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CONVERSATIONS WITH TOP MANAGEMENT (SIMULATED)

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a content analysis of 231 anonymous course evaluations submitted by students from ten sections of Business Policy classes at Wright State University. The eight undergraduate and two graduate sections were taught by the same instructor (the author). Course format included text, cases, and business simulations. Only the comments about simulations were analyzed for this paper. They show that students assume different roles in managing their simulated firms. They are wallflowers (3%), freeloaders (5%), authoritarians (4%), know-it-alls (3%), complainers (9%), Monday morning quarterbacks (15%), and positive thinkers (61%). All have something of value to communicate to the instructor. lie can use their feedback to improve course planning and to solve problems. Specific techniques include tests, peer evaluations, participation grades, decision rationales, game syntheses, scenario events, dry runs, observations, consultations, individual conferences, integration (of business functions), corrective assignments, enrichment assignments, and briefings for the Board of Directors.

BACKGROUND

Business Simulations that view “the firm” through the eyes of top management are excellent for use in policy or capstone courses in the business curriculum. The major functional areas, Marketing, Finance, and Operations, are mixed with significant elements of Accounting, Economics, Materials Management, Information Systems, and sometimes Personnel to simulate identical firms that exist within a defined oligopoly. The students are usually divided into groups of two or more and are instructed to play roles corresponding to top management positions in real-world organizations. To most students, both the simulation and the top management roles are new. Although tyros, they are called upon to make real decisions for their simulated firms. Many students enter easily into their roles and truly enjoy the challenge and the competition. Others never quite accept the roles thrust upon them and abdicate to more dominant members of the group. Still, others never quite enter into their roles and make decisions as consultants, rather than as managers who have a real stake in the business.

This paper presents a content analysis of written and verbal feedback from students who have been top managers (simulated) in policy course simulations offered over the past four years at Wright State University. Most of the Comments are from anonymous course evaluations where students could speak freely about their experiences as top managers (simulated). Their observations provide substantial insight for instructors who apply simulation as a pedagogical technique. Most of the comments support simulation as a valid learning experience. Some are comical. Some are caustic. All provide clues about how the students “played the game.” Using these clues, instructors can find better ways to stimulate the reluctant, energize the indolent, involve the bystanders, and capitalize on the “gung-ho” participators. This paper will identify the participant- types detected in analyzing feedback and will suggest some methods for combating negative attitudes and

enhancing learning.

TOP MANAGERS (SIMULATED) SPEAK

Formal Feedback

Tests, reports, and class presentations are normal vehicles for formal feedback. All furnish valuable information to the instructor. Perhaps the best way to obtain uninhibited feedback ia through controlled course evaluations that conceal the identity of the students. When sheltered by the cloak of anonymity, students will freely express their opinions. An alert instructor can gain valuable information about course format, materials, techniques, and results by evaluating these uninhibited remarks. Sometimes, a “thick akin” is essential when feedback becomes caustic and hypercritical, but there are always the positive, helpful remarks to salve the wounds. Both the positive and the critical feedback provide clues for improving future offerings of the course.

Informal Feedback

For improving current classes, the instructor must rely on observation and verbal exchanges with students. This is extremely important when simulation is used, because students can view it as “just a game” and minimize its learning capability. They must be encouraged to immerse themselves in their roles as top managers and apply all their knowledge and capabilities in making good business decisions.

By observing the simulated companies in action, the instructor can identify potential problems. For example, an industry can easily fall into a price war when several companies cut prices to the break-even point or below. This can be extremely frustrating early in the simulation. The instructor may have to assume the role of consultant, or government regulator, to head off this problem.

If a student displays a negative attitude, the instructor may take corrective action if he is sensitive to informal feedback from observation of the student and his teammates.

Instructor’s Role

In business simulations, the instructor should also participate in the game. He becomes a consultant, an arbitrator, a regulator, an interpreter, or whatever role is necessary. Very seldom does he lecture. Primarily, his objective should be to facilitate this learning experience and to make it as realistic as possible. Sometimes, it requires considerable ingenuity to convince the student managers that the simulated catastrophe they have just experienced actually happens to real managers in real companies. The instructor soon learns to anticipate the various roles students can assume. Many of the problems may be solved by designing the course format and grading system to make use of peer pressures, discussion sessions, interesting game scenarios, and other techniques. Some problems must be identified and solved as the simulation progresses.

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PARTICIPANT TYPES

Analysis of both formal and informal feedback reveals various postures students assume as they confront this new experience of managing a simulated firm. Most of them accept the role of top management and take pride in making their firm succeed. Unfortunately, not all are positive thinkers. Other participant types can be identified: Wallflowers, freeloaders, authoritarians, know-it-alls, complainers, and Monday morning quarterbacks.

