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MEETING THE MANAGERIAL SKILL SHORTAGE - IS ACADEMIA UP TO IT?

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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the likelihood of the graduate business education community producing graduates who are capable of actually performing the skills required of a successful manager rather than just understanding those skills. The key to acquisition of the more complex and critical performance skills is considered to be the use of complex, realistic, perpetually running simulations.
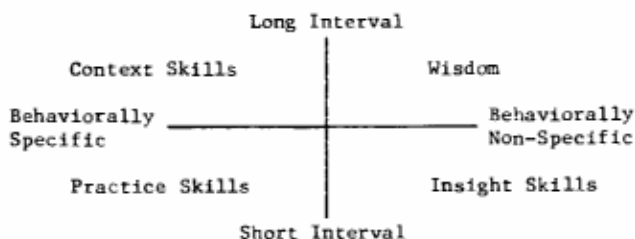
INTRODUCTION

In 1977, Miner predicted a massive managerial talent shortage commencing in the early 1980's [1, p. 412] It is apparent in current press reports that his predictions are now becoming fact. A July 4, 1980, NBC White Paper entitled, 'If Japan Can Do it, Why Can't We? painted a sad picture indeed of the application of managerial talent in recent years to America's productivity. Even though the annual output of MBAs from schools of business increased during the 70's from 21,000 to over 50,000, there seems to be a distinct scramble among employers for only those few graduates of the "best schools" [2, p. 80]. In fact there seems to be a greater demand for BBA's than MBA's, allegedly because employers can obtain them cheaper! [2, p. 83] All this should give reason to pause and reflect upon the quality of managerial skill value added in many of our MBA programs. Livingston of the Harvard Business School states flatly that 'managers are not taught in formal education programs what they most need to know to build successful careers in management. [3, p. 79] Mintzberg takes an equally dim view by stating What student of management is taught how to develop liaison contacts, handle the disturbances that inevitably arise, negotiate with other organizations, innovate in his organization? . . the management school has been more effective at training technocrats to deal with structured problems than managers to deal with unstructured ones. .. (and) will significantly influence management practice only when it becomes capable of teaching a specific set of skills associated with the job of managing." [4, pp. 187-188]

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

It is quite apparent to this writer that we cannot take lightly the questions raised about the ability of business schools to provide our society with adequately skilled management talent, especially in view of what many consider a productivity crisis existing in the U.S. [5, pp. 50-69] In any attempt to deal with questions concerning how to better develop managers/leaders, it seems essential to first define in some manner what skills a manager requires to function successfully. There seems to be no shortage of lists and definitions of such skills. However, for purposes of this discussion a rather interesting framework for describing a continuum of managerial skills proposed by Waters will be used. [6] The continuum proposed by Waters (see FIGURE I) as being descriptive of skills required in the process of managing, classifies skills according to two major and independent factors, 1, e. the relative

FIGURE I
MANAGERIAL SKILLS FRAMEWORK

Source: Waters, James A. "Managerial Skill Development, The Academy of Management Review, 1980, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 450.

interval over which the behaviors (must be learned) [6, p. 450] He further clarifies his quadrant classifications from Figure I with examples such as:

Practice Skills: Active listening, non-directive interviewing, public speaking, report writing, asserting one's self, etc.

Context Skills: Goal setting, work planning, managing time, making demands, designing controls, introducing change, building commitment and motivation, asserting authority, etc.

Insight Skills: Working in groups, empathizing, coping with ambiguity, assessing readiness for change, dealing with authority, dealing with peers, building trust. creativity, dealing with cultural differences, bargaining, negotiating, etc.

