

A SUGGESTED SOLUTION TO THE STUDENT MIX PROBLEM ASSOCIATED WITH A GROUP APPROACH TO TEACHING MARKETING

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INTRODUCTION

The group problem solving approach used in teaching marketing is becoming very popular in most universities. A serious problem which emerges when this approach is used is that of the "student mix," because of differences which exist between the backgrounds and objectives of the students, working in groups is very often difficult. This article suggests that there is a technique available which after being employed, should reduce this problem. The authors outline how an Organizational Development intervention using Transactional Analysis was successfully used in their course.

The "student mix" problem became particularly apparent through the attempt of the authors to teach the "capstone" marketing management course through the use of the group problem-solving approach. Successful group performance requires leadership, cooperation, communication, emotional stability and self-confidence on the part of group members to overcome the "student mix" problem. Group work does not, by itself, teach these characteristics. In fact, when these group characteristics are missing, we typically witness students' disillusionment about one another, about the group approach to learning, frequently admit to frustrations and anger, and contend that their individual performances were of lower quality because of the group approach.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS

One of the major objectives of organizational development (i.e., OD) is to improve organizational (groups) performance by intervening in existing social systems. The application of OD concepts will provide an understanding of group dynamics, interdependence, and conflict resolution. Transactional Analysis has emerged as one of the more successful techniques used in OD. Transactional Analysis is used because it is a practical way of understanding self and these connections, and of relating past emotional reactions still influencing us to present experience and behavior. Since group problems and frustrations are not unique to either business and or to classroom activities, it seems reasonable that training and exercises that have been applied in Organizational Development approaches should also fit in these classroom situations.

OD APPROACH AND EXERCISES USED

Several problems exist when operationalizing OD models through the use of TA. The first problem deals with group complexity and the stress that one feels. The intervention contains several fantasy exercises which had the objective of increasing awareness of what each student usually did to handle and cope with interpersonal conflict and stress. The outcome of these exercises was to improve team member's skills in handling conflict or stress in the group setting. A second problem is the perceived role of the instructor. The students should be prevailed upon, and not the instructor, to challenge and correct dysfunctional behavior on the part of other group members. As a result of simplistic geometric exercise and empathy exercises introduced to pairs of students, most students suggested that they were able to gain experience by working together. Permanent groups of four individuals each are formed and given a simple planning task. One-half of the groups serve to work toward a solution while the other half observe the interaction and communication process. The observing Groups then report any potential problems and point to specific examples of "put downs", "discounts", and other transaction problems discussed in the first group. The group then rotates and becomes the observer for the next round. The result of these exercises is that the individuals learn of their strengths and weakness in group activities and are able to rate themselves on team membership skills. A final problem is the perceived severity of the "student mix"--particularly in the area of goal conflict and the need of goal clarification by group members. Much of the information was gathered through personal interviews with the students or through a questionnaire. Yet, exercises were conducted with the group members so that the goals and expectations could be verbalized with a common understanding of all group members.

These three problems do not represent all possible considerations but they represent a basic set of criteria, which helped us to operationalize OD in the most effective manner. Yet, this paper suggests why an Organizational Development intervention using Transactional Analysis can provide an awareness of student behavior and how that behavior might be changed and/or improved to provide better interactive skills needed in group work. These exercises contribute greatly to the needs of the students by providing them an open forum to reduce conflict and to get on with the task of the course. This report concludes that group training techniques, especially OD, can be used for this purpose.

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