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Beyond “The Total Organization”: A New Adaptation of a Great Exercise

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ABSTRACT

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"The Total Organization", a Cohen, Fink, Gadon, and Willits'(1992) exercise, has great possibilities for inclusion in a variety of current courses covering a range of topics with a variety of outcomes. We have successfully adapted the exercise for our required MBA Leadership course. The participants must self-organize, choose leadership, determine roles, and develop the structure for an entrepreneurial (and should they choose, high tech) venture. With few instructions, they must struggle with the ambiguity of multiple organizational challenges including: innovation, creativity, team building and organizational design. We will demonstrate the exercise and give participants overheads and exercise instructions on CD so they can immediately use the exercise in their own courses.

Introduction

Searching for an exercise to set the tone for a challenging MBA core Leadership and Organizational Dynamics course, we discovered "The Total Organization" in Cohen, Fink, Gadon, and Willits' *Effective Behavior in Organizations* (1992). Often students have not previously participated in experiential learning and need to have an opportunity to wrestle with the challenges such exercises will present for them personally and as a group as the semester progresses. We adapted the exercise for our own learning outcomes and have had great success with orienting students to experiential learning and our expectations for their participation in our classes.

Early in the course students learn about self-organizing systems (Wheatley, 2005), organizational creation and change (Senge, et. Al. 2005), entrepreneurial leadership (Shriberg, 2002), and understanding organizations by reframing (Bolman & Deal, 2003). About the third of fourth week of class, they are told that they will be participating in an exercise, which will help them apply not only what they have already learned, but also what they will need to learn as leaders going forward in the class. Some, but not all of those topics include organizational design (Mintzberg, 1979) (Hughes, Gannett, Curphy, 2002), decision making (Harvey & Brown, 2001), emotional and social intelligence (Goleman, 1995), negotiation, (Lewicki et al 1992) and a variety of other topics typical to a core MBA Leadership course (Bennis, 2003) (Howell & Costley, 2006).

The Exercise

PURPOSE:

1. To introduce experiential learning in the leadership context.
2. To allow students to grapple with creating an organization in an ambiguous and chaotic situation.

GROUP SIZE:
A class of 20-30 students is ideal. Any larger group should be divided into two groups, space provided. .

APPROPRIATE AUDIENCE:
Graduate MBA students are ideal, but could also be used with undergraduate business majors.

TIME REQUIRED:
2-3 hours (could be divided into two classes)

PREPARATION BY STUDENTS: Complete assigned course readings.

PREPARATION BY INSTRUCTOR:
Short lecture on experiential learning.

TO THE STUDENTS:

Purpose

This course focuses upon your development as a leader within an organizational context**.** The purpose of this exercise is to increase your awareness of your own leadership instincts and abilities, and give you an opportunity to apply them within an ambiguous but realistic organizational setting. It will also allow you to see how people in organizations form, make decisions, innovate and move forward once an entrepreneurial idea is seized upon and accepted by the group.

Procedure

You, as a class, have approximately one to one and one half hours to design an organization to fit a particular situation. You are to assume that you each are a member of the organization, and you must include in your report your individual job assignments and remuneration. Everyone must have a realistic salary and role within the organization.

The Situation

A group of community leaders has donated the funds to create a community newspaper. The community will subsidize the printing and paper costs for six months and then 50% of those costs thereafter. The paper must be no less than ten pages, on newsprint, on half regular newspaper size. A fund of $500,000 will be made available for the first year, which is to be used only for the purpose of paying your salaries for work performed to produce and distribute the paper. You may create peripheral lines of business that compliment the paper if you so decide.

Note: The instructor may decide to create some parameters about the community and the function of the paper (i.e. senior, young singles, urban, sub-urban, small town). We have found that if we do not do this, that the group comes up with their own descriptive parameters, and that is always an interesting discussion.

At the end of the assigned time you will present a report to your community funders outlining your organization and funding decisions. At the moment, the leaders are not interested in what the paper will actually look like, but are interested in the organization you will design to get the job done. Your report should include job assignments, remuneration for each person in the group as well as a preliminary funding report as to how the newspaper will survive after the first one-half year.

I will serve as the representative of the community leaders and you will present your report to me at the agreed upon time.

