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TEACHING EMPLOYEE COUNSELING SKILLS TO MANAGEMENT STUDENTS: A SIMULATION

Ronald R. Sims, School of Business Administration
College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185
(804) 253-4868

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a simulation which has the goal of improving management student's skills in employee counseling. The assumption is that management students properly taught or trained to counsel employees will know the importance of good communication which is essential for a satisfactory management-employee relationship.

INTRODUCTION

Personal problems--alcohol or drug abuse, marital problems, mental illness, and so on--experienced by employees often lead or contribute to low morale and reduced productivity thereby effecting an entire organization. It is estimated, for example, that about 10% of the U.S. workforce suffers from drinking problems--more than 10 million employees nationwide [7]. Therefore, it is often advisable that management "help" its employees through their difficulties. In addition to the personal problems experienced by employees, managers must also deal with work-related problems--absenteeism and poor work performance, some of which may indeed ensue from personal problems. Many managers, who have the responsibility of counseling, have not received specific training in this skill [1]. Consequently, these managers may feel inadequate, and this may in turn result in "shying away" from counseling or avoiding it due to fears of losing control over the situation. Also they may fear alienating themselves from co-workers, whom they have disciplined, or of their inability to handle personal hardships, although they contribute to low morale and reduced productivity. This paper will present a simulation which has the goal of improving management student's skills in employee counseling. The assumption is that management students properly taught or trained to counsel employees will know the importance of good communication which is essential for a satisfactory management-employee relationship. The goal of employee counseling is improvement in an individual's attitude and work performance. Students are taught that those involved in a true employee counseling session are involved in a helping relationship. This relationship is sometimes an emotional burden. It is a relationship which requires confidentiality and being approachable.

The objectives of this simulation are:

- 1) Teach students employee counseling skills
- 2) Accustom students to looking objectively at their own behavior with other students
- 3) Accustom students to sharing their feelings and videotaped records of their behavior during simulated employee and manager (counselor) role play
- 4) Increase student awareness of the diversity of feelings and behaviors which an employee may elicit

There are two aspects to this teaching framework. One aspect is presented during a one hour lecture and open class discussion with the students. The lecture focuses on the counseling relationship which takes the technological and organizational culture into consideration. The second aspect requires the students to role play both the part of a troubled employee and a manager! counselor. The author has found that a class of 20 or fewer students works best with this simulation. This allows for active discussion and ensures that all students are able to experience both roles. The

simulation requires at least five or six hours (two three-hour sessions or three two-hour sessions) of class time. The author received support from school administrators and the curriculum committee in the original design of this simulation.

Preliminary Steps

Prior to conducting the one hour orientation and open class discussion on the counseling relationship, management students take the following steps (for our purposes we will specifically focus on counseling employees on work performance):

The first step involves students communicating job expectations and performance standards to fellow students (twenty minutes should be allocated for this step). This step requires students to practice explaining what is required of another person in completing a given task (i.e., becoming more proficient in running a word processing machine). The importance of this step is illustrated in the following example: If someone blindfolded you and asked that you hit a target, in all probability your efforts would fail. As ludicrous as that may sound, many employees find themselves in similar situations. They may be given sketchy and incomplete job descriptions and little else and told to do a good job. Their performance may fall short of the mark because the performance expectations have not been clearly defined. Students are asked to respond to the following questions: "Did I make it clear what exactly was expected of them?" "Have I communicated clearly my performance standards?"

The second preliminary step (one hour) is self-assessment. It is explained to the students that this self-assessment is important because our attitudes have a tremendous affect on the attitude and behavior of others. If we have high expectations of our employees, there is a strong possibility that high performance will be the result. Conversely, low expectations often produce low performance. Therefore, it is important for them as future managers to evaluate what they expect of their subordinates.

Some of the questions that help in this self-assessment are: "How do I perceive the person (subordinates) to whom I communicated the job expectations and performance standards?" "Have I communicated to them in such a manner that success (or failure) is supposed?"

Once these two preliminary steps are completed, the one hour lecture orientation on the counseling relationship (which takes the technological and organizational culture into consideration) is presented. A condensed form of the lecture is presented below:

Row Organizational Culture Structures Communication (1 Hour Lecture)

Culture is the first and most pervasive factor of an individual's life. At the same time, it is the last frontier to be recognized and explored [31]. One of the most salient aspects of culture is the development, refinement, and organization of verbal and written communication among people [2]. Managers have been carefully trained to plan, organize, direct, mo-

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tivate and control various parts of the organization. Effective employee counseling is very often ignored, however, in management education--instead education is concentrated on the technical processes of the organization. Managers need an entirely different set of skills to empathically respond and communicate with employees than they receive through "technical" education. More specifically, students must learn the vocabulary, syntax and skills needed to clearly communicate their ideas to their employees. They must also be capable of expressing a full range of responses to their employees' concerns.

