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THE TEACHING POTENTIAL OF A STRUCTURED EXPERIENCE

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This article aims at accomplishing two goals: 1) to describe the anatomy of a particular structured experience, and 2) to discuss the teaching potential of exercises similar to the one described.

THE STRUCTURED EXPERIENCE--" STUCK/UNSTUCK"

The learning objectives of this exercise are twofold. Participants first are to experience the blocks in the problem solving process that result from role positions that are rigidly adhered to and from interpersonal differences. This is the "stuck" phase of the exercise. Secondly, the participants are to experience in stages a gradual release from these blocks and restrictions by moving towards the ability to recognize the unique resources provided by each group member and utilizing these resources as fully as possible in solving the groups problems. This obviously is the "unstuck" phase of the exercise.

The size of each group participating in the exercise should be limited to six members. It is possible to have a number of six member groups simultaneously performing the exercise but this requires sufficient space to allow the groups to work without interfering with each other. The time required to derive most benefit from this exercise might be as long as twelve hours. Four three-hour class sessions have been employed. The authors feel that even more time than this might have been used profitably.

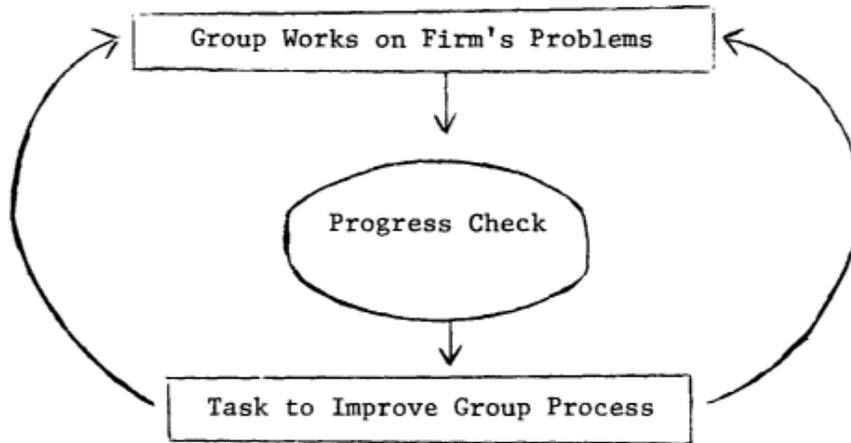
A business policy case supplies the framework within which this exercise unfolds. The policy case should be centered around six major company roles. These roles are assumed by the group members participating in "Stuck/Unstuck."

Some preliminary procedures antecede the experience. The six roles to be played are identified to the group and the group is asked to assign these roles to its members. Each group member then receives the case material which is proper to that particular role as well as that material which is proper to one other role participant. The group is informed that no single member has all the case information, but that among the group members all the material necessary to identify problems and to come to a solution is present. Group members are cautioned to stay within the limits of the material possessed by the group.

Each group member is then given a page which describes the network of relationships existing in the group. Included in these relationships are some strong interpersonal conflicts and the basis of two three-member factions. Sufficient time must then be allowed for each group member to digest the information received. Preferably this is done between classes. No one is to read material given to any of the other participants.

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The group is then directed to discover and solve the problems of the firm in a group meeting. After approximately thirty minutes the group is stopped for a progress check and asked to reflect on the group process. Questions may be put to the group. Is there any progress? What is causing problems in performing the group task? How might these problems be resolved? What generally evolves from this discussion is that the flow of necessary information is being impeded by the interpersonal conflict and distrust existing in the group. As the group moves towards the desire to relieve itself of these burdens it is given a task to improve the group process. Each member is to work out a set of mutually acceptable expectations with every other member of the group. They are to put these expectations on paper and each of the two parties are asked to affix their signatures to the written expectations. When this round of one-to-one discussions is completed the group is again set upon the task of discovering and solving the problems of the firm. A cycle has been established which is repeated as often as four times in this



exercise. It can be flow charted as follows:

After the group has worked on the firm's problems for a period of time (20 - 30 minutes) another progress check is made. This time the group generally perceives more progress and is relatively optimistic. Some discussion usually reveals that little information is being volunteered by group members. This offers an opportunity to examine the first series of mutually acceptable role expectations. These emerge as having been predominantly functional in nature. Information was exchanged and basic functions were specified. Gradually another level of expectations that relate more to behavior in the group appear to be needed. At this point the group is asked to carry out the task of setting up mutually acceptable behavioral expectations on a one-to-one basis with the other members of the group. These expectations are then written and initialed before the group returns to the firm's problems.

At the next progress check, the impact of the behavioral agreements is assessed. Perhaps members rank each other in order of most helpful contributors. The content of the behavioral expectations is discussed. Fidelity in observing the agreements is checked.

