

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 13, 1986

USING THE REAL WORLD: INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential learning design to be used in an undergraduate course on 'Men and Women in Organizations. The design is comprehensive in its scope, providing students the opportunity to apply and synthesize their academic learnings. Specifically, each student identifies a woman manager, interviews her three times during the term on assigned subjects, writes papers analyzing the interviews, and discusses information about his or her woman manager with others in a small group. Each interview must be carefully planned to incorporate questions and issues which have been raised in the readings and in class sessions.

The purposes of this design are: (1) to provide live case studies for each student to analyze, (2) to facilitate the exchange of information and opinions among students and (3) to reduce the distance between classroom and workplace. The design is especially useful in combating the idealism and naivete of juniors and seniors who have had little experience in the business world.

INTRODUCTION

Many professors who teach courses comparable to 'Men and Women in Organizations find the idealism and naivete of some juniors and seniors to be a significant block to their learning. This was a major issue expressed at an Organizational Behavior Teaching Conference (1) by professors of courses focusing on women in business, organizations or management. For example, professors reported undergraduate students as having said such things as sex-typed jobs are a thing of the past', 'equal opportunity awaits any woman who is willing to work hard, or "aren't we lucky to be coming of age now that sexism no longer exists'. Other comments included: "any woman who is sexually harassed has asked for it", "day care centers solve the problems of the working mother", "sex shouldn't make a difference, and "I've never been discriminated against". Holding beliefs and attitudes such as these, students tend to discount what they read and what they hear in class. It isn't what they want to hear. It isn't the way they think the world should be.

An antidote for this situation is to bring each student into one-to-one contact with a woman manager of his or her own choosing. In a series of interviews focused on specific issues, students discover for themselves the extent to which the literature applies to their woman manager's experience.

COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE DESIGN

This experiential learning design has both cognitive and affective dimensions. Cognitively, students are required to identify and analyze the issues and problems of the mixed-sex workplace as they impact on a particular woman manager. Each interview and paper is increasingly complex in the questions it raises. Each assignment gives students the opportunity to apply and synthesize what they have learned in the course to date.

Affectively, students seem to proceed through stages during this experiential learning design. The first stage is identification. As students contact their managers, plan and conduct the first interviews, and write their papers, they identify with her. Some students project their idealism onto her with fairy-tale expectations. They may want to find her a good example, successful against all odds, the exception to the rule. Others may start out bored or intimidated about interviewing a manager, but when the first interview is underway, most students become interested in the manager, her job, and her company. As they share information in small groups, their language speaks of their identification. They refer to 'my manager', 'my woman', 'the one I interviewed'.

The second affective stage involves dissonance. Students find their women managers experiencing many of the problems, dilemmas and issues described in the literature. What students read and hear from the women managers does not square with their perceptions of what the world is like or what the world should be like. Anger, frustration, confusion, disappointment, helplessness and/or sadness may be expressed after the second interviews. The closer the student's identification with the manager he or she interviews, the greater the dissonance to be expected. This is particularly the case for female students and those male students close to a career-minded girlfriend or sister. The instructor's acceptance of students' feelings is important in facilitating the students movement to the third stage.

The third stage involves a heightened motivation for learning. Many students adopt a gaming approach or a problem solving approach to learning. Their optimism, tempered by what they have read and what they have heard from their women managers, seems to motivate fast, eager learning.

REVIEW OF OTHER EXPERIENTIAL APPROACHES

Many experiential approaches to learning about the dynamics of the mixed sex workplace are available for use in courses similar to "Men and Women in Organizations" and may be incorporated into class sessions and/or assignments. Alice Sargent's Beyond Sex Roles (2) addresses many aspects of sex role socialization and change and provides numerous experiential exercises to promote awareness and change. Natasha Josefowitz's text on women in management, titled Paths to Power (3) and its accompanying Instructor's Man 1, detail many experiential exercises and simulations within lesson plans for an entire semester. The Institute of Case Development and Research at Simmons College has developed a series of "Cases on Women in Management" (4) which focus on different industrial settings and are cross listed by teaching topics.

A few specific exercises and instruments deserve mention because of their usefulness in addressing particular topics. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's slide-tape show A Tale of "O": On Being Different (5) and its accompanying training package address the dynamics of tokenism and minority numbers. These tools are ef-

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fective for teaching about affirmative action, personnel planning and organizational development. Sandra Bem's Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (6) can be a useful tool for self assessment of personality characteristics. The Women as Managers Scale (WAMS) (7) by Peters, Terborg and Taynor is useful for assessing the attitudes people have about women in business. An unobtrusive measure of sex role stereotypes associated with the managerial role may be taken by administering The Manager's Dilemma, by Claude Graeff (8). The Promotion by Janet Bentz (9) addresses sexuality, romance in organizations and stereotypes. Raising Elizabeth, by Janet Mills (10) links sex role socialization with career choices and aspirations.

Exercises, simulations and instruments such as these make class sessions lively and make learning personal. However, the addition of Interviews with Women Managers to the course on "Men and Women in Organizations" provides students with additional learning opportunities not available in these other learning approaches. The design requires students to review several sessions of material, apply learnings to the design of interviews, conduct and report case study research, synthesize/evaluate information and verbally discuss their work and the work of several others.