In the discussion that follows, the information and quotations were gleaned from a content analysis of confidential evaluations collected at the completion of ten sections of Business Policy classes (eight undergraduate and two graduate) at Wright State University over the past four years. In all classes, simulations, cases, and text materials were used. Of the 262 students in these classes, 231 responded to confidential questions about course content, format, and techniques. Using an N = 231, the responses relating to simulation were categorized according to the participant types discussed in this article. The proportion (%) in each category is stated.

Wallflowers

When students assume the role of observer rather than participant, they become wallflowers. They can be identified early in the course if they are often absent from class or miss team meetings. Their team members tend to ignore them. They make statements like the following:

“The team met when I could not attend.”

“Team meetings were no fun because the others became so involved and upset when things went wrong.”

“Too many boring team meetings.”

“I missed the first two classes and was assigned to a team that did not include me in their discussions.”

About 3% of the students fell into this category.

Freeloaders

Some students participate in team activities but are willing to allow others to do the work and make the decisions. They are usually the ones who attend but are not prepared. They often complain that the course is too much work. Typical remarks from this group include:

“Fortunately, our team had a good leader who knew what to do.”

“Too much work for undergrads.”

“I liked the group work because the decisions got made even when I couldn’t be there.”

Almost 5X of the students (mostly undergraduate) fell into the category of freeloaders.

Authoritarians

Some students easily assume leadership roles. If they are teamed with “wallflowers” or “freeloaders,” they quickly become authoritarian and may do most of the work as well as make the

decisions. If their team members are competent and aggressive, they may be able to modify their behavior and together form a competent group. Some people, however, must be the recognized leader, so conflict develops and the group may become ineffective. The authoritarian often makes statements such as these:

“I liked the experience of running my own company.” “My team didn’t give me too many arguments.”

“The two guys assigned to me were very helpful in doing the computations I needed to make decisions.”

About 4% of the students fell into this category. Know-I t-Alls

Related more to the freeloaders than the authoritarians, the “know-it-alls” were usually not willing to work because they perceived the simulation as just another exercise using material they had studied in other courses. For some reason, they could not comprehend the value of integrating business functions. Their comments were:

“Nothing new--a repeat of other course material.”

“I really didn’t learn much, and what I learned was a lot of garbage.”

“Simulation lacks challenge; ---isn’t fun.”

This category presents the greatest challenge for the instructor. They are difficult to identify because they usually will not say such things until the course is finished; then, it is too late. Fortunately, only 3X of the students fell into this category.

Complainers

Complainers are those who find fault with the course and the simulation but offer no positive feedback. For example, the student was a true complainer who wrote:

“It’s ridiculous to expect us to have time for other courses while taking this one.”

On the other hand, the student is a positive thinker who wrote:

“I spent more time on this course than any other in nine years at Wright State University. Had fun! Learned!”

The most common complaint concerned the great amount of time consumed in team meetings.

Other complainers wrote;

“The simulation was not very useful.”

“The course seemed to be a lesson in coping with stress.”

“I’m tired of working in groups and having to carry most of the load.”

“My grade should not depend on the effort of others in the group.”

“Text and game both lousy.”

These gripes are not very pleasant for the instructor, but they contribute to humility. More importantly, they provide insight into the attitudes held by some students. Their perception of the course and the simulation provides clues for improving the conduct and

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techniques employed. The number of complainers, (9X of those surveyed), is significant and should jolt the instructor into investigating and correcting problems revealed by valid complaints.

Monday Morning Quarterbacks

This group offered suggestions about how things should have been done. Some were critical, others were polite, almost apologetic, with their recommendations. Many conflicting suggestions were made, such as:

“The entire course should be built around the simulation.”, and:

“Throw out the simulation.”

or:

“The simulation is too simple; not realistic enough.”, and:

The simulation was too much work. A simpler game would have been better.”

Of course, it is impossible to react favorably to both of two conflicting statements. If dichotomies in student opinion are significant, the instructor may need to investigate further to determine the real cause. Other Monday morning quarterbacks suggested:

“You should have eliminated the tests because the simulation did not leave us time to study for them.”

“All companies should have suffered strikes, fires, and late shipments rather than leave it to random numbers.”

“In all honesty, if it were not for the simulation, the course would not be very helpful.”

“Should use only one or two persons on a team. It would be easier to meet and fewer arguments about decisions.”

“Wish I knew how the computer was programmed. Maybe I could beat this game!”

“We should not have been thrown into the simulation to sink or swim.”

“Wish there was some way to make a decision then correct it after you see the results.”

“You should have explained things better. We did not realize our plant could be wiped out for lack of a measly \$1,000 in fire insurance.”

