

HOW MANAGERS GET THINGS DONE: A VIRTUAL SOUNDBITE

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ABSTRACT

This 30-minute exercise introduces the functions of management to students so they can see and comprehend how managers get things done.

INTRODUCTION

Defining management functions is often the first step most management students must take to understand the workings of an organization. These management definitions, and Mintzberg's roles (1973), describe the functions managers must perform to achieve the organizations stated goals and objectives. The management process describes how the management functions work, or don't work, together. Management functions should interact continuously and simultaneously so managers can effectively integrate functions to achieve desired results from this process. This concept may be difficult for beginning management students to understand.

The objectives of this exercise are twofold: 1) introduce experiential education and 2) demonstrate the continuous and simultaneous nature of how management functions should work together. The exercise is appropriate for students in a beginning management class, either during the first class session or any session that introduces management to the class. This is an "unfreezing" activity to get students involved in the learning of the management process, and lets them know the class will use different learning methods. First impressions do count, so an exercise rather than simply a lecture, or handing out a syllabus, sets the learning objectives and course expectations for the semester.

Understanding the process of management, such as how managers achieve meaningful results,

requires a higher level of comprehension than memorizing the functions and definitions of management. Learners need a base of information to build a viable body of management knowledge. They also need ways to empower themselves to meet management's expectations. This requires a thorough understanding of the management process, reflective thinking and problem solving skills.

Experiential activities such as this exercise, role playing, simulations, other student interactions with fellow students and virtually any similar activities provide a choice learning environment for participants to enhance their "management" thinking and practice needed skills required to be a successful manager. Learning in this type of environment can facilitate self-empowerment and productive reflective thinking.

Following the learning cycle of 1) experiencing, 2) observing and reflecting, 3) forming abstract concepts and generalization and 4) applying--testing implications in new situations (Kolb, 1991), this exercise dramatizes the management process. Successful completion of the exercise will help participants form a realistic understanding of management functions and optimize their learning by involvement in the functions of management. This activity achieves these objectives by providing a beginning conceptual framework reinforced by definitions of management terms.

Students work together refining their definitions of the management functions so they can explain them to others. Next, students demonstrate and observe how the functions fit together and finally, they share their observations by applying the principles to practical situations.

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OBJECTIVES

1. Introduce experiential education to students in a challenging and effective way
2. Share and discuss the functions of management and definitions of terms
3. Accurately describe the management process and apply this concept to a real world situation.

MATERIALS

1. Information sheets. See Appendix A, or any management textbook for brief definitions of the management functions and terms.

EXERCISE

1. Read the introductory section in the text describing the functions of management planning, organizing, leading, controlling.

This exercise is designed for students who have not yet read the introductory section. If this section has already been assigned, begin with step 2.

2. Individually, write out your definition of the functions of management and describe how you would apply this information in a management situation?" Textbooks are allowed. Writing out this portion of the exercise ensures that each group member focuses on the management functions and is more likely to make a contribution during the next step, which involves a group discussion. It can also serve as a pre-test.
3. Students: select the management function you think is most interesting and form into groups. It is not necessary for groups to include the same number of students for each functional group, though each functional area must be included and have at least two people.
4. As a group develop a concise explanation of one particular function in three sentences or less. Encourage students to peruse the chapter(s) in the text, which deal with the function they selected (about 10 minutes). Then develop a pantomime, role-play, etc. describing the function. Encourage presenting groups to think of "creative," "clever,"

ways to present their material. Give them five to seven minutes to develop their presentation.

5. Ask for at least two volunteers from each function--8 total. With larger classes (40 or more), request three volunteers from each function. Volunteers present a demonstration and/or explanation of their function to the class.

6. Explain the following procedures ONLY to the volunteers: "Management functions are not isolated activities that occur in a vacuum. Instead, managers must understand all organizational functions and coordinate several functions at one time to meet organizational goals. Understanding functions is essential to understanding how managers get things done. Therefore, when you present your findings to the class you will do it all at the same time."

7. While the groups are developing their presentation ask the class to observe this very important part of the management process. Direct the class to make notes about their observations and impressions of how management functions work.

8. Finally, ask the presenting groups to begin their presentations. Further reinforce the groups speaking simultaneously with the following explanation: An important part of this exercise is for all groups to talk and give their demonstrations at the same time. Do not worry that the class may not understand you. Since etiquette normally stops us from interrupting and speaking while others are speaking, presenting groups will need to concentrate so they can continue talking and demonstrating while the other three groups are talking. Note: Some presenters break away from the group, others just mill around together as they speak and demonstrate. Since the class has already read the explanations of management functions, it is not important for them to hear the explanations. They will gain a better understanding of the process from observing. Allow the chaos, which you are encouraging to continue for a few minutes. Then, STOP the process.

