

**Developments in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, Volume 29, 2002**  
**FUTURES COURSE: LEARNING HOW TO ANTICIPATE THE  
FUTURE OF BUSINESS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper describes a class especially designed to produce learning outcomes to deal with strategic business planning as well as personal issues. The Futures class challenges students to practice leadership skills, apply problem-solving and critical thinking skills to their personal career choices and to a specific industry.*

A vision for the future of business and industry requires a breadth of knowledge about past management theories and practices. This historical perspective is used for enhancing the current and future trends and projections which is the thrust of a course designed to deal with the future of business. The purpose of this unique curriculum is to help students become the effective managers and leaders needed by business in the future. This paper describes a class especially designed to produce learning outcomes to deal with such strategic business planning issues. Students anticipate the future by setting personal goals, researching, reading and participating in group discussions to understand past and present leadership styles, and recognize the application for future leadership challenges. Most business schools today include pedagogies which claim students gain some problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Policy, the capstone course in many business curricula provides students with some practice using these skills. The dynamic nature of business today, however, requires additional vigor in the business curricula. A "Futures" (Futures) course complements capstone courses such as policy by extending students' visions to industry and providing a pedagogy which supports leadership development.

### **CLASS PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES**

Future managers must anticipate how current political, social, economic, technological and environmental changes will affect future businesses and industries. Although there is no way to accurately predict the future, managers must prepare for the impact these changes have already had and certainly will have on individuals, organizations, countries and the environment. Future managers must also recognize

the influence they can wield for the success or failure of their businesses and the impact their present decisions may mean in the future. Readings, projects and discussion practices are designed to broaden students' perspectives about the "manager's" role in the future of business practices and also to provide opportunities for students to practice their leadership styles. The focus is on analysis and decision-making across a wide spectrum of management activities. Leadership influences and practices, and long-term thinking are important dimensions added through the Futures class.

The Futures class challenges students to apply problem solving and critical thinking skills acquired from their previous business and management courses to selected industries. Students compare different strategies and operations for businesses, understand the global dimensions of management, apply the important management concepts and theories from several disciplines, and practice leadership behaviors.

One assumption of experiential learning is that listening or reading alone does not accomplish learning (Kolb, 1984; Lewin and Grabbe, 1945; Pfeiffer and Ballew, 1988; and, Raelin, 1997). That is why many business courses take the approach of combining lecture, discussion, demonstrations, and group activities which allow students to be involved in what they are learning. The Futures class makes less use of lecture and more use of discussion and group activities based on research and reading by the students. The four components of the class which provide students direction are, class discussions led by student groups, an individual life planning paper, group industry analyses, and mid term and final essay exams. Successful students in this class will develop creative and critical problem solving skills, willingly express innovative ideas, display positive leadership attributes, and will refuse to let their world-view be confined by old paradigms.

### **CLASSROOM PROCEDURES**

This is a discussion class. So that all students can engage in the discussions and for the instructor to appropriately assess and provide feedback to students, limit enrollment to 30 students. The role of the instructor in the classroom is to assign readings, select curriculum emphasis, guide the discussions to meet desired course learning outcomes, and evaluate performance.

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The future success of business depends on people working together in groups to solve problems, conduct research, and develop workable strategies. Over the past 25 years there has been a tremendous increase in the use of teams in industry and now, teamwork skills are not just “desirable,” they are required (Green and Seymour, 1991; Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; Stewart, Manz, and Sims, 1999; and, Thompson, 2000). When organizations establish teams or work groups it is often to take advantage of the workers’ abilities to manage themselves (Albright and Carr, 1997). The Futures class encourages students to practice important interpersonal skills, e.g. listening, working in groups, introduced in earlier business classes. Students select two or three people with whom they will work for the semester. Each group is responsible for completing an industry analysis, presenting the industry analysis to the class, and for facilitating discussions on the chapter reading assignments.

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Two textbooks are employed. The first book, Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard (1996), describes the dimensions of leadership, the unique attributes required to lead in a different kind 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 groups leading the discussion are tasked with generating discussion questions in order to encourage meaningful discourse. For the second book, content must examine 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.

