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PROVIDING A REAL WORLD VIEW OF THE PERSONNEL FUNCTION: A SIMULATION

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ABSTRACT

In today's colleges of business, experiential techniques have gained favor. Many people have come to recognize the great potential experiential techniques offer both as teaching tools and learning devices. This paper presents the result of the author's experience with a personnel administration simulation. Groups of students were assigned the task of creating their own company and next carrying out key personnel activities.

INTRODUCTION

To learn specific techniques applicable to the field of personnel administration, the student and prospective personnel professional needs both knowledge of content material and experience in actually putting theory into practice. Yet traditional instructional methods of lecture or lecture and discussion remain the mainstay of most college instruction. In addition, although many excellent textbooks on personnel administration can be found, most of these books tend to present the subject only on the content or cognitive level. Textbooks that fit this description are those of Beach (1980), Crane (1978), Dessler (1978), Glueck (1978), and Heneman, Schwab, Fossum and Dyer (1980). (One notable exception is Personnel Administration: An Experiential Skill Building Approach, by Schneider and Beatty (1977). The text includes short chapters covering key personnel topics and one or more experiential exercises or simulations conclude each chapter:)

The use of the experiential learning approach is one means of helping students acquire both knowledge of content material and experience in actually putting theory into practice. The experiential earning concept, defined most simply, is learning by doing and includes various types of experiential exercises, business games, and other task performances. Experiential learning helps prepare students technically and socially for their life work because this form of learning includes both active, personal experiences and general concepts, as well as theory and action. Students- are provided with an opportunity to test theories in action.

The last decade has seen the experiential learning approach enter into the mainstream of management education. This movement gives further indication of a movement away *from* the traditional lecture approach. One reason *for* this movement may be the recognition on the part of educators and managers that most problems have a large interpersonal component. The development of interpersonal skills requires a high degree of self- awareness which can he developed by having individuals focus on their own behavior as well as that of others. Experiential. training materials are now available which focus on the development of technical skills (Gitman, 1974; Goosen, 1973), human skills (Belasco et al. ,1975; Dutton, 1975), and conceptual skills (Scott and Strickland, l974) Not surprisingly, some authors, e. Knudson, Woodworth and Bell (1973) believe the experiential approach has many advantages over the case approach and lecture format with respect to involvement, enthusiasm, self-responsibility, flexibility, and learning. Unlike the more general laboratory model, of which the experiential model is a spin-off, the experiential approach

adds the ingredient of a structured experience for the participants. (The common ingredients of laboratory approaches are the use of feedback, disclosure, small groups, face to face interaction, and development of a climate of psychological safety in order to effect change.)

Some Key Assumptions About Experiential Learning

Many teachers who utilize the experiential learning approach realize that at the heart of the approach lie five key assumptions:

1. Learning is more effective when it is an active rather than a passive process.

2. Problem-centered learning is more enduring than theory-based learning.

3. Two-way communication produces better learning than one-way communication.

4. Participants will learn more when they share control over and responsibility for the learning process.

5. Learning is most effective when thought and action are integrated.

These five important assumptions, according to Hall, Bowen, Lewicki, and Hall (1975) help explain the increasing popularity of the experiential learning approach. These authors believe the student will better integrate new ideas with past learnings if he or she can try it (a theory, concept, or practice) on for size..." Hall et al. claim that the chance to problem solve and apply knowledge internally motivates students. The experiential approach, unlike the lecture method, allows for a good deal of interaction between teacher and pupil. Such communication tends to improve information accuracy and enhance student satisfaction. In addition, participants in experiential learning are in a better position to accept responsibility for the outcomes of the learning experience because they have some control over the process. Finally, as Hall et al. (1975) have indicated, a course designed to train people for action (such as jobs in personnel, labor relations, management, etc.) should include action if maximum transfer is to be provided.

Managers sometimes assert that business administration graduates are not prepared by business schools to cope with the real world.' These managers believe college courses in business administration fail to provide the opportunity to find problems that exist or develop and implement action plans which will solve problems. In an attempt to overcome this criticism, the authors of this paper combined the lecture discussion method with a major experiential learning project in their personnel management classes.

The remainder of this paper describes the personnel management course that is offered at the Arizona State University in a way that covers personnel management topics using an experiential teaching approach. Course outcomes and student reactions to the exercise are discussed.

OBJECTIVES AND PROCESS

Course Objectives

The objectives of this course include:

(1) To provide students with an overview of the personnel function.
(2) To increase the realism of the course content by making personnel come alive through student involvement in a staffing exercise.
(3) To develop in students knowledge about human behavior in organizations.
(4) To develop in students the ability to identify and solve personnel problems in group situations.
(5) To enhance students' understanding of the skills and abilities required of a personnel professional.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 165 students at Arizona State University who were enrolled in four Sections of the introductory course in personnel administration. The students attended three lecture sessions each week. Approximately 64 percent of them were male and the remaining 36 percent were female, Forty-nine percent of the students were members of the senior class and fifty percent were juniors. The remaining participants were sophomores.

Procedure

Prior to the beginning of the Spring semester, the authors met to develop the specific details of the experiential exercise. It was decided to create an opportunity for small groups of students to carry out staffing activities similar to those typically conducted by personnel professionals. A lengthy, detailed set of guidelines was developed so that students would know exactly what was expected of them. Discussions concerning the project took place in the faculty members offices and in the classroom. At the beginning of the semester, students in each class were divided into small groups. These groups would later work together to complete all requirements of the staffing exercise.

