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INTRODUCING EXECUTIVE MBA PROGRAMS WITH MANAGEMENT GAMES

Bernard Keys and Carl. Gooding
Georgia Southern College

The Executive MBA is the fastest growing segment of the executive education market. From fewer than 10 EMBA programs in the 1960's beginning with the University of Chicago, over 200 masters programs now claim to serve executives (Phillips-Madson & Sloan, 1987). These programs differ from traditional MEA programs by enrolling more experienced participants, by meeting on alternate weekends or alternate Fridays and Saturdays, and by moving the class through the program in a lock-step procedure (Van Doren, Smith & Biglin, 1986).

Most students in EMBA programs are practicing managers of 5-10 years experience. One of the most valuable elements of the program is the development of peer groups moving through the program in lockstep who matriculate together, exchange ideas and most of whom graduate together. Consequently anything that strengthens peer group development strengthens the overall program. Since students enroll from such varied academic programs, course leveling has proven to be one of the greatest hurdles for instructors.

Most EMBA programs begin with very little prerequisite work and are often initiated by a summer live-in week at some training center or resort. These programs attempt to do several things in the first live in week: introduce students to the functions of management; introduce participants to the major functions of business; build teams and camaraderie; teach an approach to case method analysis; provide the high motivation necessary to retain students in an expensive and demanding program.

In the first year of Regional University's (RU's) EMBA program, the course was built around cases and lectures, videos and other traditional training methods. However, the EMBA faculty who taught later in the program felt the need for more orientation to the functions of business. The course professor in turn wished to avoid a cafeteria style program in which five or six professors would visit the program and present an introductory lecture without an integrative focus. The solution which the EMBA committee chose was the use of a management game. The management game choice is supported by numerous review articles comparing games with other instructional methods (Greenlaw & Wyman, 1973, Keys, 1977, Wolfe, 1985, Miles, Biggs & Schubert, 1986).

The course title of the first course in the EMBA program at RU is "The Managerial Environment (ME). The course consists of 22 one and one-half hour sessions, plus a three-hour final exam held approximately two weeks later. The integration of the Management Game into the Managerial Environment course required some careful planning and choices. The week is crowded with activities and students had already been suffering from data overload. Because of the heavy workweek and lack of accounting, finance, marketing or production management background, the game chosen for the course had of necessity to be a simple or moderately complex game.

The Executive Simulation by Keys and Leftwich was the management game selected for the program. This is a thirteen-decision game per simulated quarter with

reasonably good balance in marketing, production and finance. The game also includes well written planning sheets that carry participants step-by-step through the horizontal planning process of sales forecasting, production scheduling, pro forma budgeting (income statement), and cash flow budgeting. By following the step-by-step directions, participants can manage to make rational decisions from the beginning of the game, even though many of them do not completely understand the data. A final reason for choosing The Executive Simulation was its inclusion of short applied chapters on each functional area, Organizing and Planning, "Marketing", "Manufacturing", and "Finance".

Furthermore, the week is designed with alternating sessions of content dissemination (lecture, video tapes, etc.), game decision experiences, and feedback on performance, as suggested by Keys' "Management of Learning Grid," (1977, 1989). In the first year of management game usage, the management game proved useful in several ways, but posed several problems as well. First, a noticeable difference was seen in the speed with which team cohesiveness formed. Teams in the previous year without the management game had been organized so that they incorporated a balance in team member employment experience in manufacturing, marketing and financial/accounting. However, in spite of the varied backgrounds there were few tasks that required interdependent activity, a major criterion for team building (Merry & Allerhand, 1977). Now the teams had a task that required all of their cooperation and ingenuity. The most difficult problem with the game seemed to be the frustration caused for team members with little or no accounting and finance background, who were unable to move rapidly to a level of understanding of the financial statements returned each decision round. In Year 2 of the Management Game implementation in the EMBA program, the problem of lack of accounting and financial skills was resolved by devoting a morning's session entirely to basic financial statements.

The second year introductory week of the EMBA at RU using the management game developed much more smoothly. As is usually the case, there is no opportunity to conduct controlled studies with an EMBA class. However, some feedback has been obtained from students. Generally comments gleaned largely from students using the game one year ago in their introductory week suggest the following. Teams form cohesive units more quickly because of the intergroup competition and because of the interdependent work required in the game, the game provides a framework of simulated experiences in areas in which managers have no experience and allows them to better appreciate many of the skills courses. In short, the game creates teachable moments. The game provides an integrative (experiential) framework on which students can hang many concepts and models. Many students in the EMBA have never worked at the general management level and numerous ones come from the non-corporate sector. The game is enjoyable and adds interest and excitement to the program. The game provides some direction and understanding for the very demanding capstone course, the strategic management course at RU in which students participate in the Business Management Laboratory, a very complex simulation (Jensen & Cherrington, 1984).