Wisdom: Gaining power, allocating resources, entrepreneurship, working the hierarchy, strategy formulation, etc. [6,p.451-452]

It is interesting to note that as Waters' classification examples move from the lower left quadrant of Figure I toward the upper right, fewer skills appear capable of being acquired through lecture, reading or case studies. In a masterpiece of understatement, Waters states, It is difficult to describe the behaviors associated with skill in making decisions in unstructured and ambiguous situations such that a person could repetitively practice them. Waters does not, nor does this writer, wish to denigrate the value of learning the technical skills such as accounting, marketing, information management, etc. These essent-

ially make up the content of a manager's job. However, as Waters says, in traditional education efforts, the process (or "how) of management is normally "treated under such headings as Organizational Behavior or simply Management." [6, p. 449] In other words, students often as not end up learning about the managerial behaviors which constitute the process of managing, but never learning to perform these behaviors. The former requires a cognitive understanding of the behaviors, the latter an ability to perform those behaviors in appropriate contexts. [6, p. 449]

Zalesnik [7, p. 67] raises a further question in discussing the development patterns of leaders vs. managers. He distinguishes the behavioral patterns and personalities of leaders as generally focusing upon an individual power ethic in contrast to managers who operate more from the collective power ethic. Zalesnik postulates that "business has established a new power ethic that favors collective over individual leadership, the cult of the group over that of personality. While insuring competence, control, and the balance of power relations among groups with the potential for rivalry, managerial leadership unfortunately does not necessarily ensure imagination, creativity, or ethical behavior in guiding the destinies of corporate enterprises.' [2, p. 77]

WHERE WILL THE SKILL PRACTICE COME FROM?

After reflecting upon the state of affairs as discussed above concerning America's managerial education and upon the U.S. business environment generally, it would seem that there is ample room, if not a critical need, for improvement in the education of managers. Assuming Waters' classification of required managerial skills to be a reasonably complete inventory, it is the opinion of this writer that the insistence of business educators upon the traditional delivery methods of lecture, readings and case studies, to use the vernacular "aren't going to get it." There is no desire here to raise questions as to how to best deliver technical skills or to teach about managerial behaviors. What is intuitively clear to this writer, based upon 29 years of experience as a reasonably successful practicing manager, is that learning to perform the various skills successfully, as does any other skill which comes to mind, takes practice. It not only requires practice, but there must be motivation to practice the skills seriously. The piano student who "plays at practicing is highly unlikely to excel. The student pilot who "plays" at practicing flight skills is likely to become a statistic. This writer knows of no other means of practicing managerial skills outside the realm of actual employment except by means of simulations. Instead of the constant series of debates in the management literature about whether simulations are more effective vehicles for teaching than the traditional methods, it would seem more useful to focus upon the context in which simulations are used, their realism, the motivational stimulus provided students, and the skills and motivation of the instructor using them.

UWF'S APPROACH

Some seven years ago a version of the Carnegie-Mellon Management Simulation was adopted by The University of West Florida for use in the Graduate School of Business. The objective from the outside was to provide maximum managerial skill practice opportunities under conditions of uncertainty.

The original game was installed by Eugene Baldwin, an Associate Professor of Management who possessed few computer skills, utilizing the part-time assistance of a member of the Computer Services Department, who

possessed only a limited knowledge of the management field, and who had a multitude of other responsibilities. As anyone who has ever undertaken such an endeavor can attest, this was an enormously taxing effort on the part of Baldwin. This point will be addressed again later. Upon completion of efforts by a group at Carnegie-Mellon University to rewrite the original simulation, this rewritten version was adopted by UWF, with the generous assistance of Robert Taylor of Duke University. This rewritten version had a vastly superior (yet still incomplete) documentation for computer personnel and a much improved player's manual. It also added considerable complexity and realism to the production process, and added a multi-national dimension to the marketing and financial areas.

In the early stages of use of the simulation, it was recognized that its use would need to be structured in such a manner as to maximize realism and provide a motivational stimulus for the student to immerse his/herself in the experience. Toward that end, the following requirements were included in the course:

a.   The game runs continuously, just as any industry would. The temptation to "end play' is largely absent. [8]

b.   Students enroll in the course for three consecutive academic quarters. Upon first enrolling, students are told to apply for employment with one of the existing firms, who are also anxious to employ new students to replace those who are just completing their third quarter. There is essentially a "job fair" at the end of each quarter, and new students sign contracts with their employing firms.

c.   To avoid the tendency to practice skills the student may already have, firms have been encouraged to place new students in a department in which his/her background is weakest. A student may remain in a single department no more than two quarters, and they are encouraged to rotate jobs each quarter. Grades are awarded only after completion of all three quarters. The individual's grade is heavily dependent upon knowledge of all facets of the organization, not just one or two departments.