The staffing exercise, the major project for each personnel administration class, required each group to carry out the following tasks:

1. Create an organization. Each group decided upon the kind of organization it would be. The decision included selection of the industry, size of firm, location of the firm, location(s) of outlets, the firm's product tine, and the firm's financial status. (Not surprisingly, given the university's location, many groups decided to be electronics firms and recreation! leisure time organizations.)

2. Prepare an Annual Report. The group was instructed to prepare an annual report for their company. These reports would contain financial information and other data typically provided in annual. reports. (Students were made aware of sources of annual reports, e.g., placement office, library, etc.) A number of copies of the fictitious annual reports were to be made available to inquiring students.

3. Prepare a Company Brochure/Employee Handbook. Each group had the responsibility of preparing a company brochure. The brochure contained such information as: brief overview of the business, training programs information, background on the company's mission and purpose, a description of various benefits and services, as well as key policies or procedures.

4. Prepare a job description. The job description is a document which shows, for a given job, such things as: duties, responsibilities, reporting relationships, working conditions, and supervisory responsibilities. The job description was for the position of marketing analyst. (Each company was required to make a selection decision. More specifically, each organization had to interview a number of candidates for the position of marketing analyst then choose the 'best' one.)

5. Develop a set of job specifications. In addition to a job description, each group prepared a list of human requirements" of the marketing analyst job. This list of requirements was stated in terms of education, skill, personality, experience, etc.

6. Develop a means of identifying and attracting qualified candidates. Students were required to make those outside of their own class aware of the students' company's marketing analyst opening. To accomplish this task, some groups developed their own advertisements. In some cases, these groups had want ads that were placed in Management News (a publication operated by the course instructors and made available to students at a price). Other advertising was distributed to "applicants" before and after class meeting times.

7. Lay out in advance the entire staffing process. The groups all had to develop and carefully lay out each step in the staffing process (recruitment and selection). Obviously, the job analysis information is used to help companies identify a pool of qualified candidates. Companies developed their own employment applications by drawing upon their knowledge of the legal constraints pertaining to pre-employment inquiries. (Many students obtained copies of area firms' employment applications and were surprised to learn that certain inappropriate inquiries were being asked by some firms.) In addition to employment applications, students developed interview questions. Students were instructed to develop questions and answers. The students had to specify the criteria they would utilize in evaluating responses in particular and the candidates in general.

8. Communicate decisions to all who submitted employment applications. Each company was responsible for contacting all students who completed application blanks. For the most part, companies sent letters to those who submitted applications. Those to be scheduled for interviews were also contacted by phone. After the interviews were conducted, interviewees received letters of rejection if not hired. The selected person often received both a letter and a phone call of congratulations.

9. Develop Affirmative Action Plan. Each group developed a program that included those specific actions (in recruiting, hiring, upgrading jobs, etc.) that are designed and taken for the purpose of eliminating the present effects of past discrimination.

10. Prepare two written reports detailing involvement and personal evaluation of the staffing project. At the conclusion of the project, each group prepared a detailed report of their participation in the project. Not only did the groups describe the activities they conducted but they also discussed the group process that occurred. The group report contained all materials developed for the project (advertisements, affirmative action plan, interview guide, annual report, company

brochure, communications with applicants, etc.). The students were also asked to evaluate the project from the group's perspective. An individual report was required of each student. This report described the student's level of participation in the group's activities and that student's experiences in interviewing with selected companies. (Each student was required to interview with at least two companies.) Finally, students evaluated the project as a learning tool.

EVALUATION OF THE EXERCISE

At the conclusion of the exercise, the students and their instructors met to discuss the value of the exercise as a learning tool and to ascertain whether students in future personnel administration classes should participate in such a project. As a first step, all group reports were placed on a cart and wheeled in to each class so that all students could judge the efforts of their peers.

Unfortunately, the authors in designing the exercise, failed to take the opportunity to develop an evaluation instrument or to conduct a pre-test and post-test of participants' knowledge as suggested by Blumenfeld (1974, 1975) and others. Specifically, according to Blumenfeld, a design without pretest and posttest does not generate evidence of behavior change; and a design without a control group does not generate evidence of the extent to which any measured behavior change might have been caused by the treatment(s) or training experience. However, Kirkpatrick (1959) suggests that evaluation procedures should consider four levels of 1 criteria--reaction, learning, behavior, and results.[1] Such an analysis provides for measure of training performance, transfer performance, and organizational objectives. Of these four measures, one was considered at the conclusion of the project--participant reaction. Students volunteered their opinions concerning the project before, during, and after the exercise. Many of the comments were expressed in writing in their group reports and in evaluation forms that were distributed which allowed for anonymous responses. The evaluation forms solicited feedback on the textbook, examinations, evaluation method, journal reviews, and the staffing project.

Student reactions to the term project were quite favorable. Students did acknowledge the large amount of work involved in completing the project. They believed, however, that the project provided them with new knowledge regarding certain personnel activities. In addition, many students felt they gained a better understanding of the detail and complexity involved in conducting recruiting and selection activities. Finally, a number of the students felt the opportunity to participate in the interviewing process from both sides of the table--as interviewer and as interviewee-- was an invaluable experience.[2]

CONCLUSIONS

The staffing project, we believe, was a real asset. The project enabled students to get a feel" for what personnel administration is all about and allowed them to apply theories to a realistic situation as well as demonstrate their

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[1] See Kirkpatrick (1959) or Goldstein (1974) for a detailed discussion of the four levels of criteria.

[2] We hope to share with others at the upcoming ABSEL meeting a number of the group projects completed by the students.

communication, leadership, and other skills. Students were active participants in a

learning experience. This exercise allowed us to achieve the class objectives we established in a manner that we believed to be much more meaningful to the student.

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