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IMAGES OF EFFECTIVENESS: A CLASSROOM EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an experiential exercise designed to address issues in evaluation, representation, self-confidence, and decision making. Individuals are asked to prepare an assignment on "images of effectiveness" by reading newspaper advertisements, and then in an experiential group exercise, to choose what the group considers the "best" completion of the assignment in the group. This group choice is submitted for a group grade.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

To demonstrate concepts of self and group evaluation, including the formulation of a working definition of what constitutes effectiveness.

Advance Preparation

In an organizational behavior class which is conducted using the experiential method, individuals should have been working in a group of six to eight members. Over the course of a quarter or semester, experience has been gained in the experiential methodology, the process of organizational behavior concepts, and the dynamics of the experiential group.

Group Size

The exercise is formulated to be done in a group of six to eight members.

Time Required

Out-of-class student preparation time, plus approximately 30-45 minutes of in-class time.

Special Materials

Student access to a business-oriented newspaper or magazine, such as The Wall Street Journal.

PROCEDURE

Step 1 - Preliminary Step

As an at-home assignment, students are required to read the advertisements in a business-oriented newspaper or magazine, such as The Wall Street Journal, to ascertain what "images of effectiveness" the publication contains in its advertisements. "Images of effectiveness" is defined as a pictorial or verbal description or representation of goods, services, individuals, and groups which convey an impression of ability, success, power, strength, and other traits associated with effectiveness. Students may select to read one issue of the publication, or several issues over the course of a week or several weeks, depending what time frame for the assignment is provided by the instructor.

Furthermore, students may select one advertisement and analyze it in depth, or a series of advertisements may be analyzed in less detail. A three to five page paper is required to be prepared by each student, including an analysis of selected advertisements, using concepts from organizational behavior theories about leadership, power, decision making, etc., as a conceptual base for evaluation.

Step 2 - Group Meeting

When the students bring the "images of effectiveness" paper to class on the assigned date, the instructor, without previous warning or discussion, announces that these papers will serve as the input for a decision by the appropriate experiential group in which the students have been working during the quarter or semester. Each group is to select one paper from those completed by the group members to be handed in for a grade which will be assigned to the entire group. Each member of the group is assigned the same grade. The task of the group is to decide which "images of effectiveness" assignment in the group is most effective, and best completes the requirements of the assignment. About 30 minutes is allotted for the group discussion and decision. The one paper selected by each group for grading is to have the name of the Individual and/or the group removed from it so that it may be graded without knowledge of these facts by the instructor. A random five digit number is assigned to the paper by the submitting group, and recorded by the group for future reference when the paper is returned.

Step 3 - Class Discussion

Following the completion of the group decision, a general discussion of the process and problems of the groups evaluation is held. Specific comments are sought as to how they defined what an effective paper was, how the group decided which paper to pick, and how Individuals felt as they went about the process of evaluating the work of their fellow group members.

Step 4 - Grading and Return of Group Selection

After receiving the group selection, it is evaluated and graded by the instructor. The graded paper, including the instructor's comments, is returned to the appropriate group, along with information as to how their submission fared in relation to those of the other class groups.

DISCUSSION

This exercise provides vivid experiences in the definition of effectiveness, and the process of performance appraisal. The first step of the exercise is well-received by students, since it provides an interesting outlet to demonstrate and apply their knowledge of organizational behavior concepts. For example, various issues of The Wall Street Journal include advertisements for: clothing (the Power Suit) which is pictured as being worn by successful executives, hotels which offer elegant accommodations and services to conduct business, equipment (particularly personal computers) that could lead an executive to a successful job performance outcome, aptitude testing which purports to tell an individual what career path to follow,

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health centers to teach executives how to maintain a lifestyle to ensure a long and healthy successful business life, professional seminars that are presented as a great way to advance one's career, etc. Images of effectiveness contained in these advertisements include power, knowledge, strength, vision, aggressiveness, credentials, innovation, appearance, organization, decision-making ability, and resource use as traits associated with successful business executives.