DETAILS OF CLASS ORGANIZATION

1. The design is best suited to a class or section size of 50 or less.
2. Since students break into groups of five to six for discussion, a large room with mobile furnishings is desirable.
3. The group discussions are designed to fit within 50 minute class sessions.
4. The three assignments are spread across the term so that students have adequate cognitive background from the class to conduct the interviews.
5. Classes similar to "Men and Women in Organizations" are generally open to juniors and seniors. The design is geared to this group of young adults.
6. The class discussions are based on interview data students have gained. Students should be encouraged to react and respond to the information they share.
7. No administrative support is needed.

GRADING

1. The written reports of the interviews are letter graded by the instructor. Criteria for evaluation include the application and synthesis of ideas from the readings and from class sessions.
2. The small group discussions are not graded.
3. Each written report was worth 10% of the grade, or 30% total. Mid-term and final exams constituted the remaining 70% of the final grade.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. In the first class session, the instructor should
 - *provide written instructions and due dates for the interviews, papers and oral reports.

- *discuss the assignment and answer students' questions

- *tell students that they have two weeks to find a woman manager who is willing to be interviewed three times during the semester

- *tell the students to propose her name, job title and the organization's name in writing in two weeks for approval

2. At the end of the second week, the instructor should

- *collect the woman manager proposals

- *have each student announce his or her managers name, job title, organization, and how he or she found her

- *approve or disapprove each proposal

3. On the day the first paper is due, the instructor should

- *break the class into groups of five or six

- *allow 20 minutes for students to share information

- *collect papers at the end of the session

4. On the day the second paper is due, the instructor should

- *ask the class to re-assemble in the same groups of five or six

- *allow 30 minutes for students to share information

- *bring closure by asking (or reflecting) how student feel about what they are learning from the women managers

- *collect papers at the end of the session

5. On the day the third paper is due, the instructor should

- *ask the class to re-assemble in the same groups of five or six

- *allow 30-40 minutes for students to share information

- *assemble the entire class and bring closure through discussing the values of the interviews to student learning

- *collect papers at the end of the session.

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

The guidelines provided below should help you organize your interviews and papers. You should be up to date on class readings and should carefully prepare each interview based on the information in the readings and these guidelines. Frame open-ended questions that lead the manager to talk freely and openly during the interviews. You may title your papers creatively. They should be written in a lively, interesting style.

Assignment: The Woman and Her Job

The purpose of the first interview is to find out about the woman and her job. What is her job title, her current job description, the tasks she does? What kind of organization does she work in? What is her personal history, her education and training, her previous work experience? When she was younger, what did she want to do when she grew up? What factors led her to do the work she does? How did she find this particular job? What does she like and dislike about her job.

Interview between dates of _____ and _____
Written report due on _____

Assignment II: The Woman and Her Life Situation

The purpose of the second interview is to find out about the woman and her life situation. What are her roles and responsibilities other than work at this time

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in her life? How does she handle these? What roles and responsibilities does she anticipate in the future? How does she plan to handle these? How does she manage time? What hobbies or interests does she maintain? What is her social life like? Who were/are her role models? friends? Has she mentors or sponsors? Has she had any experiences in which her sex might have been a factor of influence, such as: task assignments, salary, raises, perk or promotions; bias in the evaluation of her work; sexual harassment; romantic involvements or restraints at work? What is her personal style in terms of verbal and nonverbal communication variables? Does she appear personally powerful? feminine?

Interview between dates of _____ and _____
Written report due on _____

Assignment III: The Woman's Future

The purpose of the third interview is to consider the woman manager's future. Ask her for a copy of the organizational chart. Where is she on it? Where would she like to be in two years? five years? ten years? What are her aspirations? Does she have a career plan? Does the organization have career ladders? Does the organization post jobs and promote within? Has she considered leaving the organization for career advancement? Analyze the woman's power and mobility in terms of Kanter's discussions. Of what significance is the number of other female managers at her rank? How many women are in positions close to those the woman aspires to? What do you think her future looks like?

Interview between dates of _____ and _____
Written report due on _____

EXPERIENCE WITH THE LEARNING DESIGN

I have used this design once with a class of juniors and seniors and once with a master's level class. The undergraduates enjoyed the assignment because it took them out of the classroom and into the manager's workplace. The shift in their attitudes toward the class materials changed markedly as a result of the second interview which is the one that begins the in-depth examination of issues and problems women managers encounter. I found their papers interesting to read and no more difficult to evaluate than essay examinations.

When I used this design with graduate students, the value of the exercise diminished somewhat. Since the mean age of class members was 30 and all the students had organizational experience, their tendency was to discuss not only the woman manager identified for the project, but other women managers they knew, including themselves. Many women felt reassured to find that problems they believed to be personal and unique to them are shared widely by others.

VARIATIONS

1. The design may be modified so that pairs of students interview a woman manager and write the papers jointly.
2. The design may be modified so that one quarter to one third of the students interview men managers. Some of the interview guidelines will need revision.
3. Some students will probably identify women managers who are not managers at all, but are staff professionals. Point this out during the second week of class. These case studies are useful in the third round of interviews, papers and discussions. Contrasts in power, mobility and number in managerial vs. professional staff can be enlightening to students.

4. A class including senior and graduate students would work well. With a mix of graduate and undergraduate students in each small group, discussion might be expanded in breadth, depth and time.

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