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In discussing how the problem solving process might be improved another set of expectations is suggested, one that exists between each member and the group as a whole. The group is then asked to negotiate with each of its members a set of mutual expectations that is both functional and behavioral. Generally this amounts to a clarifying of role data introduced by the case and also a critique of how each member is performing and ought to perform in the group.

At this point the group can return to the firm's problems or perhaps with their new found understandings they can address a whole new set of problems and solutions just to test out their problem solving skills. An assessment of the entire "stuck/unstuck" process demonstrates among many other things 1) insights into the difficulties encountered in problem solving when there is rigid adherence to role position and status in the problem solving, 2) insights into the importance of setting up compatible expectations among co-workers and the particular difficulty in arriving at behavioral expectations, and 3) insights into the necessity of possessing skills required if the resources of each group member are to be recognized and fully utilized.

TEACHING POTENTIAL

Unfortunately there seems to be little information available which can be used to help answer questions which arise concerning the value of the experiential teaching method. To generate some of this information, we designed and team-taught two experimental Management courses in the School of Business at Indiana State University. Each course was based entirely on structured experiences such as Stuck-Unstuck, Using Participative Management (1. Section III), and To the Rescue (2. Section III). The objectives of these courses were to develop interpersonal skills in students and to furnish experience in applying these skills to practical human problem areas in organizations, i.e., communication, leadership, motivation, organizational conflict, and organizational change.

During the last meeting of each course, the instructors asked each participant to take out a piece of paper and write down his most significant feeling(s) concerning learning via structured experiences. No participant attached his name to his comments. Participants were told that since the instructors were evaluating the experiential method of teaching, they were more interested in what was said than who said it. A representative summary of quotations from these comment sheets is as follows:

1. I would like to recommend this method of teaching a class.
2. The basic concepts we learned about managerial techniques can be applied to any organization.
3. The group interaction sessions were helpful in the sense of learning how to relate to other people.
4. The course was really a skill development class.
5. I feel the method used in the course was very good. I have been able to learn just as much and perhaps even more under this type of layout.
6. I never thought I would be able to learn so much about myself and my peer group in a classroom situation.

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7. The class took a lot of time and effort but I feel that it was the most beneficial class I have taken.
8. These teaching methods are definitely aimed in the proper direction.
9. We've covered more information in this course than in any of my other classes.
10. This course offers a lot of competition, thinking, and expression.
11. I rather enjoyed the course and learned more about people's behavior and feelings than I have in any other course.
12. One primary reason I enjoyed this course is that it is not the stereotype of class with hourly lectures, sitting down taking notes, and three or four exams.
13. I really enjoyed this course more than any other course I have taken.
14. I like the group process style of instruction because it illustrated feedback given by others.
15. I enjoy the type of work we have been doing in this course.
16. The participation in the groups and understanding the roles involved makes a much better impression than the notetaking and cram for exam concept.
17. The class has really changed my behavior.
18. I have learned from the situations--personally and professionally.
19. I felt the experience gained was very beneficial.
20. The exercises were a big help because they put us in all sorts of situations.
21. I have probably grown more in this class than in any other I have taken so far.
22. The feedback I received is beneficial--plus I am more aware of feedback itself and try to use it to improve myself as I see myself and as I think others see me.
23. The class periods themselves were very interesting and contained many valuable points.
24. It was the class that I enjoyed coming to most and received the most information for future use.
25. I felt like I gained some managerial experience without actually having a job.
26. I feel like I gained some self-confidence and some leadership ability.
27. I really think I gained a lot you can't get out of a book. Thanks.
28. One thing that automatically comes to mind about this course is that the material and concepts that I have learned are concepts that I will remember for a long time to come.
29. It dealt with deep thinking many times beyond what a textbook or article said--it dealt with me.
30. The course layout in general was highly worthwhile for education and training.
31. This method presents a challenge to my capabilities and management philosophy.
32. Here I was given the opportunity to exercise how much I really know about the field. And what I discovered I did not know I improved on. The points that I lacked for sure would have gone unnoticed by me without such a unique method as this.

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33. This method of teaching a management course has come the closest so far to what I believe a degree in management is all about.
34. The course as a whole was very helpful and much insight was learned as to the qualities a manager should have.
35. I feel this course is of much greater quality than any course I have previously taken.
36. Generally, there was total commitment and the learning was enjoyable.
37. I have some concepts in my head for the first time.
38. I feel I have a good handle on what is relevant and basic to any manager.

This list of comments is comprised of subjective feedback from students about the experiential teaching method. Although valid generalizations from this feedback would be difficult to make, two broad conclusions seem apparent. First, the main thrust of these comments supports and encourages the use of the experiential method of teaching. Second, this thrust is so consistent within the comments of each student that further scientific comparison of the effectiveness of more traditional teaching methods and the experiential teaching method seem warranted. These student comments are presented not to give final scientific answers to any questions about the experiential teaching method, but to subjectively establish that the use of the experiential method of teaching can and should be seriously considered for adoption in appropriate courses.

REFERENCES

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