

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

LEARNING ABOUT ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT THROUGH "ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT": CLOSING THE GAP

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ABSTRACT

Using the whole course situation as a work organization the author was able to teach an introductory management course in which the students experienced key organizational processes: leadership, decision making, problem solving, communication, conflict, cooperation and competition. This experience approximates the organizational reality better than a conventional course. Two classes (110, 40) of business seniors in a midwestern university participated in the experiment. This paper reports the rationale, methodology and caveats of this experiment.

RATIONALE

There is a growing gap between two realities: the organizational setting and the teaching setting. A contributing factor, enhancing the feeling that there is a reality gap, is the change in content of the introductory course to management and its textbook. As we gain a better understanding of the managerial role and of managers' organizational role (e.g., Frost et al. 1978; Mintzberg, 1973), more emphasis is put on concepts pertaining to such phenomena as change, uncertainty, stress, conflict, power, careers, bargaining and politics. These topics themselves reflect a growing awareness in organizations of these behavioral processes and their costs. If we translate the numerous managerial contingency models (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; Vroom & Yetton, 1973) into job requirements, we find that adaptability, mobility, flexibility and innovation have become vehicles to managerial success, possibly surpassing loyalty, orderliness and directiveness.

In short, management in the present day highly constraint-dependent organization means a lot of unanticipated surprises, excitement, anxiety, rivalry, change and movement. These are the characteristics of the organizational reality which the conventional lecture-based course about management cannot even begin to capture. Students of physics or biology frequently touch and sense their subject; so do students of medicine and even psychology. Students of management only hear or read about their subject. This distance between realities contributes undoubtedly to the growing frustration of all parties included: students, professors and practitioners. The familiar "Principles of Administration" course, even with the amateurish use of occasional experiential exercises, does nothing to close the gap.

It is suggested here that students of management can begin to experience this subject in the classroom by an alternative learning method.

THE MAIN IDEA

The idea behind the present experiment has been that the whole course would operate throughout the term as a "work organization" with the professor as its President and the students as its members. The product would be a certain amount of knowledge as defined by the organization. The "organization" would have many characteristics of real

organizations: goals, plans, rules and regulations, authority structure, functional differentiation and control mechanisms. During its existence (from initiation to termination), members would personally observe and experience managerial roles, leadership and fellowship, intragroup and intergroup relations, decision making, the individual vs. organizational dilemma, etc. Most importantly, students should be able to grasp the fact that organizations are lively, exciting and demanding situations, and managers both react to and enact them.

THE METHOD

Forming the Organization

In the first meeting, the students are presented with a letter from the teacher in which the idea for the course is spelled out, including the goals, the methods and the implications for the individual student. The differences between the proposed setting and a regular class are emphasized: group participation, active involvement, commitment to organizational goals, and more exposure to both peers and professor. Finally, they are being asked to decide whether to join or select an alternative section (See Appendix A)

The remaining students who did not join an alternative section (98% in both cases) are divided into groups of five, which become Departments in the organization. (Larger groups have not functioned well). The professor, playing the role of President, calls for a meeting of the selected Department Heads. Each DH receives an instruction sheet detailing one of the following tasks:

(See Appendix B)

1. Goal setting - Discuss and formulate long-range and short range objectives for the organization (acquire knowledge, learn to case-analyze, learn to solve problems, deal with people, etc.)
2. Planning and scheduling - Plan the course, given the term calendar, required and selected readings, and suggested texts.
3. Rules and regulations - Discuss and propose a set of rules for behavior in the organization (smoking, attendance, discipline, etc.).
4. Performance evaluation - Suggest assessment systems for both the individual (e.g., weight of group projects and tests) and the organization (attendance rate, withdrawal, CPA, etc.) effectiveness.

