

# SUMMITING MOUNT EVEREST; AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPLICATION FOR ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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## ABSTRACT

*Organizational behavior, often included as core business curriculum, instructs students how individuals and teams successfully work within organizations. This theory-based course, which often utilizes case studies, can be challenging to transform into a hands-on, applied learning approach. This paper presents an experiential course design for organizational behavior around the theme of summiting Mount Everest. This model utilizes a variety of activities, along with a short computer simulation, in order to immerse students into the experience of ascending the famous mountain. Students encounter what it is like to maintain individual motivation, communicate effectively, develop trust within their team, build a culture, and experience conflict and change, all while designing a successful organization. The course begins with researching the individuals who made the first successful summit of Mt. Everest, which is then followed by a simulated summit attempt with their climbing team, and finally, a merger of the teams to create a world-class climbing expedition organization. This experiential learning design creates an environment that challenges students to apply and test approaches, discover solutions and personalize the task to bring greater meaning and learning to organizational behavior theory.*

Keyword: *Organizational behavior, experiential learning, team, Mount Everest.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an applied experiential learning course design for organizational behavior utilizing a Mount Everest theme. This model includes a combination of a computer business simulation, flipped classroom pedagogy, and active learning exercises within a consistent theme to provide students with an experience in which to apply organizational behavior concepts. The following will present the background, course design, and assessment comparison with a traditional lecture-based instruction method.

## BACKGROUND

Organizational behavior applies psychology theories to business organizations and operations in terms of how they affect employees, customers, and the community (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009). This course explores the behaviors of the individual and team, as well as structural characteristics that impact the overall effectiveness of an organization. It serves to reinforce various roles and functions of employees and managers in relation to issues involving communication, motivation, conflict management, negotiation, and corporate culture.

Designing activities that anchor students' performance

tasks to course objectives in an applied environment is a challenge for a class that contains psychological theoretical content. Studies have found that a stimulating and positive climate energizes student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, according to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), involving students in a real or simulated setting with many of the same challenges and settings that would be encountered in a real environment become authentic for students. A specific purpose and opportunity allows students to test approaches, discover solutions and personalize the task to bring greater meaning and learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

While computer business simulations have been known to create a realistic environment, in which concepts can be practiced in a realistic environment, the goal of this experiential learning design was to simulate psychological fidelity, or underlying psychological process relevant to performing within an organization (Hall, J. 2015). The goal was to improve performance enhanced by the psychological environment (Hall, J. 2015). Therefore, the continual Mount Everest theme throughout the course built engagement during the length of the course so students experience a beginning, middle and end, as well as the trials, errors, stressors and a sense of accomplishment. In addition, a flipped classroom pedagogy was utilized with student responsible for learning basic concepts outside of the class in order to apply their learning through a series of team activities in the class.

Included in this experiential model was a short computer simulation called, Leadership and Team Simulation: Everest V2 (Roberto, & Edmondson, 2011). The simulation challenged student, placed in various mountaineering expedition roles, to attempt a summit of Mount Everest. Each role has competing goals that test the team's cohesion and communication. This simulation is fully described in a study by Nichols and Wright (2015), in which the authors found that it aided novice students in understanding threshold concepts in core business courses.

## COURSE DESIGN IN THREE MODULES

In organizational behavior, students are required to analyze theories as related to individuals, groups, and the organization; therefore this course was designed with this emphasis in mind. In an effort to allow students to apply theories such as motivation, team dynamic, organizational communication and change in a practical method, a series of experiences around the theme of Mount Everest was incorporated. The course begins with researching the individuals who made the first successful summit of Mt. Everest, which is then followed by a simulated summit attempt with their climbing team, and finally, a merger of the teams to create a world-class climbing expedition organization. Similar to any orientation process, students begin the course with little to no information about Mount Everest and its history. Yet, by the end of the course, they have developed knowledge about the

course concepts, the Mt. Everest environment, as well as, ability to reflect how this experience applies to any work environment.

### THE INDIVIDUAL

The first stage of the course focuses on the individual within an organization, including how values, learning styles, motivation, and decision-making can affect individual success and organizational dynamics (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009). Students spend time applying these individual theories through the use of self-assessments so they can gain greater insight about their own characteristics and perspectives. Additionally, students learn the concepts, utilizing a flipped classroom method, in which they prepare notes for an individual section of the chapter. They then teach these concepts to each other during classroom discussion within their newly formed team, which creates new reliance and obligation to teammates.

During this initial stage, students also begin to get orientated to the history and environment of Mt. Everest. As would be common with an actual mountaineer prior to attempting a summit, students learn about the first successful recorded summit by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay and the British team in 1953. Students watch *Beyond the Edge* (Madigan, Metcalfe, & Pooley, 2013), a film about this first summit, which highlights the background of these climbers, as well, the monumental effort by the British team and local Nepalese support and Sherpa. Along with additional research, students not only become acclimatized to their new environment for the course, but also quickly learn that organizational success requires the determination of individuals working as a team.