Any simulation designed to sharpen students' employee counseling skills must take into consideration the cultural constraints of organizational life. This consideration might be facilitated by having students visualize a continuum of communication (Figure 1) with conversation at one end and counseling at the other. Other regions on the continuum would include interviewing and advising. As such the continuum moves progressively from content to process of communication. Students facility in moving effectively from one place to another along the continuum is sought as a final objective. A brief discussion of each of the points on the continuum are then presented to the students as follows (10 minutes).

Conversation is the friendly verbal exchange among people that is not necessarily imbued with purpose. The content of conversation is culturally normed; what a person may say, and what responses are acceptable are prescribed according to the situation. And, the appropriate degree of affect or emotion displayed by the speaker, physical location of the speaker relative to others, and appropriate voice levels are all prescribed according to the social situation [6, p. 100]. Such cultural conventions facilitate communication among

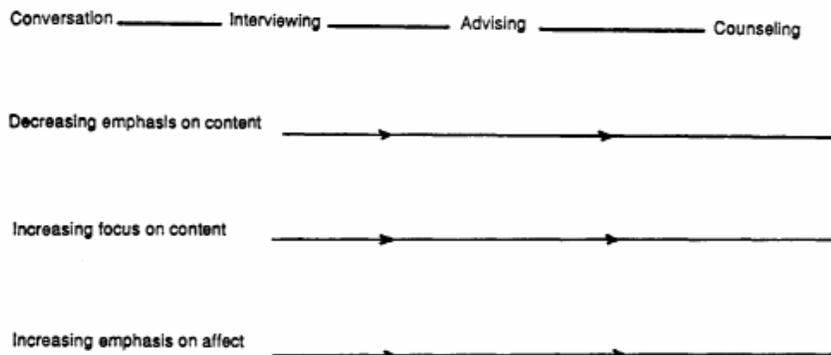
that same information during a counseling session.

Advising, another region on the continuum, consists of advocating or recommending a particular course of action. In such a situation there are implicit as well as explicit definitions of expert and non- expert. Such communication tends to create dependency and tends to be role specific.

Thus far in the discussion on the continuum of communication, the process of transactions has remained in the background. The element of ritual has directed in most cases the respective roles of manager and employee. However, as progression is made toward the counseling end of the continuum, rituals and prescribed roles are moved into the background and the immediate process of communication is given increased attention. Posture, gesticulation, inflection, organizational setting, behaviors, and themes now become the focus of the manager - employee transactions.

Counseling is the last region on the communication continuum. The goal of counseling is to influence specific attitudes and behaviors. Therefore counseling must be a cooperative effort, a shared responsibility of both the manager and the employee. It often involves choosing a specific course of acting for a particular situation at a given time. Effective employee counseling depends very much on saying the right thing in the right manner to the employee. Saying the wrong thing will do little to motivate the employee to overcome the problem and could indeed make matters worse. Counseling skills include listening, understanding, initiating communication, effective communication, and evaluating solutions. Although employee counseling relies on the exchange of information through the region of conversation, interviewing, and

Figure 1
Continuum of Communication



strangers and regulate the conduct of normed behavior [4]. These conventions, however, may inhibit communication at every juncture where behavior that is not culturally normed needs to be exposed, explored, and analyzed.

Interviewing is a form of conversation which has a specific purpose. It can be thought of as an exchange of intellectual information. It is important to note the distinction between questioning an employee about his or her attitudes, values, goals, or motivational needs during an interview and seeking

advising, it differs from these regions in that it is not always content centered. According to Schlesinger [8, p. 183], the metaphor that most clearly depicts this change in focus from content to process is: counseling focuses not only on the words of the song but on the melody of the music.

Simulated Employee Counseling Role Play (4 hours)

Before actually gathering for the actual role play sessions, each student receives an introduction to the

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session in the form of a handout on employee counseling skills. The skills are concisely defined and explained through examples. To facilitate effective employee counseling the following format has been designed which, although comprehensive, does not favor any one of the variety of counseling approaches.

