

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22,1995

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

American schools of management have become the targets of criticism. One particular concern relates to inadequate priority directed to the subject of leadership. Critics contend that graduates of schools of management, while generally excellent analysts, lack leadership skills. While this deficiency was considered tolerable in the past, today's organizations desperately need inspirational leaders in order to compete in an environment characterized by chaotic change, a focus on quality, an emphasis on globalism and diversity and the increased encouragement of empowerment. Traditional values associated with management-a focus on the logical, rational and quantifiable-are being challenged. Other values associated with leadership-humanness, flexibility, sensitivity, vision-are receiving greater recognition. For a variety of reasons, those responsible for schools of management appear reluctant to recognize this profound change in the design of their curricula. Many contend that the development of leadership skills can occur only in the workplace. The unfortunate result of this philosophy is trial-and-error at work where the consequences of error can be disastrous. What is needed is a model of a course or courses designed to teach students how to lead that is appropriate for an academic program. This paper provides such a model that relies heavily on experiential learning techniques. It has been tested twice; so far, the feedback has been exceptionally positive.

INTRODUCTION

Most of us are aware that schools of management have been coming under heavy fire. A recent *Fortune* magazine report (O'Reilly, 1994), indicated that times are tough, the demand for graduates is down, enrollments are flat and budget restrictions are tightening. That same report concluded that

B-schools are under enormous pressure to produce fundamentally different kinds of graduates than six or seven years ago. Employers claim too many MBAs in the 1980s were great at narrowly focused skills like accounting and finance but dreadful at motivating colleagues or diagnosing complex

problems. Now, they say MBAs must be inspiring leaders....(p. 64).

In a similar vein, Burt Nanus and Warren Bennis (1985), made the following observation:

The major problem is that what management education does do moderately well is to train good journeymen/women managers, that is, the graduates acquire technical skills for solving problems. They are highly skilled problem solvers and staff experts. Problem solving, while not a trivial exercise, is far removed from the creative and deeply human process required of leadership. What is needed is not management education but leadership education (p. 34).

While there are many dimensions to the problems currently confronting American schools of management-overcapacity, recession, declining demographics, to mention a few-much of the criticism relates to the term, leadership. While these schools claim to be producing tomorrow's leaders, most of their programs do little to teach leadership skills. This is occurring at a time when many, such as Tom Peters and Nancy Austin (1985), declared that we are entering something akin to a "Leadership Revolution."

the concept of leadership, is crucial to the revolution underway-so crucial we believe the words "managing" and "management" should be discarded. "Management," with its attendant images-cop, referee, devil's advocate, dispassionate analyst, naysayer, pronouncer-connotes controlling and arranging and demeaning and reducing. "Leadership" connotes unleashing energy, building freeing and growing (p. xix).

THE LEADERSHIP REVOLUTION

Whether the term, "Leadership Revolution," applies to today's environment, it is quite apparent that systems of organizational governance that seemed to

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work well in the past are being challenged. The analytical, mechanical and impersonal managerial approaches don't seem to fit in cultures that value "empowerment." The managerial insistence on conformity conflicts with a world that tolerates and even encourages diversity. The managerial focus on control is incompatible with a world of whirlwind change where chaos is the natural order of things. We have discovered "disturbing" things about human beings that reveal hitherto untapped potential capable of doing seemingly impossible things when the people are inspired. The rules of the game appear to be changing as noted by William Arnold and Jeanne Plas

(1993):

In the middle of this frantic century,
most corporate executives got the
idea that they had to carry a big stick
in order to survive and play hardball
in order to win. That's not true.
Being massively human gets a higher
-quality job done. Drawing strength
from humanness rather than
inhumanness creates credibility and
leadership excellence (p. 50).

While there isn't total agreement regarding the distinctions between management and leadership, Warren Bennis (1993) provided the following for consideration:

The manager administers; the leader innovates
The manager is a copy; the leader is an original
The manager maintains; the leader develops
The manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people
The manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust
The manager has a short-range view; the leader has a long-range perspective
The manager asks how and when; the leader asks what and why
The manager has his eye on the bottom line; the leader has his eye on the horizon
The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it
The manager is the classic good soldier; the leader is his own person
The manager does things right; the leader does the right thing (pp. 88, 89).

If the demands upon those with organizational responsibility are changing, and if that change involves an increasing focus on leadership, it is logical to assume that schools of management have modified their programs accordingly.

