Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 8, 1981

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN DECIDING PERFORMANCE CRITERIA
FOR GRADING IN AN O. B. COURSE:
AN EXERCISE AND A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

An experiential exercise was designed to allow students to participate in deciding on relative weights of the criteria to be used for their course grades. A case study determined the decisions of one OB class and the comments of the students evaluating the exercise.

INTRODUCTION

One problem of teachers and managers alike is how to evaluate performance of subordinates. Evaluation can be threatening and, therefore, dysfunctional. We evaluate people because of tradition ('we always have"), because they want to know how well they have done, because we need to decide how to allocate rewards, because competing demands draw attention away from our goals, and because (given the inverted-U curve of performance vs. Stress) evaluation can increase stress and, thereby, enhance performance. The key is to provide the amount of stress (level of arousal) that will maximize performance -- yielding neither apathy, at one extreme, nor panic, at the other (5).

EXERCISE AND CASE STUDY

An approach to the problem is to allow subordinates to participate in the choice of evaluation criteria. The OB literature tells us that participation can increase commitment, acceptance, and understanding of decisions and reduce anxiety. Why not practice what we preach in an organizational behavior course with respect to important decisions; Set some norms for the course; and, at the same time, demonstrate some central concepts of motivation and leadership theories? Since students are nearly always concerned about grades and the grading process, the assignment of weights to grading criteria would seem to be a sure- fire attention getter. I distributed the following handout to a class of 33 junior and senior students who were enrolled in an OB course that was being offered for the first time by their department.

'PERFORMANCE CRITERIA EXERCISE

"Performance evaluation is an important, and often sensitive, function of management. it can be a motivating or de-motivating process -- depending upon whether extrinsic rewards are seen as equitable and fair, and upon the effort-reward expectancy of extrinsic rewards. (Intrinsic rewards follow automatically from the knowledge of having achieved high performance.)

"This course will adopt the philosophy of the (9,9) manager: evaluation should be an ongoing process, evaluation should be concurrent with the leading function, evaluation should be a learning opportunity, evaluation should include the manager's (instructor's) own performance, and evaluation should be facilitated by regular review sessions with the entire group.

"Thus, the key concept concerning evaluation for the (9,9) manager is "steering control" rather than "after- the-fact" control. A climate of openness and trust and Theory Y assumptions are essential for this to work.

"The objectives of the exercise are:

1.   To give you the opportunity to help decide how you will be evaluated in the course.

2.   To provide a situation in which everyone has a real stake.

3.   To apply techniques used in real organizations to an academic course and, thereby,

4.   To use the course as a model for a work organization and, thereby,

5.   To show that a climate of openness and trust can work in a real organization.

6.   To test the hypothesis, known as "the self-fulfilling prophecy," that making Theory Y assumptions about people will encourage Theory Y behavior manifested by maturity, goal orientation, acceptance of responsibility, creativity, and use of potential.

7.   To demonstrate the consultive (System III) leadership style.

8.   To show the difference between individual and group decision making.

9.   To obtain your commitment to and acceptance of the evaluation criteria for the course.

10.   To plant some seeds for future discussion of motivation and leadership.

'Consider the criteria in Table 1, as well as other criteria for evaluation that you might dream up. [Table 1 was distributed with blank cells. The percentages refer to the results of decisions made by one class.] Assign percentage weights to each of the criteria (summing to 100%) according to the way you wish the criteria to be weighted throughout the course. Do this first as an individual, then reach consensus in a group of six. Then every group should choose a representative who will speak for the group in a central group made up of all the group representatives. Any group may call a caucus with its representative or replace its representative at any time. The instructor reserves the right to make the final decision, as in the consultive leadership style. Our decision will be binding for the duration of the course."

TABLE 1
WEIGHTS OF GRADING CRITERIA

Evaluation Criteria	Individuals'[a] percentages	Groups'[a] percentages	Representatives' percentages
1. Quizzes on the reading.	25%	25%	25%
2. Journal entries on exercises.	18%	20%	20%
3. Class participation in exercises, cases, & discussions.	20%	26%	30%
4. Case writeups with peer evaluation.	16%	20%	25%
5. Short paper.	8%	4%	0
6. Term paper.	3%	0%	0
7. Final exam.	8%	5%	$\leq 25\%$[b]
8. Others:			0
9.			0

[a]Means. Rounding error accounts for failure to add to 100%

[b]Points could be drawn from any other criteria according to student's choice

No caucus was called nor was any representative replaced. There were some brief conversations between individuals and their representatives.