Proposals and suggestions are submitted to the President by the end of class. Based on this material, the professor prepares the course outline which is then submitted back to the organization for review. When general acceptance is achieved in all Departments, the outline is "ratified" by the members. Retaining the veto power, the professor decides on the final course outline which becomes binding by the second or third meeting. The advantage of this outline is three-fold: (a) Students feel obligated by and committed to it; (b) It IS fairly detailed and every requirement or contin-

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

agency is clearly spelled out; (c) Students can start group-work from the first meeting because they are personally interested in the task and attempt to have influence on such issues as testing procedure or grading (See Appendix c)

Organizational Functioning

Each Department Head becomes responsible for reporting attendance, completing tasks or projects, and communicating between President and members. Class meetings open with a "public" management meeting where the President assigns the Departmental projects, distributes handouts and memos, and attends to the problems raised by the Departments. The first part of class is devoted to a short (25-30 minute) overview lecture by the professor. The rest of the period is devoted to assigned Departmental activity (analysis of critical incidents, case discussion or a given organizational assignment) As the course approaches the topic of organizational design, each Department chooses a certain function --production, maintenance, finance, personnel, marketing or R&D. Further assignments are then selected to match these functions. Thus, for example, the Personnel Department studies and presents (to the class) MBO as a development and control method; the Production Department presents PERT as a planning technique; the R&D Department develops an evaluation form for appraisal of group performance (Appendix D). At one point, the members also propose and choose a name for the organization which becomes an important property of this class.

Leadership roles (usually Department Head and Secretary) are experienced by each member by maintaining a rotation system. Because of the importance of group projects, many coordination problems arise and it is up to those in charge in a given week to ensure the activation of the group and the fulfillment of the assignment. As the term progresses, it becomes interesting to compare the various methods of division of labor and coordination developed by the different groups. This is especially crucial when students hold jobs outside the university.

The final project involves a situation where a complete organization is analyzed and thus each Department, depending upon its specific role, contributes its own perspectives and interacts with others to get information or influence a decision. This exercise demonstrates such macro processes as inter-unit relationship, resource allocation, boundary roles and communication methods.

Finally, tests--mid-term and final--are taken individually by all members. They cover a specified portion of the material designated at the beginning.

Organizational Control

As a principle, each activity culminates in some type of written report submitted at the end of class by the Department Head. This is necessary as both a behavioral control device and an evaluation means. It also enhances the students' sense of accountability. In some cases, the loose structure can mislead students into confusion, anarchy and inaction. Thus, not only constant reporting in both directions is important, but also building some interdepartmental tension and intra- departmental cohesion.

To succeed, the method demands careful pre-planning, confidence in managing the class, sensitivity to group processes and an initiation of structure in a considerate style. Students, especially the achievers, tend to become anxious because a significant portion of their grade is based on group projects and they exert enough pressure on their peers to

contribute. However, if they perceive inconsistency is running the class or lack of confidence, they tend to undermine its success so the system will be changed and they will benefit as individuals. In some instances, high achievers assume responsibility for their group and do most of the work. Those problems can be "used" by the teacher to demonstrate such issues as interpersonal conflict, work stress and social change, and to explore ways in which organizations can harness these energies for their own benefit.

CONCLUSION

The method presented here is designed as an attempt at closing the gap between the dull academic portrayal of organizations and the exciting, demanding and compelling realities for them. It was postulated that through using the whole course situation over the whole period of its life to experience and exist as an organization, students' understanding of the topic will be considerably enhanced. Operating as departments within an organization producing knowledge, students experience managerial roles, interpersonal difficulties and their solutions, coping with uncertainty, intrapersonal conflict and competition, as well as the mechanics and importance of organization level processes.

As a rule, the proposed method seems to have a better chance for success under the following conditions: campus university, full-time management students, seniors with some experience at organizational jobs, class size of 60 to 100, professor with behavioral background and meetings of two hours each. Students who are primarily commuters and/or who are required to take the class tend to exhibit social loafing, (Psychology Today October 1979) and produce less because they rely on others to perform. The method demands careful planning and constant monitoring by the professor and requires group management skills. However, especially at the introductory level, where building that interest is so crucial, merits certainly outweigh the difficulties.