By the end of the individual module, students analyze Edmond Hillary and Tenzing Norgay utilizing a selection of the individual concepts learned thus far. They have to consider what motivates them to perform both as individuals and within a their Mount Everest team. Additionally, students also apply these same theories to themselves in the context of school, work, extra-curricular activities, as well as, their future career.

This first stage not only develops knowledge and application of individual organizational behavioral theories, but they have slowly become acquainted with their team with which they will attempt their summit in the next module — the team.

### THE TEAM

Once the students develop and apply knowledge of individual behaviors, and explored their motivation and values, they are ready to make their summit attempt of Mount Everest with their team. During this module, the class learns about team concepts theories such as team development and effectiveness, communication, power and influence, conflict management, as well as leadership styles (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009).

Prior to embarking upon their team summit, the each group is tasked with developing a team charter (Hillier & Dunn-Jensen, 2012). Each team spends time discussing, negotiating and agreeing to five essential requirements important to their team. These requirements often will include requirements like attendance, communication and engagement. This process begins to also develop team norms and culture (Hillier & Dunn-Jensen, 2012). The tool is used to guide the group through their work, mediate conflicts and provide feedback. Following the building of charters, the class has a team-building session in which each group competes against the others to build a “mountain” out of recyclable materials (also known as the tower exercise).

Once the team charter is complete, an orientation of the Everest V2 simulation is conducted along with assignments of individual roles. These simulated-established roles include leader, photographer, environmentalist, marathoner, and physician. The underlying design of this simulation requires each role to work together to achieve team goals. Individually, each role has separate communications from the simulation with conflicting goals (Roberto & Edmondson, 2011). It is impossible for all individuals within a team to achieve their personal goals, so compromise and communication is essential. The simulation requires only six decision rounds and it can be played in one or two class sessions, however in this course design, there is one decision rounds per class over the course of three weeks so students can incorporate and reflect upon team concepts being learned and applied. The simulation itself is not graded, but used as a tool for students to apply concepts.

Throughout the simulation, team members are required to keep a graded journal to debrief the exercise, which is used to record the team’s challenges, team dynamics, as well as their application of course concepts. For example, individual students describe how they are moving through the stages of team development, as well as, specific methods used to effectively communicate. While students can get very caught up in the excitement, challenges and frustrations of the simulation, these journals encourage reflection and application of theory within their group. During this process, course concepts are available through online lectures.

Once the simulation is complete, the team’s graded assignment is to create a video that conveys their Mount Everest journey and experiences. This stage of the module allows students to move from the computer-simulated environment to a physical setting. In developing their video, students are required to utilize team concepts and theory from the class as they tell their story. Many teams are highly creative and attempt to recreate many of the experiences from the simulation. Teams are encouraged to be open and honest about their struggles transitioning from individuals into a team during their climb, and share elements of the team’s culture. These five to ten minute videos are presented to the class. Following the video presentations, students are ready to begin the next

**TABLE 1  
MEAN EXAM RESULTS**

	Traditional Design Mean	Experiential Design Mean
Exam #1: Individual	75.3	77.5
Exam #2: Team	81.2	87.5
Exam #3: Organization	80	95

module – the organization.

## THE ORGANIZATION

The final stage of the Mount Everest experience brings all teams together to simulate a merger of the separate teams into a complete organization. During this module, the class learns about organizational concepts theories such as organizational design, culture and change management (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009). The class is informed that their teams have been hired to create a Mount Everest expedition company. The company’s investor tasks the teams to propose the new organization’s name, mission, design, roles and culture.

Two activities have been designed for this module to encourage teams to cross-pollinate. The first activity to encourage teams to work together is a bridge building exercise. This common team-building activity is modified to the Mount Everest environment. Using recyclable materials, teams are challenged to build a path across the icefall crevasses that separate their teams in order to safely descend all climbers before a possible avalanche. Unlike the first mountain building exercise in which they compete against each other, this activity is only successful when they communicate and work together. Once a sturdy bridge is formed between two teams, those teams can then “cross” to aid other teams with their bridges. If successful the entire class will have formed a safe passage across the icefall by building a set of bridges from table to table. Following the event, the class discusses the course concepts they utilized to work together.

Next, to learn the organizational concepts being applying in their pending proposals, they spend a day learning and teaching in mixed groups. For example, the photographers from each of the Everest climbing teams meet to discuss the concepts and shares examples from their team experiences. This process forces them out of their comfort zone to learn about the other teams.

