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PERSONALITY TRAITS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES:
TWO ONE-HOUR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING EXERCISES

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ABSTRACT

Personality traits and organizational culture are two related concepts that are difficult to teach. Both concepts are more easily learned through experiential techniques. This exercise uses a personality questionnaire and group projects to aid understanding of how different kinds of behavior are rewarded in different organizational cultures. Some of the pitfalls of cultural selection become apparent during the exercise.

INTRODUCTION

Goals

1. To learn some personality traits which are important in the organizational setting.
2. To discuss how the traits might affect the performance and satisfaction of individuals in the organization.
3. To understand the concept of individuals "fitting" the organization culture.

Time Required

Two hours

Materials Required

1. One copy of the Behavior Description for each participant [2],
2. Four copies of the Behavior Description group report form.
3. One copy of the Organizational Culture Profiles handout for each participant.
4. Four copies of the Organizational Culture group report form.

(All four may be ordered from the authors.)

FIRST HOUR

Process

Step 1: (10 minutes) Administer and score the Behavior Description. Four scores are computed -- dominance, extroversion, stability, and control. Scores are computed by transferring numerical rankings of the words from the instrument form to the Scoring Sheet and totaling the responses in each column of the Scoring Sheet. Thus, the dominance score will be a total of all the ranks assigned to the twelve words that de- scribe dominant behavior. The three remaining scores (extroversion, stability, and control) are computed similarly. The scores are then plotted on the graph provided.

Step 2: (15 minutes) Divide the class into four groups based on each participant's highest Behavior Description score -- i.e., a D group, an E group, an S group, and a C group. Individuals with two or more equally high scores may be assigned to whichever group the instructor chooses--

usually the smaller of the groups. Each group is assigned the following tasks:
A. Determine what traits, strengths, and weaknesses the members of your group have in common.
B. Determine how these traits, strengths, and weak- nesses might affect your performance and satisfaction in a work organization.
C. Select a spokesperson to present your answers for A and B to the assembled class.
A group report form may be provided for each group to aid them in this task. As the groups perform their tasks, the instructor should observe their behaviors, processes, and group climates.

Step 3: (10 minutes) Each group presents its findings to the class followed by the instructor's observations of how the behaviors, processes, and climates differed in each group. Typically, the instructor will observe that the D group climate is competitive with each member striving to contribute an idea but appearing not to take the exercise seriously. They usually finish first and may use a mathematical approach to reduce the conflict of too many competing ideas. It is hard for them to agree on answers. The E group process is usually characterized by loose chat. The climate is jovial with many stories and examples causing a last minute press to finish. The S group is usually very methodical and detailed in its approach with an amiable, supportive climate. They are sometimes slow to finish. The C group is usually systematic and organized and seeks to define exactly what should be done. The climate is controlled. Members may appear anxious with lots of nodding and serious looks.

Step 4: (15 minutes) Discuss the theory behind the Behavior Description with the class. It should be pointed out that the Behavior Description scores represent a person's own perception. It may or may not describe how that individual actually behaves, how others perceive that person, or how behavior is modified by the roles he/she must play and other situational pressures. An individual's ability to adapt behavior to changing circumstances is itself a personality trait that is more-or-less normally distributed in the general population. Therefore, some people will be quite flexible in changing behavior while others will be quite rigid. Under certain conditions, changing one's behavior can produce stress (as in conditions of role conflict) which may affect one's physical or emotional health. When individual scores are plotted on the graph, participants can assess their scores relative to the general population. The solid horizontal line in the middle of the graph indicates the mean (average) scores for the general population. Scores below this midline are low scores. Scores above the mid-line are high. The dotted lines enclosed by brackets indicate the distance of + or - 1 standard deviation from the mean (noted to the left of the graph by 1 SD and -l SD) and + or - 2 standard deviations from the mean.

The concept of normal distribution predicts that two- thirds or sixty-seven percent of the general population

would score within + or - 1 SD of the mean. The mean scores of all four scales are approximately twenty-four and the standard deviations are approximately four so that 2/3's of the population score between 20 and 28 on any trait leaving only 1/6 who score above 28 and 1/6 who score below 20. Therefore, a score which falls outside the 67% bracket would indicate a significant preference for or avoidance of that particular trait. Further, a score that falls outside the 95% bracket indicates an even stronger preference or avoidance of such behavior. Individuals with extreme scores will have greater faith in the descriptions provided by the Behavior Description.

