Experiential Learning: Who Knew Wrapping Blocks Could Teach Management?

Abstract

Participants will engage in an informative session on experiential learning. This teaching practice provides students the opportunity to learn by doing. Much of the traditional classroom involves instructors lecturing. High quality lecture is important, but it should also be combined with methods that engage active learning. This session will include the following: basic information on designing and implementing an experiential learning experience, the opportunity to participate in an example, and discuss some “best practices” for experiential learning.

Keywords: management, experiential, performance appraisal

Introduction

The proposed session is designed as an activity or exercise session. The activity is designed to be an interactive presentation that will assist management faculty in branching out from lectures and other traditional methods of instruction. The activity will give attendees a general overview and examples of experiential learning. The session will show how one activity can be used in multiple courses to teach management and human resource (HR) principles. In order to understand the “student perspective,” attendees will also get the opportunity to participate in the experiential exercise.

This activity is designed for late undergraduate and graduate students and can be used with traditional or non-traditional students. A face-to-face or hybrid class (face-to-face & online components) is needed for this activity. It can be used in multiple management courses. Specifically, we will discuss how to use the activity to teach basic fundamental job design concepts such as workflow, effectiveness, efficiency, limitations to shared resources, and work motivation and how it can be used in HR courses to teach team performance management.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

It has been suggested that active participation is paramount in the learning process (Kolb, 1984). An important concept in experiential learning is “learning by doing.” In more specific terms, students are actively involved “in the learning process through discussion, group work, hands-on participation, and applying information outside the classroom” (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2010, p. 2).

Management educators can sometimes struggle to find ways to improve their effectiveness in the classroom or to keep teaching techniques from becoming stagnant. One potential method used to close the “learning gap” that currently exists between management education and the skills desired by employers is to incorporate more experiential learning in the classroom (Jackson, 2009). Experiential learning is a win-win situation that benefits the students when they interact with course material from a hands-on perspective. Anecdotally, faculty are able to see students excited about learning in a way that is not possible with lectures and other traditional methods of instruction. When thoughtfully included as part of management curriculum, experiential learning may be particularly beneficial for dynamic topics that are difficult to explain in their entirety in a traditional lecture format.

Learning Objectives

At the end of the session participants will be able to do the following…

1. Define experiential learning.

2. Apply experiential learning activity in multiple management and HR courses.

3. Incorporate an experiential learning exercise into their course.

As discussed above, this activity will be used to teach basic job design as well as team performance management principles that can be applied in management or HR courses.

Exercise Overview

As previously discussed, this exercise, called “Block Wrapping,” can be used to address multiple teaching objectives. We will describe how to use this exercise to address two different management concepts for graduate and undergraduate students: job design and team performance management.

List of Supplies

1. Wrapping paper (newspaper is sufficient)
2. Scissors (1 pair)
3. Ribbon (The more colors you add, the greater level of difficulty)
4. Tape
5. Wood blocks (search for “wood craft blocks” on Amazon; they are relatively inexpensive)
6. One wrapped wooden block with a ribbon bow (meant to look like a wrapped present) as an example for students to see.
7. Prize for the winning team
8. Timer

Teaching Job Design

During the block wrapping exercise, students will be asked to analyze the work processes that need to occur in order replicate a finished product (sample wrapped block). Students will then be required to decide how the work should be accomplished by designing the jobs for their four-member block wrapping team The process of wrapping blocks was chosen for this exercise because most people have previous experiences wrapping presents. Additionally, the use of ribbon in the block wrapping provides the instructor with a degree of flexibility to decide if the task should be simple or more complex. Such as adding additional colors of ribbon, or incorporating a more elaborate ribbon design.

**Instructions**

The instructor should split the participants into teams of four to six members. The instructor will instruct the participants that the goal of the group is to produce as many wrapped blocks in four minutes that they can, while replicating the sample wrapped block as closely as possible. All teams should be given 20 minutes to analyze the work processes entailed in wrapping the block into a present and to design the jobs of their four workers. The facilitator should make sure it is understood that each group can delegate tasks in whatever way they feel will best accomplish the work processes they have identified. The group that produces that the most output (fully wrapped wooden blocks) that pass a reasonable test of quality will be declared the winner. The instructor may find it helpful to give each group a copy of the handout created for this exercise (Appendix A).