Comments in this category are some of the most interesting and informative of all. They reveal lessons learned as well as frustrations and problems that students encountered. They have generated some very valuable changes in procedure, such as better briefing for the simulation, class discussions of industry problems, more realistic scenario exercises, and more even pacing of course work. More than 15% of the students had suggestions of this type.

Positive Thinkers

This is the category we all like. Positive thinkers offer much more than compliments. They are helpful critics who make suggestions such as:

“The simulation was the best feature of the course, but the cases were good, also. The

text was good, but a bit expensive in view of the few chapters we studied.”

“I enjoyed the simulation. Wish one more orientation period and some sample decisions with results had been allotted at the beginning.”

“Great course The models you presented were more helpful than the text. Why not work up more models and forget the text?”

Some of the students in this category confirm that course objectives were accomplished for many students:

“Simulation helped me understand the dynamic nature of business.”

“Amazingly enough, I did find the simulation very helpful in integrating my MBA courses.”

“I normally dislike teamwork, but in this course the three of us really functioned as a team. It was less work for all of us and we all enjoyed it.”

“Simulation seemed to give me some insights into the world of business.”

It helped me understand how top managers have to make their decisions even when all the information is not there.”

A few students reveal areas of personal development that will help them better cope with the vicissitudes a manager must face. Here are examples:

“This course has increased my self-confidence.”

“I can now see why Accounting is important for managers.”

“Previously, I had no idea that little things like missed delivery dates can bomb the whole plan.”

“For the first time, I spoke to the whole class without shaking. I guess it was because I was so sure of my facts that I forgot to be scared.”

Let us not omit those few delightful remarks that make teaching truly worthwhile:

“This course was one of the best in terms of overall learning.”

“Interesting course. Lots of work, but well- paced.”

“This course ties in all the others I have taken in the MBA program.

Overall, there were about 61% of the responses in the “positive thinker group.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?

If we reflect a bit on the meanings behind the words expressed by our fledgling managers, we can gain an understanding of how they really feel about the simulation experience. It seems that the majority of students feel that it is an interesting way to learn. They are willing to work harder (with a few gripes, of course) because the challenge is dynamic, compelling, and exciting. Some realize for the first time that the firm truly is a system that succeeds only if its parts are properly coordinated. Many see how environmental threats can devastate carefully made plans unless

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contingencies are included in planning.

On the negative side, there are a few who will not or cannot become involved. Some are too busy; some are unconcerned; some are indolent; some are immature. These present a special challenge for the instructor; one that learning techniques alone cannot solve. Wallflowers, freeloaders, and know-it-alls fall into this group. Authoritarians cause problems but they never stand on the sidelines. Complainers are usually participants who love to gripe. They are learning, but tend to undermine team morale and make life a bit less pleasant for the instructor. Frequently, their protests are valid. Monday morning quarterbacks are really grippers who protest after the fact. Often, they are top students who have excellent ideas about the way the game should have been played. The instructor's job is to listen carefully and use the feedback to improve the learning experience in the course.

WHAT CAN THE INSTRUCTOR DO?

Feedback from students should be evaluated and translated into positive actions to provide motivation and promote learning. These actions fall roughly into two categories: those that must be included when the course is planned, and those that may be applied as the course progresses.

Course Planning

When students know from the start how their grade will be determined, even the "unmotivated" will make an effort to pass the course. Often, a traditional text or written report will bridge the gap to the experiential approach with something more familiar to the students. Following are ideas that might be planned for the course to solve some of the problems discussed.

Written Tests

Wallflowers and freeloaders must be encouraged to participate. Group efforts tend to obscure their concern. They probably will receive higher grades than they deserve. Written tests on text, readings, cases, and simulation manual will compel them to study (in the traditional way) and perhaps a spark of motivation will be generated.

Peer Evaluations

Part of the grade could be determined by peer evaluations. When offered the opportunity to comment in strict confidence about the contributions of their group peers, students will be quite candid. If there is more than one peer evaluation for each student, it is easier to separate sincere negative comments from vendettas resulting from personality clashes. Peer evaluations will identify most wallflowers, free-loaders, authoritarians, and know-it-alls. Also they will reward the hard workers and good team members.

Participation Grades

If five to ten percent of the course grade is awarded for participation, the instructor has the flexibility to reward contributors and penalize chronic absentees, wallflowers, and freeloaders. This is not easy because the instructor must be prepared to justify the grade awarded. Participation should be more than attendance or speaking up in a discussion. It should involve a positive contribution to the class.

Decision Rationale

It is useful to require that a brief written rationale be turned in with each decision for the simulation. Why did the team decide to increase capacity or cut prices? Why did they issue bonds instead of stock? Answering such questions forces the participants to think through their decisions and justify them. It reinforces their learning experience.