RESPONSE TO THE "LEADERSHIP REVOLUTION"

My research on the subject, albeit somewhat limited, indicates that responses by schools of management have been slow in coming. The Center for Creative Leadership at Greensboro, North Carolina, has published perhaps the most comprehensive review of leadership education activities in the United States and some other countries in Leadership Education 1994-95: A Source Book. This contains a compendium of leadership-related programs, courses and instruments offered by educational institutions and training and development programs. With the exception of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond, it appears that few civilian educational institutions give leadership a dominant priority. Most courses on leadership appear to be somewhat isolated educational experiences in programs that focus on other subjects. More significant, most leadership courses are about leadership as opposed to how to lead people. Jay Conger (1992), after considerable research on the subject, concluded that "our universities are primarily teaching leadership by imparting a conceptual understanding of the phenomenon" (p.168). This approach is excellent for producing leadership observers. However, something very different is needed to create effective leadership practitioners.

There are many reasons for the apparent reluctance of schools of management to offer courses on how to lead people. The ones I have encountered most frequently include, "Leading people is just common sense; theres nothing to teach," or "Let's focus on what the students really need and let them learn the 'soft stuff' after graduation," or "We don't have the instructors qualified to teach leadership." To the first response, my reply is that there is a body of knowledge and that leadership skills are "teachable." To the second, I contend that excellence in the "soft stuff" can make the difference between successful and unsuccessful organizations. Further, graduates of schools of management are likely to be assigned leadership responsibilities very soon after graduation. To the last, I suggest that schools of management expand their faculty selection criteria to include people who have had leadership experience. I contend that schools of management must make room for instruction that teaches leadership skills. However, I need to provide proof that this is both possible and practical in an academic environment. The remainder of this paper will focus on (a) what's needed in a course that teaches leadership skills and

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(b) what approach is appropriate for an academic institution.

TEACHING LEADERSHIP SKILLS: WHAT'S NEEDED?

Our research has shown that leadership skills are developed and replicated by people on the basis of experience-trial and error, doing it, getting the feedback, making mistakes and doing it again...People also learn by watching both positive and negative role models at work...Effective leadership training is found in the doing.

If the comment, above, by James Kouzes, President of Tom Peters Group Learning Systems (Childress, McFarland & Senn, 1993, p. 289) is completely correct, the world is to be condemned to suffer from tragic blunders as each leader essentially learns on the job. For sure, experience is a powerful teacher. However, there must be educational experiences, where the consequences of error are not severe, that could help develop leadership skills in those who will need them.

The Military Approach

Military organizations appear to pay particular attention to the subject of leadership and are often associated with what are viewed as "extreme" approaches to leadership development. "Typical" military training programs often involve forms of "total immersion shock experiences." Trainees are isolated from society, subjected to "tribal rituals" (shearing of hair, etc.) and denied all basic freedoms. "Privileges" of ordinary life are slowly returned as trainees prove themselves. Trainees with potential are offered the opportunity to lead-become responsible for the behavior of others. In a 24-hour training environment, they are supervised, guided and corrected on a continual basis. With experience and successful performance, their responsibilities increase and, with these, their leadership potential. While the "military approach" is obviously inappropriate for schools of management, it is interesting to note that, as indicated later in this paper, one component of the military system, personal growth has general applicability.

Other Approaches to Leadership Development

Jay Conger (1992) sought to determine "the right combination of experiential and intellectual instruction that could spark a lifetime of leadership ability..."(p. xii). In the process, he explored and, in some cases, actually

participated in a variety of leadership development programs to include those offered by the Center for Creative Leadership, The General Electric Management Development Institute and the programs of Levi Strauss & Co. While no two programs were identical, Conger determined that there are four primary areas of training that are effective in developing potential leaders: (a) conceptual development, (b) personal growth, (c) skill building and (d) feedback.

Conceptual Development. Every educational experience must be based upon a body of knowledge that provides a basis for the understanding of concepts and relationships. In the case of instruction on the subject of leadership, there is a problem because there are so many widely varied theories, constructs and approaches. Conger noted that most college courses on leadership rely almost exclusively on the conceptual development approach.

Personal Growth. As interest in developing civilian leaders increased, it is interesting to note that leadership development programs turned to techniques involving challenge and stress that were similar to the military model. Conger (1992) noted that, in the 1980s

Managers were no longer sitting in classrooms, listening to management theory; instead they were scaling mountains, jumping off cliffs, working on actual company projects, and formulating vision statements for themselves and their companies....These tasks challenged each individual's courage, strength of character and interpersonal skills. Lessons about the necessity of teamwork and leadership were a natural by-product (p.11).