The second step of the exercise provides a good experience in the process of evaluation. Assuming that the experiential group has worked together for a number of class periods, this exercise presents the group with a conflict situation where the work of some group members must be judged as less worthy than that of others. Since the group must continue to work together in the future, this negative information must be transmitted in such a way that it will not affect the future performance of those group members whose work is judged as ineffective.

Usually the group begins its discussion with statements of how different individuals completed the assignment and a passing around of the individual papers for inspection by other group members. During this stage there is usually some provision of alibis by one or more group members as to why their individual paper is not outstanding. Comments such as "Everybody's paper is better than mine" are often heard. Thus, some individuals withdraw their papers from consideration, since they don't want to face the burden of having the group's performance fall upon their shoulders.

Attention of the group members is very intense and focused during this stage of the exercise, since there is an individual and/or group goal at stake in the exercise. At some point in the deliberation, there is a call for honesty in the evaluation of each other's work because of the graded outcome. Resources called into play during the group discussion include information from those group members who have had previous experience with the instructor's grading criteria from a previous course, and individual definitions of what constitutes effectiveness. Usually the group centers upon some trade-off of quantity and quality of presentation, including the visual impact of various individual papers, as determinants of the final submission.

The person whose paper is chosen by the group is put into an interesting position, he or she can be a hero or a villain, depending upon the grade assigned to the paper by the instructor. An excellent grade establishes the individual as competent and as one who has obtained rewards for the group. An average or low grade hangs some mantle of ineffectiveness upon the individual, even though the group bears the responsibility for the final selection. In the application of this exercise to a series of MBA classes, the authors have observed primarily the assignment of A's and B's to the group selections, indicating that, in general, the groups make effective decisions.

The third stage of the exercise includes a full discussion of the issues raised in the previous paragraphs. This is usually an interesting discussion, with wide participation by the class members.

The initial assignment to prepare the images of effectiveness paper can be stated in terms which remove any concerns by the instructor or students about grading of the assignment. The instructor can state that this assignment will be used as the input for an experiential group exercise, and some grade will be assigned to the outcome of this exercise. It is not out of the ordinary for students to put effort into coursework such as reading, preparation of homework problems, preparation of cases, etc., which does not directly result in an individual grade.

The basic concepts of the exercise, a demonstration of self and group evaluation procedures and the formulation of a working definition of effectiveness, are only tangentially addressed in most exercises found in experientially-oriented textbooks. While most experiential exercises deal with some subset of organizational behavior topics such as motivation, perception, communications, leadership, group dynamics, organizational development, etc., few deal with the issues of representation, self-confidence, and dynamics in a group after critical appraisal has taken place.

While the "Coping with Ambiguity" exercise in Lau and Jelinek (1, pp. 250-251) deals with the issue of representation, it is considered at the intergroup level, not at the intragroup level as this exercise does.

Most experiential exercises do not deal with the reality of the after effects of performance evaluation. After performance evaluation has taken place, an individual should leave this session motivated to continue good performance or to modify poor performance, committed to the job, committed to the organization, and looking forward to future interpersonal and group interactions. The dynamics of this exercise make participants deal with these issues, and the exercise serves as an excellent vehicle for the discussion of these issues in its follow-up step.

The determination of which individual paper in the group is "best" requires a comparison of Individual definitions of effectiveness, and the determination of a consensus on these issues. While the basic processes of this exercise does not differ from classic exercises such as the NASA Moon Survival Task found in Lau and Jelinek (1), what is different is that the Images of Effectiveness exercise deals with a live, real situation in which something is at stake for the group. The dynamics and interest level of the experiential exercise group is greatly affected by focus on a "live" versus on a distant, simulated topic.

While the description of this exercise focuses on a written source as the basis for the images of effectiveness paper, the basic concept could be extended to television, radio, movie, and video tape sources for the same basic visual and/or verbal analysis.

REFERENCES

- (1) Lau, James B. and Mariann Jelinek, Behavior in Organizations: An Experiential Approach, (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1984, 3rd edition).