Student groups are responsible for leading class discussions that evoke open-ended discussion questions and are relevant to the assigned chapters. Further, the questions serve as possible exam questions for the mid term and final exams. Groups generate a handout with the questions and answers about their respective chapters for their peers. In class, during the discussions, the instructor suggests ways to strengthen the questions. The questions are not graded, thus the instructor feedback is viewed as constructive. After two to three sessions most students are able to construct reasonable essay questions. About a week before the mid term and final exams one of the class members volunteers to gather, all of the discussion questions and answers, organize them into one format and email them to the instructor. Then, the instructor identifies specific questions that may be placed on the mid term or final exam and sends only those questions and answers via email to the students so they can study. More questions are identified and emailed to students than the actual number of questions that are placed

on the exam. Finally, the instructor eliminates the extra questions and the mid term or final exam is easily constructed.

### STUDENT AND INSTRUCTOR ROLES

Since traditional classes are organized so the instructor provides all of the leadership during class discussions students usually leave college without an understanding of how to lead effective discussions. Future managers must understand how their and others’ roles impact group performance during meetings and discussions. When managers understand these functional leadership roles they can manage the group process by praising, redirecting, and delegating appropriate roles to ensure groups achieve their goals. Discussion leaders may also recognize they can change their own and influence others’ behaviors. The Futures class authorizes student groups to provide some of that leadership to their peers. Since student groups are practicing their leadership discussion skills the instructor must intervene as necessary to correct statements, redirect comments, keep discussions on track, mediate differences, and generate additional comments. The following paragraphs describe students’ roles in leading class discussions. Bear in mind the roles and requirements describe the desired behaviors, not necessarily the actual behaviors.

### GROUPS LEADING DISCUSSIONS

The groups that produce the discussion questions for the day will have the responsibility of facilitating conversation. The facilitating students act as hosts for the purpose of starting a verbal exchange and keeping it on track. Students are encouraged to engage one another in dialogue and express their opinions on issues pertaining to the chapters. Outside reading is encouraged and will enable students to add substantive comments to the discussion.

Group discussion leaders must be aware the discussions are the activity in which learning is taking place. It is the process of discussing the issues and topics brought up in the readings that is important. The discussion is the vehicle through which learning takes place. It is not the leader’s job to tell the group what they should have learned from the chapter. The role of the leader is to guide the group in exploring their reactions, developing an awareness, and deriving some meaning from what they have read.

Most students, regardless of age or work and life experience, have something valuable to add to the discussion and will play a distinctive role in the class. Understanding that well functioning groups require some training and analysis of the behaviors exhibited in the class, the students will use concepts identified in the classic, Benne and Sheats (1948), “member roles classification” to describe their specific behaviors. For example a student will state s/he was an “information giver” when s/he provided additional facts from a reading. Students will

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evaluate their own participation grade—from 1 to 10, which will include comments about the degree to which they spoke at all. The instructor will also record a weekly grade at regular intervals. Also students must identify their specific behaviors from group task roles, group building and maintenance roles, and individual roles (Benne & Sheats, 1948). See Appendix A for specific roles. By identifying their roles and describing their group behaviors, students become aware of their contribution and, hopefully, learn to be productive members of working groups. This process will train students to be, both, group participants and group observers at the same time. Goal setting, communication, leadership, use of power, decision-making and conflict resolution are all elements of the process observations being practiced during the discussions.

When the students record their specific behavior they will notice trends and analyze the results of their actions. They may decide to contribute more or perhaps less to group discussions. Students may recognize that they're making very little contribution to the group process and realize that they need to conduct additional research to understand the issues. The instructor feedback to students should be provided no later than half way through the class so students may adjust their classroom behaviors.

Leaders display a wide variety of behaviors (Benne and Sheats, 1948) and different types of leaders will emerge during various points of the discussions. Students will learn that a good leader understands there are specific functions and actions that are needed at certain times. When there is a task that needs to be completed, a "task master" must emerge. When there is disagreement about a specific task, but frustration is high and tension is mounting, a person with some degree of interpersonal skills may emerge. This person will be able to ease the tension, perhaps with humor. The skilled leader has the ability to diagnose which specific behaviors are needed at a particular time in order for the group to attain their goals. Then, the leader may delegate a role or assume the necessary role him/herself. All members of the class may display leadership qualities and actions at various times. One of the purposes of the course is to make these "qualities and actions" effective in a decision-making environment.

