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A GROUP EXPERIENCE AS AN INTEGRATED PART OF THE CORE MANAGEMENT COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an attempt to supplement the teaching of concepts in the core management course with an experiential group experience engaging students actively in the learning process to generate the rules and principles to guide their behavior in new group situations. Each of the eight sequential steps that constitute the group experience is described and its underlying rationale is discussed.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Studies such as the Porter-McKibbin Report, which called for increased attention to the development of interpersonal and leadership skills among business students (Porter & McKibbin, 1988), and the increasing use in organizations of self-managed teams, cross-functional task forces, groups organized around production processes, and other group-based settings have led to greater interest in developing student skills in managing groups. However, attention to groups in the curriculum is still insufficient—courses dedicated solely to group dynamics are neither common in undergraduate business programs nor specifically required for undergraduate accreditation.

The core course in organizational behavior is often based on one of a fairly large number of available texts. Currently, we happen to be using *Managing Organizational Behavior* by Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (1994), a representative text covering a range of important topics generally included in most management core courses. However, only 14% of the textbook (three chapters out of twenty-one) is focused on the topic of groups.

Due to this limited treatment of the important topic of groups, we feel it is beneficial to supplement textbook concepts with an experiential group assignment. This activity requires student membership in an ongoing group with problems to be solved and assignments to be completed so that the student is given an opportunity to take an active part in the learning process and generate from this experience the rules and

principles that will guide behavior in new group situations.

Experiential involvement in-groups increases the possibility of developing the skills needed to actually manage them in addition to the cognitive knowledge to understand their behavior. Michael Polanyi (1966) suggests that skills are responsive in nature and a product of the subconscious. What this means is that “skill cannot be taught in [an] ‘external’ fashion.... it is knowledge that one learns and then applies.... Skills can be learned only from experience,” and “experiences, not the instructor, are the true teachers.” (McKnight, 1995, pp. 92,204). Thus, participation in an experiential group activity is necessary to foster interpersonal skill development in students.

The experiential group assignment, in which students must learn to function in a group and also learn how to make a group productive, aspires to produce in students an understanding of the two characteristics of the learning organization described by Senge (1990), adaptiveness and generativity. In his terms, successful organizations are learning organizations—they are both adaptive (i.e., coping reactively with their environments) and generative (i.e., able to be creative).

The use of a group experience as part of a course is congruent also with the model of experiential learning presented in Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre (1974). In accordance with this model, experiential learning is conceived as a four-stage cycle: (1) concrete experience is followed by (2) reflection, which leads to (3) theory building involving the formation of abstract concepts and generalizations, which lead to (4) hypotheses to be tested in future actions, which in turn lead to new experiences to be reflected upon, and so the cycle continues.

This paper describes a semester-long group experience integrated into the core course in management. The primary aim is to supplement the traditional teaching process of textbook and lectures with a firsthand, continuing group

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experience in class and in so doing enrich the learning process and enhance learning.

THE INTEGRATED GROUP EXPERIENCE

To enrich the basic course in management with a group dynamics perspective without sacrificing other important topic areas, the following sequence of eight steps is undertaken in our course.

Step 1: Student Orientation to the Course

Orienting students to the special nature of the course is accomplished in the very first class session by focusing on continuous learning as a core issue for organizational survival and adaptation in dynamic environments.

Step 2: Group Formation

To foster a sense/climate of trust, the assignment of students to groups is done publicly utilizing a random procedure that is visible to the students.

Step 3: Empowering the Group Over Members

In cases where extrinsic motivation becomes necessary to elicit or maintain performance of group members, groups may be empowered to differentiate among the contributions of their members. The groups can award individual grades to their members based upon the collective judgment of the members as to each individual's contribution to the completion of assignments.

Step 4: Facilitating the Group Formation Stage

To help the class groups get off to a good start, the Group Formation Exercise (Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn, 1994) is used at the very beginning of the semester.

Step 5: Regular Group Class Activities

To ensure time for group development, approximately 30 minutes of each class session are dedicated to analyzing short cases or to exercises.

Step 6: Group Case Analyses

Written analyses of two cases are required from each group.

Step 7: Analysis of the Group Experience

Each group must create a written analysis of its experience as a group.

Step 8: Group Presentations

To provide a sense of closure to the group experience, all groups are required to share a presentation of their group experience with the entire class.

CONCLUSION

In general, students leave the course with a sense of closure. At the end of the course 63% of the 67 students enrolled indicated they learned "much" or "very much" and another 31% indicated "some" learning. A total of 79% of those enrolled indicated they found the course "satisfying" or "very satisfying." These results indicate that the group activity as described in this paper is found by most students to be a satisfying learning experience.

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