APPENDIX A

MLR 301 - Principles of Management

Term	_____	Office Hrs.	_____
Dr.	_____	Tel. (O)	_____
Room	_____	(H)	_____

Announcement #1

Dear Student:

Please read the following announcement carefully because you will have to make an important decision: Stay or leave.

As you know, this is an introductory course in organizational management. Past experience in teaching this course indicates that the conventional teaching method (frontal lectures, compulsory reading, individual exercises, and tests) tends to turn students off. The course becomes boring and rather dull. Its success is a function of the professor's theatrical talents and the students' level of fatigue. This is in sharp contrast with the exciting and interesting jobs managers in organizations usually experience.

In order to solve this dilemma, I designed (and tried a year ago) an alternative method of teaching the course. The principle is that throughout the term the class (professor and students) operates as an organization. Thus, we simulate management and its problems right here in class.

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

The class is divided into Departments of five students. Each Department selects its Department Head and its Secretary. Most of the course activities will take place in the Departments. Department Heads are responsible for getting the work done and are accountable to the "President" (me)

The first week of the course is devoted to establishing the organization. Each Department will get a task to accomplish: Goal setting, planning and scheduling, or performance appraisal and reward system, etc. The Departments will discuss these issues and make their recommendations. These will become the course outline. Obviously, the final decisions will be made by the President.

Beginning in the second week, the organization will start its producing-learning management. This process will be based on short lectures, discussions and exercises. The Departments will be responsible for controlling their members' behavior and effort, since written projects will be submitted for the whole Department. Only tests will be taken individually. Thus emphasis will be put on group participation.

As a whole, this can be a unique experience for all of us. However, students who need more structure and do not tolerate some ambiguity should think about switching to other sections. Students will have to be highly involved throughout the term.

The course material will be mostly drawn from: Gannon, N.J., Management: An Organizational Perspective, 1977, and from: Anderson, C.R. & Gannon, M.J., Readings in Management: An Organizational Perspective, 1977.

There will be mid-term quizzes and a final test. So that in addition to valuable personal experiences in group behavior, leadership, communication, motivation, conflict, etc., students will have to seriously learn the theories, models, and research that make up the science of management in organizations.

Dr. _____

APPENDIX B

Task Assignment

1. Goal Setting - Formulate a list of objectives for this course - organization. These are both ultimate and operative goals. Also list some criteria of evaluation. We will be able to use these criteria for evaluation of our goal accomplishments.
2. Planning and Scheduling - Use a Fall term calendar to design the course schedule (readings, exercises, tests) . The following is the minimum required:
 - (a) At least 12 out of 17 chapters of the textbook.
 - (b) In each section of the reading at least one entry.
 - (c) At least two midterm quizzes and a final (not necessarily comprehensive).
 - (d) At least 3 case studies analyzed and submitted by each Department.
3. Performance Evaluation - Suggest a performance evaluation system for the organization. Consider the following:
 - (a) Students' final grades (A-F)
 - (b) Weights of group participation, exercises and tests. (percentage)
 - (c) Student (member) evaluation form (by peers,

- Department Head, professor?)
(d) Professor's evaluation form.

4. Rules and Regulations - Every organization establishes a set of norms for behavior and their sanctions in case of deviance. Consider such issues as: smoking, attendance, tardiness, group responsibility, class behavior, peer relationships, student-professor relationships, Department Head's role and power, etc.

Every Department will submit in writing its proposal by the end of the next class meeting.

APPENDIX C

NLR 301
Fall Quarter

Dr. _____

Course Outline

This course outline is based on the recommendations submitted on 9/26/79 by the Department Heads.

Objectives:

1. To develop an understanding of the organizational environment (internal and external)
2. To develop an understanding of the managerial role.
3. To develop an understanding of the human factor.
4. To acquire knowledge about the processes of planning, organizing and controlling.
5. To gain an understanding of the decision making process.
6. To experience organization management and organizational life through class participation.
7. To improve personal skills of communication with others.

