

**THE BUDDY PROJECT: A SEMESTER LONG PROJECT
AIMED AT DEVELOPING AN APPRECIATION FOR DIVERSITY**

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ABSTRACT

The Buddy Project is a semester-long experiential exercise in an undergraduate organizational behavior or human resource management class. Students examine their personal values and attitudes and compare them to the values and attitudes of a person believed to be very different from the student. Students select their own subjects, perform original research, apply relevant management theory to the “different” subject, and examine how they (the students) have changed as a result of the exercise. Assignments include an oral and written term project and various homework papers. This exercise has been used successfully in a very homogeneous university (87.6 % of the students were white/non-Hispanic American). Students have demonstrated an appreciation for University and have rated the exercise highly.

INTRODUCTION

The business environment, domestic and foreign, becomes more complex and diverse every day. Students must learn to work and manage in organizations with people who are different from themselves. Yet, many students leave colleges and universities with little awareness of or training in managing people who have differing values and perceptions. The project described in this article was developed to encourage students to become more aware of differences and similarities in people. It is a series of assignments culminating in a final project. The entire project is geared to the students’ observations and interpretations of their

values and the values of someone who is significantly different.

Goals of the Project

The primary learning goal of the project is to have students understand and appreciate diversity. This goal is realized when students understand that there are commonalities among all people. There is significant research support for the premise that most employees communicate better, have more common goals, and have lower conflict levels at work when they understand and accept different cultures, values, and attitudes (Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

A second goal is for students to examine their own values, attitudes, and personalities. Self-development can occur while students are learning management concepts and applying those concepts to the Buddy. Finally, students learn to perform research and draw conclusions about their data.

STAGES OF THE BUDDY PROJECT

Students must find a person who is significantly different from themselves and study that person, the “Buddy,” during the semester. Each student has a different Buddy and there are limits as to who may be a Buddy. Students may not select a professor, roommate, or family member as a Buddy. Examples of buddies are people with different religious beliefs or sexual orientations, homeless people living in

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shelters, people from other countries or from various cultures such as Native Americans, people with emotional or physical disabilities, and people who have experienced significant unusual events, e.g., near-death experiences, prisoners of war, trauma. Anyone who is perceived to be “different” could be approved as a Buddy. Students are encouraged to apply management theory to themselves and their buddies throughout the semester.

At first, students tend to believe that the project will be difficult, if not impossible. However, by midterm, students are involved in the project. One student wrote, “At first I thought you were crazy, expecting us to go up to someone we didn’t know and ask them if they would be our Buddy! It turns out that I’m really excited for this project!” By the end of the semester, most students are enthusiastic about the project and report that they have learned about themselves and others.

Values Assignment

Students are given a homework assignment at the first class meeting, due the second class, which is a lead-in to the Buddy assignment. Students are told to write a personal statement about their values. There is no assigned length and students are urged to be as complete as they wish when discussing their values. The teacher is the only person who reads the papers and students are urged to complete the assignment privately. (The homework papers are graded as to whether critical thought has occurred, not on the “value” of the personal value statement.)

Term Project

The final project must contain a description of the Buddy, including the Buddy’s values. Students are required to delineate differences and similarities between the student and the Buddy. Students must apply management theory to their Buddies and must explain what they have learned as a result of the research project.

In addition, there are homework assignments throughout the term where students write parts of the final paper. For example, students have to write an objective and subjective description of the Buddy. After the homework is graded, students use my comments to improve the description that will become part of the final paper.

In the final paper, students must explain what they learned from this project. The most frequent conclusion is the discovery that students and their buddies are similar in so many ways and have few differences. Students report greater awareness of others in general, a desire to learn more about people who are viewed as “different,” and a sense of accomplishment for two reasons. First of all, students are pleased with themselves for completing original research. Many of them have never collected and analyzed data before. Secondly, students overwhelmingly are pleased about their self-development.

The interactive session covers the major assignments and many of the homework papers.

REFERENCES

- Schein, E.H. 1992. Organizational culture and leadership. San Francisco: JosseyBass.
- Trice, H.M. & Beyer, J.M. 1993. The cultures of work organizations. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.