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BUILDING BUILDINGS: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, COMMUNICATION, LEADERSHIP AND GROUP DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

“Building Buildings” has been used in introductory management courses, including management principles at the undergraduate level and management process at the MBA level, as well as in workshops addressing organizational structure, organizational communication, leadership styles and/or group dynamics. By observing the effect of organizational structure on communication, leadership and group dynamics, students and workshop participants “discover” several key management concepts.

Feedback from students and workshop participants has been uniformly positive: not only do they enjoy participating in or observing the exercise, it is an element of the class or workshop they recall quite clearly years later.

INTRODUCTION

Learning to manage by attending a lecture or lecture/discussion management class has been compared to learning to swim by reading a book about swimming techniques: although a student completing either may perform extremely well on a short answer or essay test, it is unlikely he/she will master the concepts well enough to be effective in either swimming or managing. The purpose of this exercise is to provide students and workshop participants the opportunity to experience or “actively observe” the effect of organizational structure on the way in which work groups interact and perform.

TIME, COST, AND GROUP SIZE

The exercise and subsequent discussion require 60 to 90 minutes. Because the only “props” are index cards, tape and staples, cost is negligible. “Building Buildings” will accommodate both small (minimum 12) and large groups.

THE EXERCISE

The exercise requires two groups or teams of five members each; the balance of class members serve as active observers.” Each team is placed at a table, either in different classrooms (ideal) or in the same classroom but blocked from viewing each other (acceptable). The only supplies necessary are a large supply of 4” x 6” index cards plus a stapler and full tape dispenser (with refills for both) for each team.

Each team member receives an assignment card. The cards

for Team A (the structured team) include functional job titles (President, Vice President of Engineering, Vice President of Manufacturing, Vice President of Finance/Controller, and Vice President of Marketing) and a brief job description. The president is given the objective of building a building, with the materials provided, in 30 minutes and is told the building will then be marketed to class members.

Assignment cards for Team B (the unstructured team) are all the same and direct team members to build a building, which will be marketed to class members, in 30 minutes.

Observers are given Observation Checklists and asked to observe, but not interact, with both teams and to take notes for the class discussion that will follow the exercise.

After 30 minutes, the building exercise is stopped for both teams and the entire class, including Team B, is gathered around Team A’s table. Team A is given five minutes to market its structure to the class. Then the entire class, including Team A, is gathered around Team B’s table and that team is given five minutes to market its building to the class.

CLASS DISCUSSION

That the buildings are usually radically different in size, shape, stability and appearance stimulates discussion by the observers and allows both team members and observers to “discover” the influence of structure on, for example, leadership style.

Team members are then encouraged (although little encouragement is usually needed!) to share the feelings each experienced during the exercise.

CONCLUSION

This exercise has been used in undergraduate and graduate classes, including an Executive MBA class, as well as in several dozen workshops over the last ten years. It has elicited truly emotional and exciting participation from many of the building teams. As with many experiential exercises, at times the exercise has been almost textbook-perfect in terms of illustrating the relationship between the structure of the team and the structure of the building; at other times it has worked less well. In all cases, however, it has made organization structure more than just another classroom discussion topic.