

Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 19, 1992

AN EFFECTIVE ROLE-PLAYING EXERCISE FOR TEACHING REQUISITE TQM SUPERVISORY ATTITUDES/BEHAVIORS

William E. Stratton, Idaho State University

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of a classic role-playing exercise to help managers appraise their attitudes and behaviors for effectiveness in a TQM environment.

INTRODUCTION

Total Quality Management (TQM) and similar approaches to improving organizational performance assume that managers deal with subordinates in certain ways. To be successful the supervisory role must change from that of director, decision-maker, and controller to one of helper, trainer, and coach.

This transition in managerial outlook is usually embraced intellectually by those involved, but the required changes in attitudes and behaviors often do not follow. The role playing exercise described here effectively helps managers recognize their attitudes and the effects they have in a decision situation.

THE ROLE PLAYING EXERCISE

A classic role playing exercise, "The Change of Work Procedure," appeared first in a book by Norman R.F. Maier (1952, pp. 153-157) and later in Maier, Solem, and Maier (1957, pp. 82-98; 1975, pp. 75-90).

The original exercise explored resistance to change in relation to the approach to change adopted by a manager. The supervisor is in possession of newly acquired time study data indicating that a group of three assemblers reporting to this supervisor could improve their productivity significantly by changing their work procedures. The workers roles imply they should favor productivity increases since they are paid on a group piece-rate basis, but they are also concerned that boredom could ensue if the new methods suggested by the time-study man are adopted.

The author suggests workers will accept or reject changes depending on how they are approached. He elaborates on how "consultative" approaches, as contrasted to the "selling" of management solutions, usually result in more creative solutions which are more highly supported by the workers, and hence more likely to actually work when put into practice.

This exercise does a superb job of bringing out the issues mentioned above, but it is also a very powerful vehicle for training managers in a TQM environment.

THE TQM ENVIRONMENT

Total Quality Management implies an environment in which all organization members are committed to continually improving their job performance. For this culture of commitment to exist, supervisors must no longer act as the primary decision-makers, telling subordinates what to do and then ensuring they do it. The supervisory role becomes one of teacher, helper, and aide to subordinates, calling for very different ways of thinking about and dealing with subordinates.

Intellectually, many supervisors accept the philosophy

behind TQM and the need to adopt more participative practices. In reality, however, ingrained behaviors do not change. A new approach to using this classic role-play, however, helps supervisors understand the real impact of their attitudes and behaviors.

THE ROLE-PLAY PROCEDURE

Participants are divided into quartets, each group designates its supervisor, role sheets are distributed, and the groups proceed to read their roles.

Next, a meeting of the supervisors is called. Two approaches can be taken at this point. One is simply to instruct the supervisors to decide what they want to do, and to return to their groups and do it. The second is to instruct each of them to take on either a participative or directive leadership style and proceed to resolve the situation.

The instructions in no way dictate the solution to be pursued. Participants are free to go after any specific solution (the one suggested in the role description, or any other idea they come up with), or to merely seek some improvement, and go after that.

Usually the directive supervisors feel that they must solve the problem themselves. They present their proposed solutions, tend to resist any objections from the workers (whether rational or not), and often seek to exact compliance by making concessions.

The participative supervisors tend to present the data to subordinates as a problem to be resolved. Subordinates generally become cooperative and suggest one of a number of possible synergistic solutions, which utilize available data more completely, are more likely to succeed upon implementation, and do not leave a residue of resentment in their wake.

The learning for many participants is to see how successful change depends on the basic attitude of the supervisor entering the group, which subconsciously acts as the driving force behind the dynamics of the interaction. The exercise is a powerful experience. Those trying their very best to be effective realize that going about it the wrong way makes success virtually impossible, despite good intentions and mighty efforts to convince others to accept their solutions.

REFERENCES

- Maier, Norman R. F. (1952), Principles of Human Relations, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Maier, Norman R. F., Solem, Allen R., and Maier, Ayesha A. (1957), Supervisory and Executive Development: A Manual for Role Playing, New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc
- Maier, Norman R. F., Solem, Allen R., and Maier, Ayesha A., (1975), The Role-Play Technique: A Handbook for Management and Leadership Practice, La Jolla, CA: University Associates, Inc.