The Exercise:

We introduce the exercise with very little explanation. We show them the overheads describing the task at hand; we answer a few questions, and then declare the exercise has begun. If the instructor prefers, he/she may choose two to three students to observe and help with the debrief section. If that is the case, observers need to be briefed and instructed on what to look for and report upon during the debrief session. Just as Cohen, et al suggest, we do not intervene at all during the exercise. We observe as much as possible and take notes to remind participants of critical incidents that occurred. It is usually quite chaotic at the beginning, but the group usually quickly self-organizes and decides upon leaders and small groups to get the work completed in a timely manner.

Although the exercise can be used any time during the semester, we like to use it early on as it helps us understand our students better, their needs for leadership development, and also introduces them to experiential learning in a non-threatening, but dynamic way.

The Report

At the end of the allotted time, we ask for the report. Usually, the group leader(s) give the report. We ask questions and try to realistically play the role of community leader and representative of the funders of the enterprise. Once the report is complete, the debrief begins.

Debriefing the Exercise

We have the students arrange their chairs in a circle and then use "Dialogue" (Isaacs, 1993; Heenan, 1998) to debrief the exercise. As instructors, we allow the conversation to flow without any intervention and listen for the key instructional elements to come to the surface. If the discussion starts to stall or we feel that the students are not sufficiently or critically evaluating the simulation, or the role they took in the simulation, we intervene with questions and observations about the simulation.

There are a number of critical elements that can be evaluated during the debrief. First, it is helpful to determine the key milestones and turning points that occurred throughout the simulation but particularly at the beginning as the group moves from chaos to a newly formed organization. Who took charge? Who took on which roles and why? Did you step up and assume a leadership position or wait to be told what to do? How does this mirror your behavior in the class and in the workplace? What type of leadership style did the leader(s) employ? Were decisions made by consensus or some other way? Which groups formed when and why? How did the groups interact with each other?

A second area for discussion is the type of organizational structure they set up to accomplish the task of developing the newspaper. What does the organizational chart look like and why? What are the policies and procedures for paying their employees? What type of incentives, if any, do they use? How is the labor divided up? How are they going to raise and make money? Did they determine an editorial policy? Is there a specific target audience that the audience will serve? Did they develop a mission statement? How will they measure success?

Another area of interest is the extent of creativity and innovation that were employed in developing the newspaper itself, the organizational structure, the compensation system, and the individual employees. How will the organization use technology? How will they communicate with their markets and stakeholders? Which technologies will they need to develop to stay competitive? What are they doing that sets them apart from their current or potential competitors? Have they organized the newspaper in a way that allows for imagination and the ability to develop new and original ideas?

A fourth area of learning is at the individual level. It is essential that each individual examines his/her role, formal and informal, throughout the simulation. Were you a major contributor to the simulation? Why or why not? What was your level of input in the simulation? Which leadership skills did you employ throughout the simulation? How would you change your contribution? What were your moments of greatest angst and accomplishment during the simulation? Did you mentor or develop others?

Another area that can be explored is how the development of the newspaper also employs skills, strategies, and tactics discussed in other classes. What are the marketing implications and challenges of a community paper? What are the unique business opportunities and demands of a start up or entrepreneurial venture? How will the newspaper be financed in the short and long run? What are some of the moral and ethical issues the editor and the staff are likely to face? What type of information systems will best suit this organization? What type of succession plan should be developed?

Finally, if time allows, other concepts and theories such as groupthink, trust, motivation, credibility, empowerment, organizational change, politics, risk taking, and organizational culture can be discussed.

Conclusion

We have found this simulation to be successful on many levels. It is an early introduction to experiential learning which sets the stage and develops confidence for other exercises such as Hollow Squares, Star Power, and the Red and Black game. It allows the both the student and the professor, at an early stage in the semester, to do an assessment of the leadership skills and knowledge of the members of the class thus guiding future exercises and lectures. It takes students out of their MBA silos and allows them to see the interaction between leadership, organization behavior, marketing, finance, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and information systems. Finally, it forces the students to struggle with the types of issues they are currently or will be facing in the workplace. As we said before, this exercise can be adapted in multiple ways to apply to issues, theories, concepts, and experiences we incorporate in management, leadership, and other skill-based courses.

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