Game Synthesis

A final review of their simulation experience may be written by each team at the end of the course. In this report, they can review their original objectives and strategies and compare results. They should explain failures as well as successes. The decision rationales provide an excellent history for writing the synthesis. Charts of key variables, financial analyses, linear programming analyses, and other techniques and documentation should be included. The synthesis will often reveal that teams which finished poorly in the simulation actually learned as much as the winners. The synthesis grade should carry more weight when random events (strikes, fires, etc.) are likely to adversely affect the performance of an otherwise excellent team. It gives them a chance to explain their performance and to review what they should have done to soften the impact of a contingent event.

Scenario Events

Many contingencies lurk in the real world. To simulate these uncertainties, business games usually include random events such as machine breakdowns, demand fluctuations, and delayed delivery of raw materials. A planned scenario of events will make the game even more realistic and interesting. There can be labor negotiations, strikes, fires, power shortages, material shortages, government purchases, and many other events to make the simulation realistic. The scenario events available will depend on the particular simulation used, the resources available, and the ingenuity of the instructor. A simulation can never be as complicated as real life, but scenario events can defuse critics who claim the game is too predictable.

Dry Runs

Some of the remarks recorded earlier in this paper revealed that introduction to the simulation was inadequate. Several techniques may be used to remedy this. The first decision could be a "dry run" that could be repeated. This would help eliminate that "lost" sensation that prevails when starting this new experience. Some simulators provide several quarters of history and allow new companies to take over with knowledge about past decisions and results. (Note: Suggest that all teams start with the same status, i.e., the same history deck.) Also, demonstrations can be arranged to show students how to organize their firms and do the analysis necessary to make good decisions. Be sure to follow all these exercises with a question and answer session.

CORRECTIVE TECHNIQUES

As the game progresses, the various roles assumed by students will become apparent. Also, problems may develop. The instructor must be prepared to step in and take corrective action, if needed. Following are some suggestions.

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Observation

Observe groups in action. Circulate! Encourage! Answer questions! Let the class know you are interested in their progress. The students will appreciate your presence and you will spot the wallflowers, freeloaders, authoritarians, and know-it--alls. Better yet, you will identify the positive thinkers you can count on to keep up class morale when complainers try to tear it down.

Consultation

The instructor or graduate assistants may serve as consultants to guide teams that have problems. This is usually acceptable to the rest of the class if confidences are not violated. A consultation could keep an unsuccessful team from giving up.

Individual Conferences

The instructor may detect a need for conferences with individuals who display dysfunctional attitudes. By showing an interest in the student, you may be able to help him adjust to his teammates or to the course requirements. Sometimes, in a conference with an exceptionally successful student, you can enlist him to help correct a problem.

Integration

The simulation should be integrated into other course material. Leave time for reviewing results and discussing strategies as the simulation progresses. Look for opportunities to illustrate marketing strategies, pricing strategies, maintenance policies, or other lessons related to the simulation. Panels of faculty members, graduate students, or class members can bring Out many ideas the instructor could miss. Small classes lend themselves to discussion sessions that will enhance interest and strike the spark some students need to solve the problems their firms encounter.

Corrective Assignments

Normally, each team will not include specialists in all business areas. Decision will be more satisfactory if deficiencies are detected early in the course. Corrective assignments in financial statement analysis, marketing mix, production planning, and financial planning could bolster a faltering team before all is lost. Plan the exercises ahead of time and have graduate assistants aid you in correcting knowledge deficiencies.

Enrichment Assignments

Frequently it is difficult for students to apply specialized problem solving techniques in their decision processes. They have studied quantitative techniques, marketing management, economic analysis, and materials management, but have never applied them. Simulation offers an opportunity to actually solve a product mix problem using Linear Programming. It allows them to determine the price, promotion, and place for their products. Show them how to do it. Or have an outside speaker demonstrate the technique. Sometimes a team in the class will come up with an innovative approach. Give them recognition, and allow them to demonstrate it.

Briefing The Board

Top managers are held accountable for their decisions. This feature

of real life can be simulated by use of the decision rationale and synthesis, mentioned above.

A dramatic and popular way to simulate accountability is to have the teams brief a board of directors. The instructor and graduate assistants or other faculty members sit as a board of directors. The simulated firms prepare briefings to report plans and progress. Charts and slides should be used. This is an effective way to train students in the art of briefing superiors.

CONCLUSION

Students in the roles of simulated top managers communicate with their instructor both during and after the course. The compliments are nice, but comments from the complainers and Monday morning quarterbacks offer endless suggestions for improving the course. By carefully "listening" and analyzing what the students are really saying, the instructor can apply many techniques to identify problems, correct deficiencies, and smooth the rocky road of learning.