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THE SERVICE TRAINER SIMULATION

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ABSTRACT

The Service Trainer simulation is an interactive classroom exercise that has been used in Production/Operations Management classes. It has been used as an alternative to classroom lectures, films, or test on the concepts and applications of service management principles and practices. It is not a computer simulation rather it consists of a handbook, playing board, die and question cards. In the simulation, teams of students roll die, draw cards, answer questions and resolve service situations, all within a classroom setting.

INTRODUCTION

This Service Trainer simulation can be both educational and extremely easy to run. I have used the simulation both in Production/Operations Management courses at a university and as part of practitioner's conferences and seminars. In both cases the key advantage of the simulation is far more interactive than lectures. Instead of passively sitting through a lecture or film, students are actively involved in learning.

Overview

The Service Trainer simulation consists of both a handbook, used to acquire enough knowledge to play the game, a playing board, and related material. In the actual simulation participants roll a die, move around a playing board, and draw question cards when they land on certain spots. The key spots they can land on are either Challenge, Trivia, or Service Situation squares. Participants then draw an appropriate card from a deck of cards. If they correctly respond they can continue to move around the board, collecting "Gold Service Cards.

If participants incorrectly answer the question or lose a "challenge" to their answer, then the die is passed on to the next person or team. Challenges occur whenever another team or person believes they have a better answer then the champion (the one answering the question). Cold Service Cards are given for correct answers, successful challenges, and complete trips around the board. Cards can also be awarded for where a team finishes on the playing board. Those with the most Gold Service Cards "win."

The Service Trainer is more than just an enjoyable way to explore the concept of service. It provides participants with the knowledge and skill needed to improve services. Participants test their knowledge of service whenever they draw and correctly answer either a Challenge or Trivia question. Challenge questions involve managerial or strategic service issues, while Trivia questions, as the name implies, relate to interesting or intriguing facts and information about services.

The simulation tests more than a participant's knowledge about service, it also tests their ability to deliver appropriate service. This condition occurs whenever they draw Service Situation Cards and are asked for an appropriate response. These cards are actual real-life service incidents that occurred or what one CEO calls "moments of truth." By responding to these incidents, participants cannot only practice what they have learned, but also get a chance to use their own intuition and judgment.

Organization

To run the simulation, a facilitator first divides a group into teams. This usually involves choosing four or three teams for each playing board. Each team usually consists of three participants. Next, participants are asked to read their handbook and are usually given a study guide. The handbook provides participants with the basic knowledge to do well in the simulation. They will need time to read this 100-page handbook. In college classes I allow two or three weeks. In seminars I either allow one week to read the material or use the Service Situation questions and some of the broader, less detailed Challenge and Trivia questions. These simpler questions can be assumed, deduced, or picked up through a presentation on service. After participants have read the material in the handbook, they are ready to play the game.

Playing The Game

Each team is given a set of instructions for playing the game. Next a central decision-maker needs to be chosen to run each playing board that is used. I call this individual the Dahlia Lama. The teacher can act as this person or another individual can be selected. In college classes, I choose this person based on high scores on previous tests as well as their personality.

This person should not have a dominating personality, nor should they be thought of as a "wimp." The Dahlia Lama's job consists primarily of listening to the responses of teams, then comparing those answers to the ones on answer cards to make sure their answers are comparable. During the course of the simulation, there will be times when a champion team, answering a question, is challenged by another team who think they have a better answer. In most cases, one team's answer is clearly better than another team's, but it is always the Dahlia Lama's responsibility to decide which is most compatible with those responses on the answer card. The advantage of having such a person for each playing board is that it dramatically reduces any bickering and speeds up the simulation. A playing board is used by four teams, of three members each. Each board also has a central decision-maker or Dahlia Lama.

As the simulation begins, each team rolls a die to determine which team begins play. The team with the highest roll goes first and as the simulation

goes on, each team to the left will take their turn. The starting team takes its turn and will land on either a Challenge, Trivia, or Service Situation square. At that time, they draw an appropriate card and formulate an answer to the question that was posed. If they cannot answer, answer incorrectly, or lose a challenge to their answer, they lose their turn and the team to the left gets a chance to be the champion. As long as the champion team answers correctly, they can continue to move around the board and collect Cold Service Cards for four successive times. At that time, they pass the die to the next team. Of course at any point, a team's answer can be challenged.

