role of consultants speaking to a panel of industry leaders, the students will describe the steps taken to develop the strategic plan. The presentation needs to be of professional quality using audiovisual aids as appropriate. Students rehearse and plan these presentations so that the group is confident of the material and can speak with authority on findings. In addition to the facts and forecasts in the presentations, students' grades are influenced by the group's professional appearance and manner, the image created, use of time, and teamwork.

Discussion

This group project also provides students with a challenging opportunity to practice the important leadership skill of predicting the future and develop plans for the same. For the chosen industry, students take into account developments that have taken place, technological trends, and emerging technologies, in order to predict the state of the industry in the future. Also, they develop goals for the industry in the prediction. As business leaders students will be regularly called upon to visualize the status of their industry in the future. Thus, this exercise provides students with a comprehensive experience in forecasting and planning for the future.

BENEFITS

The most important benefit is the opportunity for individual students to engage in the complex activity of goal setting. Unless goals are realistic, there is little likelihood that they would be achieved. Many students have stated that development of this life plan has given them the first opportunity to ask hard questions about where they want to take their lives.

Another important benefit to students is the opportunity to make presentations of their Industry Analysis and defend their predictions. This has the additional advantage of giving the students an opportunity to practice their oral communication skills.

The two significant writing projects give students opportunities to practice their written communication skills.

LIMITATIONS

The major limitation that has been found is dealing with student anxiety relative to their life plan. The elements to be covered involve highly sensitive information about each student. Many students have been reluctant to share such information with the instructor.

Another important limitation is that both these papers need extensive grading time. While this appears to be a disadvantage, we have considered these opportunities to be a privilege so as to make a significant impact on student leadership abilities.

CONCLUSION

Management majors at this university are required to take many courses that discuss leadership theories. While studying the theory is important, experiential learning has the advantage of encouraging students to learn by practicing the desired skills. A course titled "The Future: Projecting, Planning and Managing" course has been taught at this university for over 15 years. This course provides experiential learning opportunities for students to practice two important leadership skills. Students complete two challenging assignments to achieve this goal. The first assignment asks them to develop a Life Plan for themselves. This plan asks students to identify goals for themselves and steps they will take to achieve the goal. This exercise gives them excellent practice in setting goals and identifying steps to get to the goals. The second assignment requires students to work in groups to predict the state of an industry 10-20 years in the future and identify steps the industry needs to take to prepare for that future. Thus, students are able to practice the difficult skill of forecasting the future and preparing for it.

We surveyed over 50 Management degree programs and did not find such a course being required of Management students. We believe that a course, as the one described above with its attendant learning experiences in leadership, will be highly beneficial to Management majors who are likely to be called upon to use these difficult leadership skills.

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Appendix 1
List of Institutions Surveyed (54)

Georgia

Albany State University
Armstrong Atlantic State
Augusta State University
Clayton State University
Columbus State University
Fort Valley State University
Georgia College & State University
Georgia Tech college of Management
Georgia Southwestern State University
Kennesaw State University
North Georgia College & State University
Savannah State University
Southern Polytech State University
University of West Georgia
Valdosta State University

Florida

University of Central Florida
Florida Atlantic University
University of South Florida
Florida Gulf Coast University
Florida International University
Florida State University
University of Florida
University of North Florida

Alabama

Auburn University
Troy State University
University of Alabama @ Tuscaloosa
University of Alabama
University of South Alabama
University of North Alabama
University of West Alabama
Jacksonville State University
Alabama State University

Mississippi

Alcorn State University
Delta State University
Jackson State University
Mississippi State University
Mississippi Valley State University
University of Mississippi

North Carolina

Winston Salem State University
University of North Carolina
Asheville
Chapel Hill
Charlotte
Greensboro
Pembroke
Wilmington

South Carolina

South Carolina State University
University of South Carolina
Columbus
Aiken
Beaufort
Lancaster
Sumpter
Union
Upstate

Appendix 2- Life Planning Paper

LIFE PLAN

The paper will have five (5) sections;

- I. **“Life Line”** - with brief descriptions of personal incidents both past, present and future (1 page)
- II. **“Who Am I”** - list with description and reasoning for your ranking of these incidents (1 page)
- III. A **creative letter** to one of your present classmates or friends prepared on January 1, 2025 describing your life and life style (1-2 pages)
- IV. **“Life Inventory”** - a detailed description of the eight (8) aspects of your life inventory (2-pages)
- V. A **formal life** plan to include the next 20 years in three (3) sections (be specific and as detailed as possible) (2-3 pages)
 - a. *goal determination* - with a specific set of goals for the next 20 years,
 - b. detailed *plans* for reaching goals (at least 3 major goals should have plans),
 - c. a *control system* for monitoring progress and evaluating success along with appropriate contingency plans where necessary.

The 5th section is the *most important* and should be emphasized in the paper. Try not to forget it is fully two thirds of your individual project grade and even though it is the last section, do not leave it until the last moment and then blame lack of time for your failure to do it very well.

Grading attributes are sincerity, candor, depth of personal analysis, ability to conceptualize concrete objectives, development of plans, and evidence of a workable system to monitor and evaluate your progress. Knowledge of how to establish specific goals and plans is expected; if you can't plan your own life, it's obvious your management skills are deficient.

Appendix 3-Industry Analysis

GROUP PROJECT - PLAN & PRESENTATION

I. DEVELOP A STRATEGIC PLAN FORECAST FOR A SPECIFIC INDUSTRY

- Step 1. *Pick* an industry or service sector to study: agriculture, pharmaceutical, gas & oil, transportation, health care, banking, telecommunications, education or others with approval from professor.
- Step 2. *Define* your particular industry in terms of what its present form is, its market, and a short summary history of its birth, growth and development.
- Step 3. Develop the following environmental scan necessary for any strategic planning process. Each of the following conditions must be explained in terms of how they will affect your chosen industry over the next 10-20 years.
- a. *socio-cultural* changes - values, beliefs, demographics, and lifestyle of population.
 - b. *economic* changes - general economic conditions and specific changes effecting your market or your stockholders.
 - c. *political/legal* changes - international, national and local governmental changes.
 - d. *educational* changes - the changes in the role of education in both your workforce and your market and how these changes will specifically impact your industry.
- Step 4. Now, based on the above steps, first, develop a clear statement of what you *forecast* your industry will face in the year 2025 (a to d above); second, what specific goals should be set for your industry in the year 2025; and third, what will have to be done in order for your industry to meet these goals in the future.

II. CLASS PRESENTATION

As a group, using all of its resources, you are expected to present to the class the results of the four steps you have taken to develop a strategic plan.