Method:

The class will simulate an organization throughout the term. The professor will function as a president and an expert. The class will be divided into 6 groups of five students. Each group will be a department. Each department will select a Department Head and a Secretary who will be responsible for the department's activities. Class meetings will be devoted to the production of knowledge through lectures, projects and experiential activities. Mostly the work will be done in the Departments.

Rules and Regulations:

1. No smoking in class
2. Students will be penalized for missing more than 2 classes or not contributing to group projects.
3. Tardiness should be kept to a minimum.
4. Attendance record will be kept by groups and reported in writing to the professor every Wednesday.
5. Department Head's and Secretary's jobs will rotate every two weeks. They will be responsible for the communication between the group and the professor.

Grievance Procedure:

Members will be allowed to file a grievance (in writing) concerning any matter directly to the professor.

Performance Evaluation:

- A. Organizational effectiveness criteria:
 1. Organization will survive until final.
 2. Not more than 2 persons will drop.

Experiential Learning Enters the Eighties, Volume 7, 1980

3. There will be a minimum number of grievances.
4. Absenteeism will not exceed one meeting per student (average)
5. No student will get an F.
6. Final average will not be below 2.0.

The following will be the grade system:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1. Mid-term tests (2) | 20% | 10 points per test |
| 2. Final | 15% | 15 points |
| 3. Group projects (3) | 45% | 15 points per case |
| 4. Group's evaluations | 10% | 10 points maximum |
| 5. Professor's evaluation | 10% | 10 points maximum |
| TOTAL | 100% | 100 points |

B. Individual Evaluation:

Students final grade will consist of the following factors; test grades, project grades, group evaluations, and professor evaluations. Because of the special structure of the class, relatively heavy weight will be given to group activities.

Grades:

90-100	= A
80-89	= B
70-79	= C
60-69	= D
0-59	= F

MLR 301 - TERM SCHEDULE - FALL						
Date	Topic	Text	Reading	Planned Activity	Project Due	Test
9/24	Forming the Organization	---	---	Goals, Procedures	---	---
9/26	---	---	---	Schedules	---	---
10/1	---	---	---	Project #1	---	---
10/3	Introduction to Management	Ch. 1	Weber, p. 5 Drucker, p. 14	Lecture Discussion	---	---
10/10	Organizational Design	Ch. 3, 4	Organ, p. 22	Lecture Critical Incidents	---	---
10/15	Planning	Ch. 5	Industry Week p. 81	Lecture Critical Incidents	Project I	---
10/17	Control	Ch. 6	Bedford, p. 103	Case, p. 185	---	---
10/22	---	---	---	Test & Project #2	---	Midterm
10/24	Motivation	Ch. 8	Greene, p. 179	Project 2 & Lecture	---	---
10/29	Motivation & Performance	Ch. 8	---	Movie & Exercise	---	---
10/31	Leadership	Ch. 9	Tannenbaum, p. 210	Lecture & Case & Observation	---	---

APPENDIX D

Form A -- THINK, INC. --					
GROUP EVALUATION					
NAME _____		DEPARTMENT _____			
DIMENSIONS	VERY POOR (1)	POOR (2)	AVERAGE (3)	GOOD (4)	VERY GOOD (5)
1. Cooperation with Group					
2. Contribution to Projects					
3. Attendance in Group Activity					
4. Responsibility/Reliability					
5. Leadership Quality					
6. Knowledge of Material					
Total Score					

Form B -- THINK, INC. --			
GROUP EVALUATION			
NAME _____		DEPARTMENT _____	
AVERAGE TOTAL SCORE	EVALUATION 1 - 10	COMMENTS	
1. _____			
2. _____			
3. _____			
4. _____			
5. _____			
KEY 26-30 = 9-10 21-25 = 8-9 16-20 = 7-8 11-15 = 6-7 <10 = 5		DEPARTMENT HEAD _____	