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A MODEL FOR DEVELOPING STUDENT SKILLS AND ASSESSING MBA PROGRAM OUTCOMES THROUGH OUTDOOR TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

The recent Porter and McKibbin (1988) report has given greater impetus to the concern that MBA students are not well prepared in behavioral skills such as leadership and interpersonal relations. This paper presents a model for assessing and developing the behavioral skills of MBA students through the application of assessment center and outdoor management training technologies. The benefits and limitations of the model are discussed.

Ever since the publication of Mintzberg's (1975) landmark study, which criticized management education for its lack of attention to behavioral skills, there has been a growing interest among business educators in developing effective interpersonal and leadership skills among students. Indeed, critics of higher education in general, and business education in particular, have argued for a greater emphasis on competency or outcome-based measures of the educational process (Grant et al, 1979). While there exists some agreement on the specific skills to be developed, there is still considerable debate on the appropriate methods for developing and measuring these skills. This paper presents a novel approach for developing and assessing behavioral skills among MBA students. The approach is based on the learning model proposed by Whetten and Cameron (1984) adapted to the outdoor environment.

Identification of Skill Areas

In 1976, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) launched its Outcomes Measurement Project,' which identified 90 skills and personal characteristics (SAPC's) intended as outcomes of a sound business education. These 90 SAPC's were later refined to include: information gathering and problem analysis, decision making, planning and organizing, leadership, delegation and control, written communication, oral communication and presentations, and disposition to lead (AACSB, 1984). To date, the AACSB has continued to refine an assessment center methodology for valid measurement of these skills, but has not focused on the methods for developing them (AACSB, 1987).

Perhaps the greatest recent impetus for improving the behavioral skills of business students was provided by the Porter and McKibbin (1988) report. This report, the culmination of an intensive study of American business school education, concluded that

"business schools, for all their changes in the last 25 years, have not made much progress in developing students leadership and interpersonal skills" (p. 65).

Specifically with respect to the MBA curriculum, both academics and business executives who responded to the study, indicated that greater emphasis should be placed on developing the following skills: analytical, computer, decision making, initiative, leadership/ interpersonal, oral communication, planning/organizing, risk taking, and written communication.

The Development of Behavioral Skills

The methods by which behavioral skills can be developed in business students have received considerably less attention than skill assessment. The AACSB (1984) approach is based on assessment center technology. Presumably, skill acquisition will occur through the student's course work (which will include more qualitative/behavioral skills Courses) and through feedback provided in the assessment center process. However, details of how this type of program would work have yet to be determined.

One training technique that has proven successful in developing management skills in industry is behavior modeling training (BMT) (Burke & Day, 1986). Supporting evidence in academic settings has been provided by McEvoy (1989). BMT is based upon social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and involves four steps: 1) presentation and discussion of learning points for dealing with a specific management situation, 2) observation of a "model correctly demonstrating the learning points, 3) role play of a similar situation with feedback on performance, and 4) provision for transfer of learning to the work setting.

A popular approach for developing management skills in academia has been proposed by Whetten and Cameron (1984). Their model, based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), and incorporating some elements of BMT, identifies five components of the 'earning process:

1) Skill pre-assessment -- to assess participants current level of knowledge and skill competence.

2) Skill learning --to teach correct principles and present the rationale for specific behavioral guidelines.

3) Skill analysis -- to provide examples of appropriate and inappropriate skill performance, and to analyze behavioral guidelines and why they work.

4) Skill practice -- to practice the behavioral guidelines and adapt general prescriptions to personal style; to receive feedback and support for trying new behaviors.

5) Skill application -- to transfer learning to real life situations and foster on-going personal development.

Another skills development approach that is gaining increased popularity in industry is outdoor management skills training (OMST). OMST consists of a series of sequenced structured activities conducted in an outdoor environment. These activities are designed to build trust, and develops skills in supportive communication, problem solving, decision making, team building, risk taking and planning (see Lang, 1984, for a good overview of these activities). Most OMST programs include a debriefing session immediately following a particular outdoor activity, which allows participants to reflect on their feelings, experiences, and learning's from the activity. In addition, many programs combine conceptual material with the outdoor experiences in the form of lecturettes. There is some preliminary self-report evidence that OMST can improve participants' behavioral skills (McEvoy & Buller, 1989).