The instructor should clearly state the following rules:

1. Groups can only use the supplies they are given to wrap the blocks.
2. At the end of the allotted four minutes (time can be varied based on class constraints), only finished products will be counted towards their total.
3. Once groups have designed their jobs they cannot change plans during their turn, or because of watching other groups.

Once the 20 minutes are up, each group should complete the task by working through their jobs as they created them. Groups larger than four will have the additional members acting as observers to determine the effectiveness of work flow processes. The instructor should ensure that there is a table with ample room for the groups to complete tasks on.

It is suggested to have groups take turns going through the task one at a time. This will allow each student the opportunity to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each team’s design, rather than being limited to their personal experience. After each group takes their turn, the instructor should tally up the number of wrapped blocks that meet a reasonable level of quality. A small prize should be awarded to the group who was able to produce the greatest level of acceptable output.

Once the block wrapping exercise has concluded, all participants should go back to their group and spend 15 minutes reflecting on the assignment and completing a handout (See Appendix B). Groups should try to identify what worked well, and what did not. The instructor may want to ask each group their answers to the questions on the handout. Often groups are stunned at how poorly they designed each job. Students often neglect to account for bottlenecks they designed into their work flow. It is not uncommon for groups to have one or more group members sitting idle for large chunks of time, thus wasting valuable resources. At this point in time, it suggested that the instructor discusses the results of the exercise in the context of organizational productivity. If time permits, the instructor may want to have the groups repeat the exercise to highlight the importance of job redesign. After the activity is completed, the instructor should provide information (possibly a traditional lecture and/or class discussion) on work flow processes and job design.

Teaching Team Performance Management

This same activity can also be applied in management or HR courses to teach performance management, specifically how to set and measure team performance goals. Prior to the activity students must be familiar with concepts of setting performance goals and the issues related to managing team performance. The activity is set up the same. Students must be divided into teams and the activity must be explained as discussed above (wrapping as many blocks as possible within the time limit while maintaining quality and consistency). Before students participate in the actual activity, they must, in their groups, write goals for their team’s performance and determine how they will measure those goals while applying the course material (see Appendix C). After the goals are written then the teams select one member of the team to be an observer and then rest of the team completes the block wrapping activity. Once this is complete then students discuss if their goals were well-crafted (e.g. did the goals actually measure the activities of the team, were the goals set measurable) or if improvements are needed. This allows the instructor to facilitate a discussion on the challenges of setting performance goals and measuring those goals effectively as well as the unique challenges of measuring team performance.

Session Overview

We are requesting a 90-minute format. The session will be broken into six parts. A summary of each part is included below. The breakdown of the session will be as follows:

1. Presenter 1: Introduction of presenters and objectives for the session (5 minutes),

2. Presenter 2: Description of experiential learning example (15 minutes),

3. Presenter 2: Participants will engage in the experiential learning example (30 minutes),

4. Presenter 1: Discussion of how it can be applied in another course setting (15 minutes),

5. Presenter 1: Tips for creating your own experiential learning (10 minutes), and

6. Question, answer and wrap-up (15 minutes).

**Segment 1: Introduction (5 minutes)**

The session will begin with introductions by Presenter 1 and a brief discussion on each portion of the session. Materials for each attendee will be handed out at this time as well.

**Segment 2: Description of Experiential Learning Example: Job Design (15 minutes)**

Presenter 2 will focus on incorporating experiential learning in the classroom. The presenter will describe the exercise and how it can be incorporated in the classroom. The hands-on activity allows students to design four jobs, and then test out their effectiveness. This allows students to see the critical impact job design has on organizational success. The exercise also highlights the importance of incorporating shared limited resources when designing jobs. After completing this exercise, students’ view of job design has often been transformed. They no longer view job design as an inconsequential factor in the success of the organization, but rather a key component in organizational success.

**Segment 3: Attendees Participate in Experiential Learning (30 minutes)**

Next, the presenters will provide attendees with an opportunity to participate in the job design experiential learning exercise previously discussed.

Afterwards, participants will be asked to reflect on the experience and will discuss how they may incorporate experiential learning into their courses.