Adventure-oriented team-building experiences, offered by many organizations such as Outward Bound and Inner Quest and catering to a variety of audiences, are very popular these days.

Skills Development. Most leadership training programs include components that focus on specific leadership-related skills. This is often accomplished through the use of a variety of experiential exercises. The Looking Glass Simulation offered by The Center for Creative Leadership is a well-known example of this. Since the process of leadership involves so many activities and components, it is necessary to determine what specific skills should be given priority.

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Feedback. Leadership is a very personal activity. Effective leaders must be able to perceive who they are and how they are viewed by others. Feedback can be provided through self-analysis instruments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Additional feedback can come from the instructor and the student's peers. Finally, if videotape is used, the student can engage in profound self-analysis watching him-herself in the act of leading.

The "Ideal" Program. According to Conger (1992),

The ideal program would begin with a conceptual overview, then provide feedback.

This would be followed by skill building, for skills that are teachable...Feedback would reappear after preliminary skill building to assess how well individuals have learned and understood the skills, and this would be followed by more skill building. Personal growth experiences would be used along the way as powerful opportunities for reflection on two levels: to help managers determine their own desires to lead, and to free participants of ineffective behaviors (p. 53).

GRADUATE-LEVEL COURSE: APPLIED ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The remainder of this paper is a description of a graduate-level course presented to 24 students on an experimental basis at The George Washington University during the Spring Semester of 1994. This followed a similar experiment for 18 undergraduate students during the previous semester. The class was presented in a typical classroom environment during fifteen two-hour sessions. In addition, students were invited, on a voluntary basis, to participate in a seven-hour Inner Quest team- and confidence-building activity on a Saturday during the course. I was assisted by Stacy Trotter, a very capable teaching assistant. Both Stacy and I were capable of "playing parts"-participating in experiential exercises with the students. Special equipment included a video camera, a TV/VCR and videotapes that were issued to each student and retained by the student.

From the very beginning of the course, students were advised that the course would be "different"-extremely experiential with extensive use of the video camera. Students were urged to "loosen up," express themselves candidly and to take chances, include the chance of making a mistake, in the interest of learning. Initially, they were suspicious and

somewhat intimidated by the ever-present video camera. As time went by, they tended to emerge, challenge one another, and even become receptive to critical feedback.

The course included the four basic components identified by Conger and discussed earlier in the paper: (a) conceptual development, (b) personal growth, (c) skills development and (d) feedback. Because this was a three credit hour course in an academic program, it was necessary to add a fifth consideration-academic grading. I will discuss this first.

Academic Grading

Since there are few, if any, "school solutions" to leadership situations, academic grading of student responses to experiential exercises was inappropriate. The course requirements that were graded-team presentations to the class, written analyses, a term paper and a final examination-were relatively conventional in order to insure student perceptions of fairness and consistency.

Conceptual Development

The conceptual development component of the course-included (a) required texts, (b) instructor lectures and related discussions and (c) student team research projects with reports to the class. These elements were introduced relatively early during the course in order that the theories and concepts could be applied later during experiential exercises. The selection of texts was a problem. While there are many books on leadership available, many are far too theoretical for an applied course. Others tend to focus on the author's specific theory or construct to the exclusion of all others. I selected my own two books on leadership, (Malone, 1986) and (Malone, 1990) primarily because each contained a self-analysis instrument and because I could provide them to students at cost (I am both the author and publisher). My third selection was a mistake-relevant but very redundant. I am now considering a new Center for Creative Leadership book (Clark & Clark, 1994).

Personal Growth

The personal growth component of the course proved to be a challenge. Since almost all students were attending the University part time and were very busy people, the activity was offered as a voluntary addition to the course conducted on a Saturday. I explored a variety of team- and confidence building

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personal growth programs, some of which were very expensive, and selected a one-day program offered by Inner Quest in nearby Northern Virginia (\$28.00 per student). Under very professional Inner Quest supervision, the 18 students who volunteered engaged in a variety of videotaped team-building activities and were also exposed to the emotional (for most) experience of the “zip wire”-overcoming their fear of heights as they climbed high wires and then zipped at 25 miles an hour suspended from a cable some 75 feet above a canyon below.