The consensus of the group representatives, shown in Table 1, was to assign 25% to quizzes, 20% to journal entries, 30% to class participation, 25% to case write-ups, and up to 25% to an Optional final exam. The points for the final exam would be drawn from any of the other criteria according to the student's choice. There would be no papers and, normally, no final. During the next class meeting, I tabulated the frequency distributions of percentages assigned by the 33 individuals and by the 5 separate groups. The mean individual choices for all of the criteria were very nearly the same as the consensus of the representatives, except for class participation and case write-ups with peer evaluation. Thus, there might have been some misrepresentation of individual preferences.

Immediately after completing the exercise, the 33 students were asked to write one or two paragraphs apiece, evaluating the exercise and sharing with me their feelings about it. The feedback taught me more about the exercise and about my students' insight and attitudes than I had dreamed would be possible. Table 2 shows the nature and frequencies of the students' ideas.

DISCUSSION

The bias in weightings for class participation and case write-ups might have been predicted because the group representatives were likely to have been the ones who participated the most in their groups. Well-developed oral communication skills, quick-thinking ability, self-confidence, assertiveness, early acceptance of leadership roles, etc., might have been characteristics that increased a person's chances of being chosen to represent a group. Also, possession of those characteristics might have influenced the representatives to weight heavily class participation and case write-ups with peer evaluations. They liked to talk and perhaps they believed that their frequent talking in class would improve their grades. As for case write-ups with peer evaluations, the representatives had already been recognized by their peers through being chosen to speak for their groups. Per- haps they felt that they would be evaluated positively by their peers in the future as well. The bias might be called "electoral college shift;' a concept that needs further research before any conclusions can be drawn about it. It represents a second-order risky shift if class participation and case write-ups can be considered more risky than the other criteria [3].

I chose to use the consultive model because it seemed to allow flexibility. I wanted to share some of my authority as instructor but was reluctant to trust the students with all ot it. Since this wag the first time anyone had tried the exercise, I feared that an unmotivating grading system might result. What if they decided to place 100% on a short paper? I wanted an escape route and, therefore, carefully defined 'consultive leadership style' on the day before the exercise. I would solicit their ideas and recommendations, I would consider them, and then I would decide. This way I would be able to design the grading system by myself, if necessary, but still might not be accused of reneging; and the climate probably would be no worse than that which would have evolved if we had not done the exercise at all. On the other hand, I would be able to accept any reasonable (to me) grading criteria, and the students and I would reap the benefits of their involvement. As it was, I felt that the representatives' decision was a good one and we implemented it.

The risks can be reduced considerably by assessing the moods and maturity levels of one's students. I would suggest using the exercise early, but not too early, in the course. Some norms and trust should be established first. I scheduled it for the middle of the second week, after doing the Course Expectations Exercise [4], informal self-introductions by students, reviews of the Managerial Grid [2] and the consultive leadership style [6], and the Sherlock Holmes Exercise [1]

as adapted by Porras [7]. We used the 'Performance Criteria Exercise" to bring expectancy theory to life during a later meeting.

TABLE 2

FREQUENCIES OF STUDENT COMMENTS ABOUT PERFORMANCE CRITERIA EXERCISE

		Comment	Frequency
+	1.	Good, excellent, beneficial, interesting, useful, valuable, etc.	28
+	2.	Gave class a part in an important decision	17
+	3.	Compromises showed cooperation needed to make group work, to make committed, important, realistic decisions	9
0	4.	Outcome different from my decisions but I can live with the compromise	9
-	5.	I don't understand what's going on, not clear where course is going, can't keep up with prof., working in the dark, etc.	6
+	6.	Participation leads to better grades, motivation, harder work	4
+	7.	Fair way to let us decide how to be graded	4
+	8.	Course different, unique, but still informative	4
+	9.	Geared towards learning, learn from experiences & not memorizing from books, learn things about self and others	4
+	10.	Participation is reason for high attendance, satisfaction	3
+	11.	Demonstrates participative/consultive leadership style, get a feeling for it	3
+	12.	Chance to meet with groups, people oriented, see how classmates feel and why	3
+	13.	Feel I can contribute more, becoming more comfortable in speaking out, helped me realize that I have a big part in this course	3
+	14.	Let me experience Theory Y philosophy that I have learned about but never seen in action (in or out of the classroom)	3
-	15.	Representatives should face class and talk louder, should set time limit for group rep. session, group discussion takes longer	3
+	16.	More methodical than I expected, prof. is capable of teaching course	2
-	17.	Group wanted to minimize work, not maximize learning. Group tend to second-guess prof.	2

The group representatives' discussion and the student feedback in Table 2 revealed that my fears about lack of trust were not warranted. The students demonstrated that they were mature, learning-oriented, and willing to attempt a different kind of course which would focus on learning by doing rather than on trying to remember what the professor and the book would say. My acceptance of their decision seemed to help build a foundation for mutual trust between them and me, and to reinforce classroom norms of spontaneity and candor. The constructive criticism I received, particularly Items 5 and 15 of Table 2, suggested some adjustments I needed to make.

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