d.   Strategic plans are required for the forthcoming two years, and financial performance projections are made every four months. The quality of team performance is measured by the success with which these plans and projections are carried out.

e.   The performance of the team accounts for 50% of the individual student's grade.

f.   The process of learning the rules of the game (a difficult task) takes place in the same type of atmosphere this writer has experienced in actual work situations--i.e., their new superior may or may not be articulate, a good teacher, or even terribly interested in teaching them about the company; documentation is not easy to locate, and once found, it is not easy to comprehend; yet the new student is under severe pressure to "perform."

g.   Labor negotiations are conducted for two game year contracts, with the firm having to live with the results of the agreements.

h.   Firms finding themselves in financial difficulty must find financial relief through their own resources, including bankruptcy courts.

i.   Each student must address the Chairman of the Board in a directors meeting twice each quarter.

In this writers relatively brief experience in administering the UWF simulation, no instrument has been established to measure its success in accomplishing the objectives stated above. However, some observations based upon oral and written feedback from students may be useful to others contemplating the challenges outlined in this paper.

First, it is quite apparent that the exercise of both Practice Skills and Insight Skills as described by Waters [6] is rigorous in the simulation. Students emerge from this course visibly more self-confident in these skills than when entering.

Secondly, with the student remaining immersed in the simulation for three academic quarters, there appears to be a realization on the part of the students, often for the first time, of how difficult it is to perform the long interval skills. Unless a student has had previous managerial experience at a reasonably responsible level, this seems to be the first and only opportunity to experience the application of the long interval skills as graduate students.

Thirdly, the manner in which the simulation is operated at UWF, together with its inherent complexity and realism seems to facilitate the student becoming immersed in the simulations rather than playing at it. Interestingly, there is often some discomfort on the part of students who seem compelled to remind themselves that "after all this is only a game."

WHY NOT OTHERS?

It seems fair to wonder, if a small university such as UWF finds such value in its management simulation, why has this technique not been more widespread? To this writer's knowledge, UWF is unique in its use of such a complex simulation in the manner it does. It is understood that even Carnegie-Mellon no longer uses its own revised simulation. One writer, in concluding that games have "failed," states that by the end of the 1960's the large graduate centers had generally ceased to be enthused about them. [9, p. 127] In measuring the so-called success or failure of management simulations, writers seem to have a tendency to consider simulations in a generic sense, ranging from the quickie' classroom exercise to those of great complexity. This writer has yet to find any discussion of the correlation of the "success of a simulation to either the manner in which it is administered or the skills of those administering the simulation. This writer has found the administration of the complex UWF simulation to be an intellectually humbling and physically demanding experience. One must wonder how many of those simulations categorized as failures," since they are no longer in use, were terminated because of the wear and tear on the faculty involved.

Kelp recognized the requirement for finding an instructor who is extremely well-informed and up-to-date in all functional areas. [10] It seems fair to ask how many professors in graduate schools of business possess both the very substantial range of skills required and the willingness to expose themselves to the constant stress of being a resource in the unstructured environment of a highly complex game?

Fritzsche pleaded recently for simplifying the administrative requirements for games. [11] Regardless of how simplified those requirements are, the operation of a complex simulation is an administrative task of considerable magnitude, filled with surprises, and one which many

talented faculty members wish to avoid. The only significant rewards normally forthcoming for such work are psychic, and the long haul these are unlikely to be sufficient to pay for the resultant alimony being risked. Sadly, it is the talented faculty members who are the most likely candidates to play the mentor role described by Zalesnik as being critical in the development of leaders. The mentor role is hardly one which can be played by the detached involvement of the talented faculty members dealing with the students through graduate assistants.

CONCLUSION

It is this writer's contention that given the apparent shortage of highly skilled managers in this country, these skills must either be acquired through highly complex, realistic management simulations or else society must provide these skills in the live environment. To do the latter, society and the practioners themselves must suffer the consequences of errors which are inevitable as skills are being attained. Given the nature of the academic decision-making process and the disadvantages to the individual instructor involved in such a course, it does not, sadly to say, seem likely that academia will provide those skills--at least through the use of complex simulations.

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