9. Praise the presenting groups for taking on this challenging task. Explain why this activity is part of the learning objectives. Allow them to return to

their place in the classroom.

10. Give presenting groups and observers about seven minutes to complete their notes on their observations.

DISCUSS TILE EXERCISE

1. Ask presenting groups how they felt, during their presentation and discuss their responses.
2. Pose questions to the class.
 - a. What really happened?
 - b. What does it mean? To you? To you as a future manager?
 - c. What do we need to remember from this activity?
 - d. How can you use this information in the future?
3. Ask students to write a paragraph describing what they have learned about the management process from this activity. Student responses comprise the post- test.

AFTER CLASS ALTERNATIVES

Collect the paragraphs as students complete them. Quickly review them, select a few of the better paragraphs, and read them to the class. Appendix B is an example of student observations from one iteration of (the functions exercise/name).

After selecting a few good descriptions of the activity, condense them into a one-page handout for the next class session.

- Use this exercise as a requested journal entry or homework assignment.

SUMMARY AND RESULTS

This readiness activity prepares students to understand their functional role in an environment that encourages reflective thinking. This unfreezing exercise introduces experiential learning to students in about 30 minutes. After participating and observing during this exercise students more accurately describe how managers get things done by understanding and effectively

using the management functions. A post-test confirms a deeper understanding of how the management functions are integrated to achieve an organization's goals and objectives.

During the first step of the exercise students generally describe management functions by regurgitating definitions from the textbook (See Appendix I). While these descriptions are accurate as far as they go, they reflect vertical thinking. Students' initial responses are best described as sequential.

Breaking the functions of management into discrete elements may help students to understand the definitions, but it tends to lend naive readers to expect the functions to also operate in that fashion. Working together in-groups, students hear and discuss alternative descriptions of management functions. Observing the simultaneous presentations provides a dramatic simulation of management functions in action. Organizations do not work in perfect sequential patterns. Instead inputs are both irregular and continuous. On the surface, the activity might appear too chaotic a scene for learning to occur. Conversely, students see the system as a whole and describe it more accurately on the post-test than on the pre-test.

Students' subsequent written comments demonstrate a broader understanding of how managers get things done. Most responses went beyond the textbook explanations. Students recognized the need for managers to be responsible, flexible, and open to feedback. They were aware of the need to coordinate and integrate management functions, and to communicate among the functions. Accordingly, the objectives of this activity were achieved. The results, as seen in Appendix II, demonstrate students' different and more substantial level of awareness of how the functions of management work together. The pre and post-test comparisons confirm this phenomenon.

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APPENDIX I

Management Functions

Planning. The process of determining an organization's goals and establishing an overall strategy for achieving these goals. Organizing. The process of determining what tasks are to be done, who is to do them, how the tasks are to be grouped, who reports to whom and where decisions are to be made.

Leading. The process of influencing and directing people to accomplish organizational goals, including motivating, communicating and resolving conflicts.

Controlling. The process of monitoring outcomes against plans to ensure that activities are producing expected results and addressing deviations from plans.

I learn in class.

- In essence the manager's job is to take the situation at hand and unscramble all the inputs given to them and to use what resources are available to accomplish this task.

- All four management functions must work together. ..must all be performed for an organization to run effectively. There must be coordination and communication between those states. These stages are not always precise and can often be confusing because managers may have to deal with all stages at once.

- To be effective in management, one must be flexible, and be able to juggle many tasks at once.

- This exercise was an excellent example of what can be experienced in a major corporation on a daily basis.. each individual has to be able to determine what their role is in the mass confusion

APPENDIX II

Sample Responses to Exercise After Class Discussion

Upon completion of the exercise, students were asked to describe how the functions of management work together. The following are sample responses.

- The four functions for achieving organization's goals are always in motion.

- It takes a bit of skill to properly plan, organize, lead and control; often the functions of management may appear confusing to those not involved in management; it is management's responsibility to make sure that tasks are properly carried out so that confusion is minimized

- Management is the continuous interactions of the elements of planning, organizing, leading and controlling. These activities are performed simultaneously. Management should be flexible and attuned to feedback that may be received. Often management's intentions are perceived differently than what was intended.

- Communications will play an important role in a manager's ability to perform those four functions. The real world will not be textbook perfect, and. ..I will need to be flexible and improvise the skills

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