**Segment 4: Discussion of Application in Another Course (15 minutes)**

Presenter 1 will discuss how this exercise can be applied to emphasize managing team performance concepts.

**Segment 5: Tips for Creating Experiential Learning Projects (10 minutes)**

This portion of the presentation will focus on some basic beginner tips for starting an experiential learning project. Several of the tips are discussed below:

1. Development is an Iterative Process: Creating a successful, long-term project does not happen overnight. Start small and gain momentum.
2. Use Your Network: Talk to friends, family, colleagues, and professional contacts to develop ideas for experiential learning projects.
3. Clearly Define Expectations: It is very important to clearly define expectations for the students.
4. Focus on Course Objectives: It is important that any activity be tied to course objectives. Doing so, also makes assessment of student success easier to define when the project is tied to one or more course objectives.
5. Don’t Reinvent the Wheel: There are groups devoted to developing and supporting experiential-learning, so use their resources and knowledge to help get you started. A list will be provided.
6. Think Outside the Box: The same experiential exercise may be used to highlight different topic areas. For example, the job design experiential exercise could be tweaked to focus on performance management, selection, training, or even leadership.

**Segment 6: Question/Answer and Wrap-up (15 minutes)**

In the last section, participants will have the opportunity to ask questions. Presenters will then provide summative comments and reference material for attendees to take with them. We hope that this session will help to inspire others to develop and share more ideas and methods for incorporating experiential exercises in the classroom.

References

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Appendix A: Student Handout

Block Wrapping Exercise

You work in a block wrapping factory. Your group is responsible for wrapping the blocks so that they are ready for immediate delivery to the customers. You have all the supplies you need to create the finished product (the instructor will show you an example of a “perfectly” wrapped block). You want to try to produce as many wrapped blocks as you can in the time you are given. It is also important that you make sure that your final products are consistent (all look the same).

Your group is tasked with analyzing the work process to decide what processes need to occur to create the desired finished product. You also need to decide the best way to design the jobs of your four-person team. You have 20 minutes to complete this task.

An analysis of the work process (List all steps required to complete the wrapping block task):

Write the specific tasks and duties that each employee will be responsible for.

Job Design: Worker 1

Job Design: Worker 2

Job Design: Worker 3

Job Design: Worker 4

Appendix B: Post Exercise Handout

Post Exercise Reflection Questions

1: On a scale of one through ten, how well did you think your group did in designing the four jobs? Provide a rational for your answer.

2a: Did you feel your design effectively managed all the resources you were given (both workers and supplies)?

2b: If not, what seemed to be the biggest flaws in your job design?

3: If your group were to redesign your jobs, do you think you would see a considerable improvement in the efficiency of your workers? If so, how would you improve work efficiency?

4: If you were a manager responsible for designing or redesigning a job, but were not actually doing the job, how would you identify job design issues without actually participating in the job task?

5: (If time permits): Based on your experiences during this exercise, redesign the jobs of your four workers

Appendix C

Team Performance Management (PM) Development Exercise

Things to Keep in Mind:

* PM systems should target:
  + Individual performance
  + Individual’s contribution to team performance
  + Performance of entire team
* Specific to team performance:
  + Make all team members accountable
  + Motivate all team members to have a stake in team performance
* Challenges of Team PM
  + How do we assess relative individual contribution?
  + How do we balance individual and team performance?
  + How do we identify individual and team measures of performance?
* KSAs needed for most teams:
  + Task: results and/or behaviors
  + Contextual:
    - *Communication*
    - *Decision-making*
    - *Collaboration*
    - *Team leadership*
    - *Self-control*
    - Effectiveness
    - Efficiency
    - Learning and growth
    - Team member satisfaction

How do you recommend the team be evaluated? - Select 3 measures to assess team performance. List a goal for each one. (Remember to look at the three targets of team PM (individual performance, individual contribution to the team, team performance) as well as the contextual factors listed on the previous page.)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Measure | Goal |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

Evaluate the team using your measure. Did they achieve the goals?

Goal 1:

Goal 2:

Goal 3:

Debrief:

1. Did you encounter problems with the goals you set for the team? If so, explain them.
2. What improvements would you make to your measures? What other measures would you add?
3. What was difficult about writing and measuring a goal you had not actually done before?