Employee Counseling Skills Format

The employee counseling format consists of the experientially-based learning of specifically enumerated counseling skills

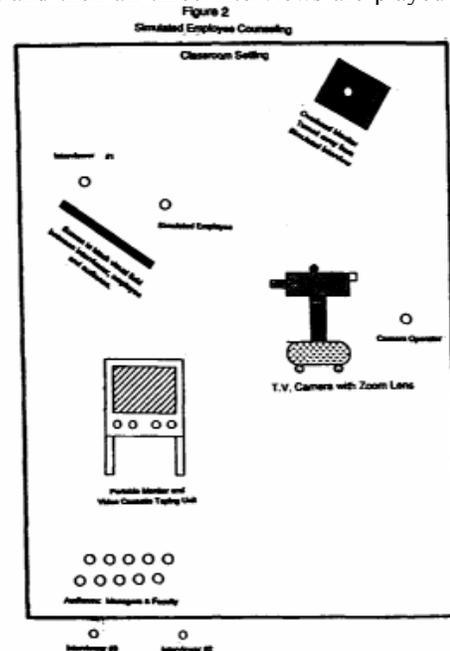
- I. Skills of Interviewing
 - A. Attending behavior (paying attention to what is going on in the interview)
 - B. Creating an atmosphere for talking (open invitation for participation)
 - C. Encouraging discussion and dialogue (minimal encouragement to talk)
- II. Listening Skills
 - A. Reflection of feeling (carefully think about the feelings that develop)
 - B. Paraphrasing (restate or paraphrase what the person has said)
 - C. Summarization of feeling
 - D. Summarization of content
 - E. Learning employees' attitude toward performance evaluation
- III. Skill of Self-Expression
 - A. Expression of feeling
 - B. Sharing behavior
 - C. Direct, mutual communication
- IV. Interpretation
 - A. Empathy (the ability to see the world from another person's viewpoint; to try to experience the world with the same emotions, attitudes, and reasoning as that person)
 - B. Positive regard (a demonstration of respect and acceptance)
 - C. Concreteness (directness and accuracy in communication)
 - D. Genuineness (honesty and consistency in one's ability to communicate valid statements of one's feeling)
 - E. Diagnosing the causes of poor worker performance
 - F. Identifying employees with problems

The first session, which lasts fifteen minutes, opens with an individual review of the first three skills which is followed by a discussion of the students' comprehension and feelings about the skills.

Next, a simulated manager-employee role play involving one student as an employee and another student as a manager takes place. The student (manager) is expected to ask questions to assist the student (employee) in solving a particular work problem. Three students are asked to volunteer for the counselor role. Two of the volunteer counselors leave the room before the first interview is begun. Each counselor then enters the role play naively. (See Figure 2 for a presentation of the physical format in which the employee counseling exercises are conducted).

Each interview is videotaped for five minutes and then interrupted. A faculty member uses a zoom lens camera to videotape the eyes, arms, hands, legs, and feet as well as the entire body of the student manager! counselor and the student employee. This allows the entire continuum of communication to be addressed, while bringing posture, gesticulation, inflection, and setting into the foreground. Before the first interview is discussed, the second student

manager enters the room and is videotaped interviewing the employee. This process is repeated for the third student manager, and then all three interviews are played back and



analyzed individually.

One of the role plays the students may be assigned in due the following: Nancy, the supervisor of a large group of accounting personnel, suspects that John, a tax auditor, is suffering from alcoholism. At one time, John was an excellent employee, but he has recently begun to perform erratically and demonstrate behavioral problems. For example, John made errors in auditing a clients taxes and has also experienced several interpersonal problems with Nancy and other coworkers. Nancy has just begun to talk to John in her office. All of Nancy's statements are poor and represent the use of improper counseling techniques. Your job in the role of Nancy is not to make the same mistakes.

The first student manager and employee are asked to describe their feelings during the interview. The employee is asked to describe how the student manager had been particularly effective and, at other times, less helpful. The videotape of their interview is then replayed once without interruption. The tape is rewound and played a second time. It is then stopped frequently to allow the group to comment on their perception of the interview and the extent to which the student manager/counselor has been able to incorporate the skills reviewed prior to the role play.

Observers are also asked to discuss their possible responses to a particular employee statement and the student manager is given the opportunity to respond differently. Each observer has a form (See Figure 3) which identifies particular statements made by the student manager (Nancy). The observers are expected to decide what Nancy should have said if they disagree with her responses and questions to the employee. The student manager may be asked what he or she is experiencing during a particular transaction. In this respect the tape review session resembles Norman Kagan's Interpersonal Process Recall (IRP) technique [5]. When the next set of employee counseling skills is introduced, new volunteers are selected to assume the simulated employee role and the manager roles. The above procedure is followed until all the students

