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BREATHING (MORE) LIFE INTO THE CASE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of an experiment intended to “breathe (more) life into the case approach to teaching. The principal objective was to teach students not just about management, but also how to manage. That is, it was to develop management skills and competencies. Both from Our in-class (grading) assessments and from student feedback, the results included furthering of technical knowledge and skills, research skills, teamwork skills, presentation skills, and “think-on-your-feet” skills.

INTRODUCTION

The basic premise is that students must “do” management. Management cannot be “done” except in an interactive fashion and that interaction must include people (as opposed to being strictly with instructors and/or computers). With that in mind, the experiment undertaken was designed to elicit maximum preparation, participation, and interaction from each and every student. The experiment began in an MBA program HRM course, and later was used in MBA courses in Business Strategy and Management of Change. Due to certain “system eccentricities” arising Out of severe budgetary constraints, enrollments in graduate “seminars” was consistently in the 35+ range. Plenty of places for the reluctant participant to hide!

OBJECTIVES OF THE EXPERIMENT

The cases selected charged the students with the tasks of (a) formulating solutions, (b) planning how to implement those solutions, and (c) “selling” their proposed solutions to various stakeholder groups. This required that they understand the “technical” aspects of the problems, understand how HRM strategies fit into the overall business strategy and goals, understand the relationships between HRM and other business functions, and understand the principles of change management.

The experiment added two dimensions beyond those usually imposed by the first was the stakeholder approach; the second was the development of managers skills of

persuasion. The principal objective, then, was to teach students how to manage, rather than merely about management. To do so, it was necessary to simulate the interaction dimension of the workplace as nearly as possible.

THE ASSIGNMENTS

Cases selected involved existing, identified organizations, as students were required to obtain additional firm and industry information. For each case, a “principal group” was assigned to study the problem and recommend solutions. That group presented its recommendations to a second group acting as management of the firm in question. This second group was required to role-play the stakes and the personalities involved and to question the presenting group from those perspectives. After questions and responses, management had to arrive at a decision regarding acceptance or rejection (in whole or in part) of the recommendations.

Remaining students were divided into groups to assume the roles of other stakeholders (union, employees, community, stockholders, etc.), and to report their assessments following the interaction between the principal and the secondary groups.

In addition to content preparation, all groups were required to fully develop professional presentations.

Group composition was kept the same throughout the term, so that students would have to work through all of the “group project problems” that typically emerge. Peer evaluations were used to “encourage” this process.

CONCLUSION

Students like it. And, it appears to “work.” It develops the kinds of skills and knowledge they can use at work. (Nearly all students are employed full-time at “career” jobs.) They do a better job because their work is exposed, not just to the instructor, but to peers (and sometimes to external “judges”). They push each other. They know that if they do not ask the tough questions, the instructor will.