### 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. 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 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 10 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, motivate them to continue to achieve, and provide an example to which 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 learning outcomes for the life planning exercise. The life planning paper will consist of: a life line, 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 life line 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 life line. 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 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 life line 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 grounded. In this section students can acknowledge talents and skills and determine potential for future achievements.

"Who Am I" is simply a list of the student's description of themselves with ten descriptive "I am ..." statements. These statements will be listed in order of

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importance and 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 themselves and 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 student to create a visual image of themselves achieving their goals and attaining success in all aspects of their lives.

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. Most any decision making model will do. 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.

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.

### **GROUP PROJECT: INDUSTRY ANALYSIS/STRATEGIC PLAN FORECAST**

Through involvement in this research project, students will learn how to conduct an industry analysis and how to use the analysis to formulate a strategic plan. Students will use information technology to present the results of their research.

Groups, select an industry, e.g. telecommunications, computers, virtual reality, robotics, artificial intelligence, distance learning, or electronic banking, 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.

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. Explain current conditions as well as any predicted changes and how they will affect the industry. Discuss the future of the business, including important trends, paradigm shifts, driving forces, and countervailing forces for the following themes:

- Socio-cultural changes, values, beliefs, demographics, and lifestyle of population
- Economic changes – general economic conditions and specific activity affecting the market or stockholders
- Political/legal changes – global, national and local government conditions
- Technological changes – the nature and impact of technology; important trends
- Educational changes – the changes in the role of education in both the market and the workforce
- Environmental changes – the impact increased environmental regulation will have on a business in general
- From the information gathered and reported on above, develop a clear statement forecasting what this industry will face in the year 2012. Describe specific goals and the clear logical steps in order to meet these goals in the future. Provide 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 will be of professional quality using audiovisual aids as appropriate. Students will 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.

### **PEER FEEDBACK**

Sharing interpersonal perceptions and reactions from other students in the group will provide useful information that will allow individual members to see themselves more clearly (Pfeiffer and Ballew, 1988). When students have a good understanding of themselves they are more successful in all endeavors (Luft, 1984). Some students may find that some of their own behaviors are perceived by others as less than desirable. Others may be surprised to learn about positive effects their behavior has had on the group. In

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either case students gain valuable insights about how their behaviors are perceived by others. Students will learn to behave with an awareness of the effects their actions have on others. It is hoped that trying this behavior will provide useful information for future managers and also these students might continue the practice in their lives and throughout their careers.

The group must develop a standardized form for documenting and rating the behaviors and actions performed by each individual. The form will define exactly the behaviors, actions, and functions to be observed and rated. There will be two feedback sessions; the first scheduled a couple of weeks into the group activity and the final at the end of the presentation.

The peer feedback process will start with self-disclosure. The student will rate themselves on various group performance functions; then each member of the group will individually rate that student. Feedback should be specific and objective. It should accurately rate how well each student worked to attain their group's goals. The accuracy of feedback should be validated in the group setting.

The final feedback session should not hold any surprises for students. This formalized feedback session will merely underscore the behaviors. It is necessary to have a supportive climate with an atmosphere of trust and non-defensiveness in order for the students to accept the feedback and improve from it. The feedback process is designed to enhance the students' concepts of themselves and the purpose is to help students, not create hostility or new problems. Students may learn to recognize behavioral styles and personality traits in other group members that allow them to understand and work with others more effectively (Shaw and Fisher, 1999).

### SUMMARY

The Futures course is designed for students to integrate and apply the management skills and leadership abilities they have acquired in previous business and management courses with appropriate emphasis on the future direction of business. In addition to establishing individual career goals students practice leading and facilitating discussions. Then they evaluate themselves and receive feedback from the instructor and their peers concerning their classroom behaviors and overall effectiveness as "managers." Leading group discussions in the prescribed manner assists students in becoming participant-observers. This process observation can energize the group, and improve the performance of the group.

