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USING SIMULATION & EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN INDUSTRIAL SETTINGS

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Use of experiential learning and simulated experiences in the classroom has been the major focus of attention or ABSEL since its inception. There has been some discussion of the role of simulation and experiential learning in business applications, but the field is an emerging one and its importance is only now being realized. Private and public organizations, profit and not-for-profit organizations, are slowly realizing the important role that experiential learning and simulations can assume in the development of their personnel,

THE NEED FOR AN INTERFACE

There is a definite need for an interface between the classroom and "real" institutions. There is a clamor for this direction both from the student (client) of the collegiate environment and in those organizations that rely upon the institutions of higher education for their supply of talent to meet the needs of their organizations. Educational institutions have been surprisingly slow to adapt to the changing needs of students and of the external environment. There has been a reticence of educators to enter the realm of developing the skills inventory of students in a process fashion. The reliance in the past has been directed toward the exposure of the student to the current theories and concepts, with little attention placed upon the development of the ability of the students to use these theoretical skills or in developing the skills needed to perform and exist in an organizational world. In essence, the direction has been centered too much around building mental skills and not enough emphasis placed on building diagnostic human skills by which to assess, react, and act in the current organizational setting with the differences in personalities, political groups, and interest group cross culture.

The emphasis is slowly changing. Organizations are now in the process of working to directly develop the human and communicative skills of their employees. Recent articles have pointed to organizations that use simulated experiences to build the reactive and proactive skills of their supervisory work force. One organization uses video taping of their executives' behavior in order to assess and improve their skills in television interviews. Another organization utilizes role playing situations to aid in building their union negotiating team skills in maintaining the bargaining edge. Several companies use other direct experiential techniques to assess supervisory skills in the area of conflict resolution, subordinate performance reviews, and handling group meetings.

The authors of this session firmly believe that the use of simulations and experiential learning as currently used in organizations may shed some light on additional uses of the techniques in educational settings. There is a need to design specific courses around the development of interpersonal skills. The major medium for these courses is the use of experiential learning and simulation to build individual skills. These courses would be unique in that they would not teach additional theoretical constructs. They would be structured totally around the development of the individual's skills in handling different situations that he will face in the

outside world. The development of interpersonal skills through the use of simulations and experiential learning would be the main content of the course. This differs from the usual practice of having experiential learning only as a portion of another course such as Leadership or Organizational Behavior. This session, therefore is structured to show some of the applications of these techniques in industry and some of the concerns of organizations toward the deficiencies of their employees and the sort of skills that are needed to survive and succeed in current organizational life.

THE SESSION'S DIRECTION

The session's panel is composed of six members. Three of the members are directly involved in the consulting process and three members are directly involved with the training and development programs of their respective organizations. Each of the participants has used simulations and experiential learning to develop his/her particular organization. The program has been structured around three distinct uses; in assessment centers, in supervisory development, and in executive development.

One of the organizations is using simulations in assessment centers in a unique manner. While most assessment centers are conducted as a screening tool to judge the organizational fit of a prospective employee, this organization, Bendix, uses the assessment center as a means to assess current skills of already employed participants. The objective is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the employee in an overall program to improve the employee's skills. Assessment centers are open to all employees at all levels of the organization even clerical. It is a voluntary program, results are confidential and would not be included in the individual's personnel record. The counselor discusses the results with the employee and a specific course of action to improve skills is outlined for the employee.

Each organization uses techniques such as role playing as part of a supervisory development program. Individuals are placed in situations that they are often faced with in the course of their current position. These role playing situations are taped. Each a diagnostic session held later in order to point out the desirable and undesirable behaviors exhibited. Effective behavior modes are then suggested in order to improve the interpersonal skills of the participant.

CONCLUSION

Personal skills are very important in the overall development of employees in filling supervisory roles in today's organizations. Much can be learned from the uses of experiential learning and simulations in extra-educational uses. Additional insights for educators may lead to a change of course offerings to meet the needs of students in becoming more prepared to meet the challenges of the new work environment of the 1980's.