Assessment of Behavioral Skills

With the increased attention to enhancing the behavioral skills of business students, educators have been experimenting with different methods for measuring skills. The AASCB (1984) has focused on measurement using a modified application of assessment center technology. Bigelow (1983) and McEvoy and Cragun (1986-1987) have also concentrated on skills measurement, using action skills testing procedures. These efforts suggest that reliable and valid measurement procedures can be established.

A Model for Developing and Assessing Skills for MBAs

We propose a novel approach to skill development and assessment based upon OMST and assessment center technologies. The proposed model will be applied to an MBA student population, but could be adapted to an undergraduate business student population as well.

The conceptual framework of the program is based on Whetten and Cameron's (1984) five stage learning model. Our proposed program consists of four phases incorporating each of the five stages of the Whetten and Cameron model. The program outline, shown in Figure 1, is described below.

Phase I - Needs analysis

The purpose of this phase is to obtain baseline data regarding the entering MBA students behavioral skills. Entering first year students would be required to attend a 5-day orientation and assessment session nor to the start of their course work. Students would be given behavioral skills tests upon their arrival at campus (for examples of behavioral skills exams, see AACSB, 1987; Bigelow, 1983; McEvoy & Cragun, 1986-87). Other competency tests could be given in technical or functional skill areas as well (e.g., computers, finance, marketing). In addition, students would be given conceptual information and behavioral guidelines for specific skills to be developed in the program. The behavioral skills testing and presentation of conceptual material, as well as the usual program orientation would cover a period of about 5 days.

Phase II - Outdoor Phase

Immediately following the needs analysis phase, students would participate in a 3-5 day outdoor management skills training program. The program would be a required, for-credit class for all entering students. The purpose of this phase is to continue the needs assessment and to provide a vehicle for students to practice and apply the conceptual material covered in the previous phase.

The outdoor phase would consist of a series of structured activities or "initiatives" designed to develop the skills introduced in the needs assessment phase. Students would participate in these initiatives in groups of 6-10 people. We have found that some of the concepts or skills that lend themselves to outdoor training include: understanding self, risk taking, supportive communication, diagnosing and solving performance and interpersonal problems, decision making, planning and organizing, and building effective teams.

Following each outdoor initiative, students would be asked to reflect and write in a "learnings log" on what happened, how they felt about it, what they learned, and what they intend to do differently based on the learning. Then a "debriefing" discussion would be held with the group to process key feelings, learnings, and applications.

In addition, each participant would be observed throughout the outdoor program by a trained observer (second year MBA student or faculty). Observers would record observations on specifically designed behavioral skills checklists. They would then summarize the information and provide feedback to the student in a private session near the end of the outdoor phase.

On the final day of the outdoor phase, students would develop a specific action plan to transfer the learning to their relevant environment (e.g., university and/or work). The action plan would include a personal development plan to be completed by the end of the MBA program. The basis for the action plan would be: 1) the results of the needs assessment completed in Phase I, 2) the learning logs completed by the student during the outdoor session, and 3) the observations of the outdoor assessors.

Phase III - MBA Program

The purpose of this phase is to provide an environment for skill practice and application, and to accomplish the students personal skill development plan. Each student would be assigned an advisor who would review the student's personal development plan, and suggest course work and other experiences that would foster development of the particular skills. For example, if the plan involved a goal to become better at oral communication, the student would be encouraged to take a course in public speaking. and to seek opportunities in other classes, and outside the classroom, to develop that skill.

Although the advisor would be available to the student for consultation throughout the year, a formal advising session would be held at the end of the first year to review progress on the personal development plan, to revise it if necessary, and to add additional goals if appropriate. Also, at the end of their first year, students would be trained to serve as assessors for the outdoor phase for incoming students. This would be a required, for-credit component of the MBA program. The training in effective observation would itself be an important skill component of the program.

Phase IV - Post-MBA Assessment

At the end of the second year of the MBA program, students would again be given a series of behavioral skills tests, as well as a final assessment in the outdoor setting. This, session would be a for-credit requirement. The test results and the observations of the assessors would be used to measure behavioral skills outcomes. Differences between pre- and post-assessments would be used as a measure of the value added' of the MBA program.

