

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986

STRATEGIC PLANNING WITH AN EXPERIENTIAL CASE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a relatively simple but powerful experiential exercise which can be used as an in-class activity at any level of college class, from freshman through graduate. It is effective for demonstrating and practicing the following skills: decision making, creativity, strategic planning, communication, and group dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

Although the scenario of this experiential case appears simple, the class discussion and excitement it elicits are tremendous. The entire exercise takes from 30 to 50 minutes. It can be used in any size class. The objectives are:

1. To experience a brainstorming session with a group of peers.
2. To understand the creative process and to apply the principles of brainstorming.
3. To work under a tight time constraint which requires some early planning and group organization.
4. To apply the decision making process to a group situation.
5. To experience a market- and product-strategic planning session.

Types of classes it could be used in Include:

Principles of Management
Principles of Marketing
Small Business Management
Introduction to Business
Business Policy
and any class in the area of behavior, group dynamics, communication, etc.

Materials Required: Metal paper clips

Description of the Exercise

The class is divided into several groups of from three to five students. The instructor can either give instruction verbally or an instruction sheet can be distributed. It is optional as to whether an observer is assigned to each group, depending on what the key objective of the instructor is in using the exercise.

The scenario takes place at a meeting of the management team of a firm which produces metal paper clips.

The president of the firm speaks:

"Members of the management team. I am very sad to announce our company is in big trouble. As you are well aware, the firm has not been profitable for the last 18 months and we can't go on like this much longer. We need to come up with some ideas to increase our sales of paper clips - and fast! I would like each of you to think about new uses of paper clips, new forms of paper clips, and alternate products we could produce using the technology we already have."

At this point the instructor hands out a metal paper clip to each person in the classroom.

"For the next (5 or 10) minutes, write down your thoughts to two issues:

First, list the possible reasons paper clip sales are down all over the industry.

Second, list as many new products that can be made from a paper clip, including new ways of marketing our current product and new, modified, or alternate products, using our present, or closely related technology.

After thinking about it individually for a few minutes, I will signal when you should begin sharing ideas as a group. You will have (10-20) minutes to discuss various ideas with your group. The objective is to come up with as many ideas as possible. Good luck."

Either before the dialog or at this point the instructor could discuss creative thinking and the principles of brainstorming. The length of time allowed, as suggested within the parenthesis above, is at the option of the instructor, according to the amount of time she/he wishes to devote to the activity.

When the allotted time is over, each group is given the opportunity to present its list. The instructor should list each item on the board and use hash marks to indicate when an item has been mentioned more than once. According to the time remaining, the instructor would allow the class to discuss the items and perhaps come up with the ten best ideas.

Debriefing

There are several possibilities of topics for the debriefing session, dictated by the manner in which the instructor uses the exercise and the type of class it is used in. Some of these include:

1. Group process: what happened in your group? Why? Who became the informal leader? Why?
2. Organization: did the group try to get organized? Did an individual member of the group organize it, or try to organize it single-handedly?
3. The Brainstorming process: were group members able to make wild and unusual suggestions without being evaluated or laughed at by other members? How much synergy surfaced; e.g., how many times were modifications made to an original idea that produced either another idea or an idea which produced yet another idea?
4. Creativity: how creative were the individual members of the group; how creative was the group? How innovative were the groups' ideas, overall?
5. Productivity: what contributed to how productive the group was, or conversely, what contributed to the lack of productivity of the group?
6. Communication: what were the communications patterns in the group? How many times do two people talk to each other instead of to the group?
7. Market/Product Planning: what do you think contributed to the drop in sales in the paper clip industry? What should the mission of the

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firm be? Paper clips, fasteners, paper accessories, office supplies, metal objects, metal and plastic objects...
What steps would a firm take at this point to further develop the ideas presented?

Summary

The exercise described is intended to provide students an opportunity to interact in a group brainstorming session. Various learning objectives are available to the instructor depending on the focus of the course. The experience becomes experiential with the use of a simple everyday object, a paperclip, which the students look at, bend, twist, and turn over.

RESOURCES

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