People who score high on the D scale are said to prefer dominant behavior. The <u>dominant individual</u> usually describes him or herself as being "self-reliant, positive, competitive, original, adventurous, eager, decisive, forceful, and bold." If this is the way in which the person actually behaves, he or she may be seen by others as being either a "forceful and dynamic leader" or a "belligerent troublemaker" depending on the circumstances. If such behavior is inappropriate for the situation, others may see the dominant individual as being "brash, pushy, reckless, overbearing, and egotistical."

Low D scorers tend to be "mild mannered, conservative% modest, cautious" people who are sometimes seen by others as being "submissive, hesitant, or unsure of themselves."

The <u>extrovert</u> (high E score) usually uses such self-descriptions as "enthusiastic, cordial, entertaining, outgoing, diplomatic, sociable, convincing, polished, popular, and persuasive." If the person actually behaves this way, he/she may be seen by others as being "enthusiastic and popular" or "superficial and nonproductive" depending on the situation. If the situation is inappropriate for this type of behavior, extroverts may be seen by others as "talking too much, wasting time, overly concerned with popularity, superficial, self-centered, and shallow."

Individuals who score low on the E scale are usually "logical, factual, probing, thoughtful and decisive" individuals who are sometimes seen by others as "cold, aloof, blunt, shy and skeptical."

The <u>stable person</u> is generally described as being "dependable, persistent, stable, controlled, steady, even-tempered, settled, amiable, patient, consistent, accommodating, and unhurried." If they do indeed behave this way, they may be seen by others as "patient, persistent, team-players" or as "stubborn roadblocks to progress and change" depending on the circumstances. If such behavior is inappropriate for the situation, they may be seen as "slow-starters with no drive and ambition, unwilling to fight, and slow to react."

Persons who score low on the S scale are "alert, self-starting, flexible, responsive, and variety-seeking" individuals who are sometimes seen by others as "impatient, impulsive, erratic, and explosive."

The <u>controlled individual</u> is usually described as being "accurate, receptive, careful, systematic, open-minded, conservative, precise, cautious, orderly, exacting, cooperative, and correct." When people act this way, they are seen as "precise, systematic, and cooperative co-workers" in appropriate situations or as "overly-dependent, fearful people" in others. When the situation is inappropriate for this kind of behavior, they may be seen by others as "scared, inflexible, overly concerned with detail and perfection, bound by procedure, inhumanly neat, and without ideas of their own."

Low C scorers are "independent, individualistic, firm and strong," but are sometimes seen by others as being "stubborn, unbending, arbitrary, and uncommunicative."

Thus, there are both positive and negative interpretations for each type of behavior, depending on the situation in which it occurs and the person judging the behavior. Obviously, the higher the score on any scale the more that person will agree with these descriptions. Taken together, scores on these four variables provide a very large number of possible combinations which result in a pleasing and essential variety of human personalities.

SECOND HOUR

Step 5: (5 minutes) Introduce the concept of Organizational Culture.

An organization's culture is analogous to an individual's personality. Culture is a robust concept which includes the relatively uniform and enduring values, customs, traditions, practices and behaviors of the organization. Organizations, like people, can be described on trait continuums as conservative-experimenting, warm-cold, stable-dynamic, relaxed-tense, uncontrolled-controlled, practical-imaginative, etc. Culture is a common perception shared by the organization's members, and it influences the relationships between insiders as well as relations with outsiders.

Various researchers have identified the following characteristics of organizational culture:
1. Values - the basic concepts and beliefs of an organization, as well as its standards for achievement.
2. Heroes - the people who personify the cultural values and serve as role models for employees.
3. Rites and rituals - the systematic and programmed routines of day-to-day life in the company (including ceremonies).
4. Individual autonomy - the amount of responsibility, independence, and initiative allowed to members.
5. Structure - the degree of formalization, centralization, and direct control over events.
6. Reward orientation - the criteria, measures of success, and way of distributing rewards.
7. Leadership - consideration, support, or warmth provided by leaders.
8. Conflict - disagreements between members and how they are managed.

Step 6: (5 minutes) Distribute copies of the Organizational Culture Profiles handout. Without discussion, have participants decide which culture is most congruent with their Behavior Description.