Further, students gain experience in strategic management and apply concepts they have learned in other business courses. Though students may have applied specific concepts in previous classes, once they leave the respective class they do not necessarily understand how to apply the concepts to other areas. Thus, this project reinforces understandings gained in other business classes

and challenges students to apply their understandings in ways that are relevant and practical to them. Classroom discussions include current events, ethical business practices, and the global dimensions of management. The group work culminates in a professional formal presentation and a final group feedback session giving students some insight into group dynamics and organizational behavior.

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### Appendix A

Effective Behavior		Ineffective Behavior
<b>Task Behaviors</b>	<b>Maintenance Behaviors</b>	
1. <b>Initiating-Contributing:</b> Proposing tasks, goals, or actions defining a problem in a new way; suggesting a procedure or a way of organizing.	1. <b>Encouraging:</b> Being friendly, warm, and responsive to others; indicating by facial expressions or remark that acceptance of others contributions.	1. <b>Attacking (Aggressive Behavior):</b> Deflating other's status attacking the group or its values; joking in a barbed or semi-concealed way; trying to take credit for another's contributions.
2. <b>Information and/or Opinion Seeking:</b> Asking for relevant facts; asking for clarification of the values underlying the task of suggestions being made	2. <b>Harmonizing:</b> Attempting to reconcile disagreements; reduce tension; getting people to explore differences.	2. <b>Blocking:</b> Disagreeing and opposing beyond "reason", resisting stubbornly the group's wish for personally oriented reasons; using hidden agenda to thwart the movement of a group.
3. <b>Information and/or Opinion Giving:</b> Offering facts; expressing feelings; giving opinions	3. <b>Gate Keeping:</b> Helping to keep communication channels open; facilitating the participation of others, suggesting limits or length of presentations to give everyone a change to communicate.	3. <b>Dominating:</b> Asserting authority or superiority to manipulate the group or certain of its members, interrupting contributions of others; controlling by means of flattery or other forms of patronizing behavior.
4. <b>Paraphrasing:</b> Checking on meaning, "Is this what you mean?", "If I hear you correctly, you are saying...", or "Let me see if I understand..."	4. <b>Consensus Testing:</b> Asking to see if a group is nearing a decision; sending up a trial balloon to test a possible conclusion.	4. <b>Play/Playgirl Behavior:</b> Making a display in "playboy/playgirl" fashion of one's lack of involvement, "abandoning" the group while remaining physically with it, perhaps through cynicism or nonchalance.
5. <b>Clarifying and/or Elaborating:</b> Interpreting ideas or suggestions; defining terms, clarifying issues before the group, providing examples	5. <b>Compromising:</b> When his/her own idea or status is involved in a conflict offering a compromise that yields status, admitting error; modifying in interest of group cohesion or growth.	5. <b>Recognition-Seeking:</b> Calling attention to oneself through boasting or reporting on one's achievements.
6. <b>Summarizing and Coordinating:</b> Pulling together related ideas; re-stating suggestions; offering a decision or conclusion for group to consider.	6. <b>Standard Setting:</b> Suggesting standards for the group to achieve in terms of how well the group works together.	6. <b>Self-Confession:</b> Using the group to express non-related personal feelings, insights, ideologies.
7. <b>Reality Testing and/or Standard Setting:</b> Making a critical analysis of an idea, testing an idea against some data trying to see if the idea would work, suggesting standards for the group to achieve in terms of the task.	7. <b>Process Observing:</b> Making observations of group processes and supplying this information for group evaluation of its own functioning.	7. <b>Sympathy-Seeking:</b> Attempting to arouse sympathy through expressions of insecurity of self depreciation.
8. <b>Recording:</b> Providing the "group memory" by writing down key points, suggestions and	8. <b>Following:</b> Going along with the movement of the group, serving as an audience in group discussion.	8. <b>Special Interest Pleading:</b> Speaking for the "small businessman", the "housewife", "labor", etc., frequently hiding one's own biases behind a convenient stereotype.

Modified from Benne, K. and Sheats, P. (1948). Functional roles of group members. *Journal of Social Science*. Spring, 1948.