The graded assignment for this module includes a proposal from each team, in the form of a presentation. In the presentation, they need to develop an organizational design along with a name and mission. They also must consider how the separate team cultures will merge into one cohesive culture utilizing change management theory. The teams have various constraints placed on them as they work on their proposals. For example, to avoid the continued separation of teams, the new organization cannot contain the same number of “departments”

as original climbing teams. Their proposal also has to utilize cultural elements from all the other teams.

Following the presentation of each team’s proposal, the entire class then works together to determine the elements of their new Mount Everest expedition organization. They are required to use elements from all proposals in their final design. Other than the required elements, the class has complete discretion as to how they work together to meet this outcome. Without any prompting from the instructor, students often utilize many of the concepts from the class during this process. They often start by discussing how they will work together to reach consensus before actually working on their required tasks. It has also been observed that students add elements to the organization beyond the assignment requirements such as work environment and marketing concepts.

## ASSESSMENT

To determine the effectiveness of this design, the model has been compared with traditional lecture methods, taught by the same instructor. The following will discuss exam assessment, student feedback and instructor observations, along with lessons learned and some general conclusions.

## EXAMS

When comparing final exam raw scores between courses utilizing the Mount Everest design to a more traditional course design taught by the same instructor, scores improved. Both the traditional and Mount Everest design courses utilized three multiple-choice exams to assess the students’ knowledge and understanding of course concepts. The first is taken individually, the second as a team, and the third as a whole class, or organization.

As seen in *Table 1*, based on class size of 25 students, all three exams scores showed an improvement from the traditional to the experiential Mount Everest design. For this limited comparison analysis, the results seem to indicate that moving from a traditional lecture-based approach to this experiential approach may aid students’ ability to grasp core organizational behavior concepts.

## STUDENT FEEDBACK

In addition to exam assessment, student feedback was

**TABLE 2  
STUDENT FEEDBACK**

	Traditional Design		Experiential Design	
	Average	SD	Average	SD
Gaining factual knowledge	3.9	0.7	4.3	0.7
Acquiring teamwork skills	4.1	0.8	4.5	0.7

1=No apparent progress

2=Less than most

3=Moderate progress

4=Substantial progress

5=Exceptional progress

gathered utilizing the IDEA Student Rating of Instruction diagnostic course feedback tool (IDEA Center, 2015). For the purpose of this comparison, this tool was used to specifically assess student feedback regarding the following two categories: “Gaining factual knowledge” and “Acquiring skills to working with others as member of a team.” While the traditional class scored in the moderate to substantial progress level in both areas, an increase was seen in both factual knowledge and acquiring team skills with the experiential model. As seen in *Table 2*, student feedback from the experiential model was evaluated as having gained substantial progress in both knowledge and team skills. Again, this is based on class size in both models of 25 students.

While this comparison is limited in scope, there is some indication that the experiential model is more effective in meeting outcomes regarding retention of the theories and knowledge of organizational behavior. Additionally, based on student feedback, as well as instructor observation, students were more successful in learning and applying skills needed to successfully work in a team. The instructor noted fewer instances of poor group dynamics. Moreover, groups were far more willing and able to confront individuals not meeting agreed upon workload requirements, often enabling the team to resurrect successful team dynamics.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Through the development of this course, over the last two years, there have been many lessons learned. Moving from a more traditional to experiential course has witnessed much more engagement from students. The class had developed a positive reputation within the institution, and has quickly filled every term by students across many majors. Students have appreciated the Everest theme as a fun learning experience, however, more importantly the majority can illustrate specific ways in which lessons learned from this experience will be utilized in the future.

Since the majority of class work is student managed, it is not uncommon for students to try to rush through work, which can limit their understanding of key concepts. As such, several techniques have been utilized to keep students focused. Certainly, the instructor must wander the classroom and challenge students with questions. Also, tools like Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique cards by Ebstein have been utilized and incorporated into teamwork and grades to motivate students. These scratch-off multiple-choice cards give student teams immediate feedback and challenge them to learn concepts.

Additionally, this class has had far less success in a traditional lecture classroom. A team-based classroom with tables encourages the necessary communication to make this course experience successful. Moreover, during the merger stage, students need to have the freedom to rearrange the classroom in order to work as one large group. A flexible classroom has been very helpful to encourage the needed team dynamics.

## CONCLUSIONS

This model was developed utilizing a Mount Everest theme in order for students to apply organizational behavior theory using experiential learning. With the use of the Everest V2 computer simulation, as well as a consistent Mount Everest theme designed activities and assignment, students became

more engaged in comparison with a more traditional lecture-based design. Assessment comparison yielded positive results, most significantly in students’ ability to learn and apply teamwork skills. Future work in this area may include more in-depth assessment of specific course objectives, as well as, expansion of this theme by development of more Mount Everest activities and assignments, both in an outside the classroom.

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