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THE PRESIDENT'S DECISION: AN EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISE IN DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential role playing exercise for imparting an appreciation for decision-making processes and the importance of communication in leading organizations. These skills are particularly relevant in today's flattened, downsized organizations where all employees are increasingly involved in decision making processes.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Decision making quality influences the long-term success (or failure) of organizations. The processes used to make decisions, as well as the decisions themselves, affect employees' perceptions of the organization and commitment to those decisions. This exercise is directed to improving the decision-making skills of our students to enhance their effectiveness as future managers and decision makers.

OBJECTIVES AND USE OF THE EXERCISE

As instructors we should teach not only the principles of decision making--defining the problem, generating alternatives for resolution, evaluating these alternatives, and choosing and implementing the solution--but we should also offer students actual opportunities to engage in implementing and practicing these concepts and to receive feedback on their decisions.

A role-play that achieves some of these objectives is "The President's Decision" by Maier, Solem, and Maier (1975). The role-play instructions describe an electrical parts company with a new top management group consisting of the president and three vice-presidents. These four roles are provided with individual role descriptions which include data that could support opinions regarding expansion (or non-expansion) of the company's operations. The three vice-presidents want to expand the company and expect the president to announce such plans in the forthcoming meeting. However, the president's role description provides information on which he has based his decision not to expand operations. Thus, he calls a meeting of his three vice-presidents to announce his decision and check with them whether anything has been overlooked in arriving at his decision.

Those students not engaged in the role-play receive guidelines and become observers of the decision process. They share their observations and insights following the role play session and also engage in evaluating the quality of the President's decision.

Timing and Preparation

This exercise should be conducted after students have been exposed to the concepts of communication, decision making, and leadership. It gives those involved the opportunity to practice and observe the dynamics of leadership and decision making.

The length and detail included in each role description require that role assignments be given prior to the class meeting. Role players should study their roles carefully, so that they are not dependent on the text during the role playing session.

Feedback and Evaluation

Observer instructions focus attention on the president's verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors--his receptivity to data from others, degree of defensiveness, commitment to problem solving, and openness in communicating concerns. In addition, the merits of the solution decided upon are discussed from both the point of view of the President and that of the future of the company.

Gender

This exercise (originally published in 1957), casts all the roles as males. If desired, the names can easily be changed to unisex names by substituting initials for the first names or by using names that can be either male or female (e.g., Pat, Lynn, Tracy, etc.).

REFERENCES

- Maier, Norman A. F., Solem, Allan A., and Maier, Ayesha A. 1975 *The Role Play Technique: A Handbook for Management and Leadership Practice*. La Jolla, CA: University Associates, Inc. (This book is a revision of *Supervisory and Executive Development: A Manual for Role Playing* by the same authors, published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., in 1957.)