Administration

In management classes, I have run the simulation two or three times during the course of a semester. Each simulation exercise lasts approximately forty-five minutes. This assumes the playing board, cards and playing pieces have already been set up.

As noted earlier, it is often wise to provide students with Review questions. Some examples are as follows:

1. What is the value of quality service?
   T1, C1, T2
2. What is the cost of poor quality?
   T2, C14, C2, C3
3. Who performs service work?
   T3, T5

The letter-number combination following each question corresponds to specific questions that participants draw whenever they land on a Challenge, Trivia or Service Situation square. Therefore, "T1" means that Trivia question number one relates to this category (e.g. value of quality service) and information about this can be found in the Service Trainer handbook.

The "C's" and "T's" under each question identifies whether the question is a Challenge or Trivia question. None of the 31 questions I use has a notation for Service Situation questions. The reason is simple; if students read section four of their handbook, all of the Service Situation questions used in the simulation are proposed after each of the incidents described in the handbook.

These numbers are shown here only for reference purposes. From a facilitator's viewpoint, knowing which cards relate to specific questions has several advantages. For one thing, knowing which of the question cards relates to a specific topic helps insure that certain topics will be discussed. To insure adequate discussion, merely include one or more of the appropriate questions in the deck of cards from which participants draw their question cards. For instance, if you want to make sure participants discuss the effect of technology or employee motivation on service, then choose an appropriate question that relates to this area and place one or more of those cards in the deck of cards participants will use.

Another advantage of using the review questions comes when using more than one playing board. I have used the simulation in a classroom of over 140 students. As such, I used ten different boards. In such a situation, you do not want students answering the same questions and thereby receiving an unfair advantage. Likewise, if you have several classes, you do not want participants

from earlier classes telling those in later classes some of the answers. Therefore, you can use the review question that covers a certain area, (e.g. value of quality service) and then select a question like T1 that relates to that area. For another group or class, you can choose another question, like T2, that is different, but relates to the same subject area. It is also wise to shuffle all of the cards that will be used so they do not come up in the same sequence for all groups.

Rationale

A complete cross-indexed list of all the Challenge, Trivia, and Service Situation questions is also provided. Each of these three pages lists each question that could be asked of participants. They are cross-indexed so you know where a particular question was drawn from in the handbook. All of the Challenge and Trivia questions used in the simulation can be cross-indexed to specific sections within the handbook. Note that all of these questions are indexed not only by page number, but by line as well. That way the facilitator knows exactly what page and line of the handbook relates to any specific question.

While all of the Challenge and Trivia questions could be answered by reading and comprehending the information in the handbook only about one-half of the Service Situation questions could be answered in this manner The reason is simple, all the Service Situations come from real-life service incidents that occurred unlike many textbooks where answers are black or white, real life situations have a lot of gray area. Almost all of the Challenge questions, which deal with strategic or managerial issues, have a specific approach that has proven best or most appropriate. Either you know the best approach or not. The same is true of Trivia questions, which include facts and interesting data. Either you know it or you do not. This, however, is not the case for Service Situation questions.

In these real-life service incidents, knowledge of managerial guidelines for service helps, but individual judgment and decision making are still needed. It is not enough to simply have great depth of knowledge about service management; you will also be called upon to use a certain amount of intuition and judgement.

One other point about these Service Situations should be made. Since they are real-life solutions, the solution may not be the best approach, but it was the approach the employee or manager chose. It is vital to the learning process that these issues be discussed. Incidentally, these questions are without a doubt the favorite questions of most participants.

CONCLUSION

For me, the simulation has proved to be an exciting and more effective way to transfer learning. It is easy to run and administer. Once you construct the playing board and set it up, you need only to choose a central decision-making person for each board. Divide your group into teams, give them the instructions, and have them read the Service Trainer handbook (although surprisingly some dc quite well without it, reading it helps the vast majority play more competitively). At this point, all you have to do is observe and occasionally clarify an unusual question since simulation is designed to run autonomously.