DISCUSSION

Potential Benefits

The potential benefits of this proposed approach to skills development and measurement include the following:

1) The program is integrated into the MBA curriculum. The needs analysis, outdoor program, and the post-MBA assessment are elements of a required course for all MBA students. In addition, the MBA (and university) curriculum, as well as the many extra curricular activities around the campus and community, serve as environments in which students can practice and apply skills toward the fulfillment of their personal development plan.

2) The program is individualized to a particular student's needs. The needs assessment and outdoor phases help the student identify skills strengths and weaknesses. The student then constructs an action plan to build on strengths and to improve in weak areas. Since the plan is individualized and developed by the student, he/she is likely to have more ownership and, thus, more commitment to accomplishing the plan.

3) The program is based on Sound learning theory. The learning model of Whetten and Cameron (1984) is adapted from social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which has been shown to be an effective model for developing behavioral skills in industrial settings.

4) The outdoor model is unique and apparently effective in developing skills. It provides a medium in which a) assessment of behavioral skills can occur, b) students can experiment with and practice new behaviors, and c) students can have an enjoyable learning experience.

5) The program allows for reliable and valid assessment of MBA program outcomes with respect to behavioral skills development.

Limitations and Constraints

As with any program, there are some potential limitations. These include the following:

1) The program assumes a flexible MBA curriculum. If the personal development plan is to be a useful vehicle for skill practice and acquisition, the MBA program must be flexible enough to allow the student to select thc courses and other experiences that will most benefit him or her. One way to overcome this limitation is to allow students to select course work outside the Business School. In addition, advisors must consider the entire campus and community for learning opportunities. For example, a particular student may accomplish his or her personal development plan by joining clubs, participating in civic organizations, volunteer work, or other non-academic activities.

2) The program cannot assess all behavioral skills. In this regard it would be important for the program designers to identify those skills that appear to be critical (see, AACSB, 1984, or Porter & McKibbin, 1988, for useful lists). Next, the methodology used for developing skills (e.g., experiential, outdoor, lecture) may determine which skills can reasonably be developed. Some methods are better suited for teaching some skills than others.

3) The costs of the program and the resources of the business school are also limiting factors. However, some of the costs could be absorbed through a creative revision of the curriculum. For example, most MBA programs offer a course in organizational behavior. This course could be adapted to fit the program outlined in this paper. Instead of one course covering a quarter or semester, the course would simply be divided into three parts covering 1) the initial outdoor training session, 2) the observer training and observation of entering students at the end of the first year, and 3) the post-MBA assessment in the outdoor environment.

Faculty interest and skill in this area is also a key limiting factor. There needs to be sufficient administrative and faculty support as well as a critical mass of faculty whose expertise is behavioral skill building, and the use of the outdoor environment as a training medium. However, the broader campus and community may have ample untapped resources. There are many educational opportunities for students outside the business school, and for that matter, outside the classroom.

4) A particular limitation may be the lack of expertise or facilities for outdoor training. Although this may seem to be a formidable obstacle, there are a number of schools and organizations involved in OMST that could provide consultation. Faculty with group facilitation skills would find that their skills would transfer quite readily to the outdoor environment. In our experience, many useful outdoor initiatives can be structured (even on campus) at relatively little cost.

DISCUSSION

In summary, there has been much criticism over the past two decades regarding the lack of attention paid by business educators to the behavioral skills of students. While there has been some progress in identifying critical behavioral skills and developing methods to measure the outcomes of business school programs, relatively little progress

has been made on the methods for developing these skills in the curriculum. This paper has presented a model that incorporates assessment center and outdoor management training approaches to skill development and assessment in MBA programs. Although the model remains to be tested empirically, it clearly is consistent with the mandate of the Porter and McKibbin (1988) report - to improve students' behavioral skills.

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FIGURE 1
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING MODEL
AND THE PROPOSED PROGRAM

Emphasis in Program Phases

Learning model	Phase I Needs Analysis	Phase II Outdoor Training	Phase III MBA Curriculum	Phase IV Post-MBA
Skill preassessment	2	2	0	0
Skill learning	2	2	1	0
Skill analysis	1	2	2	0
Skill practice	0	2	2.	1
Skill application	0	2	2	2

Note: 2 = major emphasis
1 = minor emphasis
0 = no emphasis