Skills Development

The skills development component of the course was provided through the students’ participation, usually videotaped, in a series of experiential exercises. During the first session, the students were introduced to the Basic Course Case, a description of Vis-O-Tec, a hypothetical high-tech organization evolving from the entrepreneurial to the growth phase of development. This organization provided the environment for eight experiential exercises introduced sequentially during the course. Each exercise placed the student in a situation somewhere within Vis-O-Tec that required leadership action. The exercises were designed to be relatively simple at first and then increased in complexity, as the students became more comfortable with the experiential environment. Since leaders do a variety of things, it was necessary to make some choice regarding what skills one wants to develop, what skills are “teachable” and what skills the instructor is qualified to evaluate. For this particular course, the skills selected included (a) dealing with a bereaved employee, (b) evaluating employee performance and stimulating improved performance, (c) firing an employee for sub-standard performance, (d) developing a team and harmonizing team performance, (e) implementing change in response to adversity, (f) developing and articulating a vision, (g) inspiring a dispirited workforce and (h) developing and articulating a personal philosophy of leadership. Integrated into the exercises were concerns such as dealing with cultural diversity, empowering subordinates and confronting sexual harassment. Very often, Stacy and I played key parts in the experiential exercises. This contributed to some control of situations and ensured that learning objectives were achieved. During the course, students were required to make three presentations: (a) team reports on research projects, (b) individual inspirational speeches and (c) individual “take charge” speeches as they assumed leadership responsibility for a component of Vis-O-Tec. Of course, the students were challenged most by the inspirational speech requirement-five to ten minutes long without the use of notes and *with* the

video camera recording their every gesture.

Feedback

Throughout the course, students were literally bombarded with feedback. At first, this made some uncomfortable since leadership-related feedback can be very personal. Later, when students became used to an open, unthreatening atmosphere, where making mistakes was totally acceptable, most “loosened up” and even began to welcome critical comments from their peers and the instructor. Feedback was provided using a variety of mediums. Much of the classroom activity was videotaped. Frequently, videotapes were played in class and discussed. Additionally, students, either individually or in teams, reviewed their classroom performances at home. One graded requirement was for student research teams to evaluate in writing their own presentations to the class.

Another form of feedback was provided internally to the student as he/she engaged in self-analysis using a variety of self-analysis instruments. The instruments used in the course were the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior (FIRO-B) by Will Schutz and those contained in my two books (Malone, 1986) and (Malone, 1990). In the future, I plan to add the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The term paper for the course, a result of this self-analysis, included (a) a determination of how the student is unique, (b) a determination of how that uniqueness is likely to affect other people, notably subordinates, and (c) articulation of the student’s personal philosophy of leadership.

EVALUATION OF THE COURSE

Was the course any good? Did it achieve its learning objectives? Obviously, I am biased so my opinions are of questionable value. The others involved were the students. While some professors I know question the utility of student opinions, I value them highly. In most cases, they’re the only ones around to critique the educational product. Based on my experience, they’re good at separating “winners” from “losers.”

The students critiqued the course in writing twice-at mid term and again at the end. The international students (one each from Germany, Peru, Thailand and Vietnam) experienced some difficulty adjusting to the experiential nature of the course. A few students indicated that the class was too large and that the

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student limit should be twenty. All who participated in the Inner Quest experience indicated that it was an absolute. There were two PhD students in the class. They were disappointed. They found the course to be too practical and insufficiently theoretical. The remainder were enthusiastic about the course indicating that minutes in the classroom raced by at high speed, that learning resembled an "adventure" and that they had real, live FUN. Listed below are selected student written comments from the end-of-course evaluations.

"Finally, a class that teaches you how to deal with real-world challenges in a safe environment. (My grade-not my career-was at stake.) Thank you for the opportunity. Please give others the same chance."

"It is the only 'real world' class experience I've encountered. All business students should be required to take this class."

"I have thoroughly enjoyed learning about myself. . . . It was probably the best, most interesting thing I have ever done."

"I enjoyed the class while I 'earned about myself' and my overall presentation to others. I found the video-tape a useful tool."

"Good luck with the successful continuation of this course. It is the one that is desperately needed in this [MBA] program (what good is learning if it can't be applied?)."

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I contend that the demands relating to organizational governance today are very different from those of the Industrial Age. While values associated with management-logical, rational, analytical, quantifiable-still have a place, others associated with leadership-humanness, sensitivity,

vision, empowerment, inspiration-have become terribly important. While leadership is indeed a "slippery concept," it is the "glue of excellence" in a world of rapid change and ferocious competition. In my opinion, schools of management have a mandate to prepare their graduates for leadership responsibilities. I disagree with those who claim that this can't be done in the classroom. I offer a model of a course, very experiential in nature that I believe helps students to learn how to lead and to assess their desire to become future leaders. I offer my ideas to any and all who share my zeal in this vital area of endeavor.

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