Step 7: (20 minutes) Reconvene the groups which were formed for the behavior discussion and have each group answer the following questions:
A. Determine which organizational culture would provide your group members with the most success and satisfaction and tell why.
B. List problems which might arise if all members of the organization possessed the same traits, strengths, and weaknesses.
C. List some of the other types of personalities which might be needed in your chosen organization culture and why.
D. Select a spokesperson to present your answers to the assembled class.

Step 8: (10 minutes) Each group presents its findings

to the class.

Step 9: (10 minutes) Summarize how knowledge of individual differences and organizational culture can be used by management to create more effective and satisfying organizations:

Knowledge of individual differences can be used to create more effective organizations by improving personnel placement, communication, motivation, structuring the organization and groups within the organization, assigning problems, and initiating change.

However, before individual differences can be used, they must be reliably measured and their importance must be properly weighed in the decision process. For instance, in placement decisions, differences such as specific skills, knowledge, abilities, intelligence, commitment, and motivation may be far more important than the traits contained in the Behavior Description.

In addition, there are a great number of so-called individual differences which are irrelevant (not job related) for most placement decisions. Such traits as sex, race, age, religion and national origin (which are also illegal criteria for job placement) are of little practical value in placement. These traits are surrogates or group differences rather than individual differences. Although there are sometimes legitimate differences between groups, it should be remembered that we are selecting individuals, not groups, in a placement decision. The concept of normal distribution assures us that, even in a low scoring group, there will be some individuals that score higher than the group mean on any relevant traits. These relevant trait measurements should be used rather than the less reliable surrogate or group trait.

Managers must ensure that any information they use for decision making is valid for that use whether they are using test scores, interviews, observations, or opinions. A validated test is always preferred for decision making over an unvalidated opinion or observation.

Some additional points can be made about personality types and traits:
1. No personality type is superior to another. Each has its own strengths and weaknesses as well as its appropriate situations and jobs. Each type can make a unique contribution to the organization and society when well placed.
2. Each personality type is better suited for some occupations than others and people tend to choose a job which requires behavior congruent with their type.
3. Each type tends to develop a leadership style which is comfortable and, therefore, may be more effective in some leadership situations than others.
4. Decision making is approached differently by each style. For instance, dominant types may make rapid decisions without waiting for data while controlled types may wait for more and more information in order to be absolutely correct.
5. Each type tends to develop its own communication style, and communication can be improved by appealing to each individual style. The different styles sometimes lead to what has been called personality clashes which can be overcome through communication techniques suited to each style.
6. There are certainly more than four personality types. This is only one "cut" at the vast variety of human personalities.

The Organizational Culture Profiles are based on Deal and Kennedy's [1] culture types. The behavior expected of managers in the Driving culture is congruent with the traits of the dominant individual. Managerial behavior in the Enthusiastic organization best fits the extrovert traits. Specialist organizational culture is a comfortable home for the stable person. While the controlled individual will most likely find a niche in the control culture. Deal and Kennedy named these cultures Tough-Guy/Macho, Work Hard/Play Hard, Bet Your Company, and Process; respectively.

Most organizations do not fall neatly into one of these descriptions and may exhibit some characteristics of each in various parts of the organization. It would be unwise to fill any organization with a single type of personality based on cultural fit since the weaknesses of that personality type would become an organizational risk. Most cultures can be improved by insuring that the organization is staffed with a variety of personnel capable of contributing the full range of skills, behaviors, and values necessary to deal with potential problems that may be faced by the organization.

TEACHING NOTE

This exercise has been used and refined over a two year period and will continue to be used by us in the future. It has been effective in both graduate and undergraduate management, organizational behavior, and policy courses. Class sizes have ranged from 15 to 45 students and resulted in subgroups of from 1 to 12 people. The exercise itself does not lend itself to grading. We have used it only as a learning experience. Evaluation of participants has been done by including questions about personality traits and organizational cultures on course examinations. Other details of class organization, timing, feedback, preparation, learning objectives, etc. are included in the exercise.

REFERENCES

[1] Deal, Terrence E. and Allen A. Kennedy. Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

[2] Oliver, John E. "The Behavior Description," in The 1987 Annual: Developing Human Resources by Goodstein, L.D. and Pfeiffer, J.W., University Associates, LaJolla, CA, 1987.