

THE MANAGEMENT LEAGUE CUP: A SEMESTER-LONG TEAM-BASED EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING INFRASTRUCTURE

Matthew T. Luth
Assistant Professor of Management
Valparaiso University
matthew.luth@valpo.edu
219.464.6788

Abstract

Instructors of management and organizational behavior courses often utilize team-based learning and a variety of experiential exercises in their courses. In this proposal, I describe a semester-long team-based approach to experiential learning, called the Management League Cup. In the Management League Cup, teams compete in a series of exercises throughout the semester where points are awarded for performance. These points accumulate over the course of the semester, and at the end of the semester, the team with the most points wins the cup. Individual exercises as well as the macro-structure will be discussed and critiqued.

Keywords: Experiential learning, Organizational behavior, Team-based activities

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Introduction

For the past decade, I have been utilizing experiential learning in my management and organizational behavior courses to varying degrees of success. For the most part, these exercises have been successful in engaging students in the topics of the day; however, I often struggled with several students, and at times entire teams, just going through the motions. That is, student teams completed the exercise as prescribed, but did not fully immerse themselves in the learning experience. Recently, one student even remarked on the end of course evaluations, “[that] all the games we played were fun and related to course topics, but I didn’t really see the point. At times I felt like we were just wasting time.” Upon review, I concluded that this student was correct, although each experiential exercise had explicit course connections, in aggregate the use of experiential exercises in my courses lacked infrastructure and intentionality. That is, they were just loosely connected exercises that mostly engaged students, passed some time, and / or thinly highlighted course concepts.

In order to address this lack of intentionality to my use of experiential exercises, this past semester I developed a semester-long team-based experiential exercise infrastructure I call the “Management League Cup”. In the spirit of full disclosure, the idea came to me as I was watching the students at Hogwarts competing for the House Cup in the Harry Potter movies, and thought, I wish my students cared that much about competing for their teams. In essence, the Management League Cup is an infrastructure of experiential exercises where teams are awarded points throughout the semester based on their performance. At the end of the semester, the team with the most cumulative points wins the Management League Cup.

Teaching Implications

The use of experiential learning techniques is quite common in management and organizational behavior classrooms. Individual experiential exercises are widely published in teaching and learning journals, and countless exercises can be found in management books and online. These individual exercises provide instructors with the necessary raw resources to engage students in active learning; however, there exists few best practices for combining individual experiential exercises into a coherent whole. The Management League Cup offers one way for instructors to build connections between individual exercises to create a semester-long active learning experience.

Similarly, the use of team-based learning is common in management and organizational behavior courses. Pedagogically, the use of teams is based on the notion that students will have to be effective team members and learn to collaborate to be successful in their careers, and that there is no better way to learn about team work than to have students work in teams. However, the difficulty with the use of student learning teams is creating meaningful team-based learning activities. Often instructors create team projects, have students work in teams to analyze cases, or debate course concepts. While each of these methods can create meaningful team experiences, they are typically based on the completion of individual tasks, not on overall team development or continuous process improvement. That is, often students experience these assignments as one-time tasks, rather than part of a larger team development process. Although the Management League Cup does not fully solve this issue, it does help make ongoing team performance and improvement a more explicit learning outcome. By providing a comprehensive infrastructure to on-going experiential exercises, team members should be more aware of the importance of addressing process losses and developing productive team norms.

Finally, my students consistently report enjoying the Management League Cup; it is fun. On my course evaluations, over 60% reported that the Management League Cup was the “most effective” aspect of the course. To date, my experiences has been that students are more engaged and excited for each exercise, and it is rare for students to miss class on the day of a Management League Cup activity. Furthermore, I have found that it builds a sense of team pride and identity. For instance, one of my teams came up with a team chant, which they shouted in unison when they won a league cup event. Similarly, another team wore team shirts for the final exercise of the semester. Their team name was Gold Team, so they all wore yellow shirts; one student even dyed his hair gold. Although I have been running most of the experiential exercises listed in Appendix A for years, it was not until I organized them into the Management League Cup format that I truly got out of them what I was hoping – an engaging class climate where students were active participants in both the activities and learning outcomes.

Learning Objectives

1. To systematize individual experiential exercises into a coherent infrastructure.
2. To encourage student participation and engagement in experiential exercises.
3. To improve team processes and outcomes.
4. To promote a playful yet competitive class climate.
5. To introduce and reinforce management and organizational behavior concepts.

Exercise Overview

I utilize this exercise in a Junior-level Management and Organizational Behavior course; however, I believe the concept could be replicated in a variety of management courses. In my courses, I place students in semester-long teams of five to seven people. I prefer to use random team assignments, but instructors are free to choose their own method for team selection. What is

important is that students remain in the same teams for the entire semester, and that team assignments are decided in the first few class periods, typically the second course meeting in my classes. Individual experiential exercises are mapped on to different course topics; for example, I utilize an exercise called “Aces Up” to teach leadership style and leadership emergence. For references, all of the experiential exercises that I utilize and their course connections are included in Appendix A. Although the macro-structure of the Management League Cup is competitive, I utilize three different classifications of exercises, not all of which are competitive or count toward the point total. First, *competition* exercises are those that count toward the overall points earned. They include exercises where performance can be readily assessed. Second, *friendly* exercises are competitive in nature, but include some aspect that makes determining performance difficult. For instance, teams may be asked to play by different rules (e.g., verbal vs. non-verbal communication) or be given different resources to highlight different aspects of individual or organizational functioning. Third, *practice* exercises are not fundamentally competitive in nature, but instead focus on improving team processes. For example, one practice exercise is developing a team charter, which includes developing normative standards for how team members will engage in Management League Cup activities and teamwork in general.

Each of the competitive exercises are scored separately, and point totals accumulate throughout the semester. For most exercises I rank-order teams and award 10 points to the first place team down to zero points for the last place team. For example, if I have 5 teams, then first place is awarded 10 points, second place gets 7 points, third place gets 4 points, fourth place get 2 points, and fifth place gets 0 points. For some exercises, points are determined by raw performance. For example, the Marshmallow Challenge asks teams to build a tower out of spaghetti sticks, tape, string, and a marshmallow. Here I award teams points based on the height

of their respective towers (e.g., for every inch of tower height the team earns 1 point). To enhance the competitive nature of this exercise, approximately 3% of the student's final grade is based on their team's performance in the Management League Cup. In other words, my course has 670 available points, 20 of which are based on Management League Cup team performance. Specifically, in a five-team class section, points are distributed as follows: 20 points for first place; 19 points for second place; 18 points for third place; 17 points for fourth place; 16 points for fifth place.

Session Description

Proposed Session Length: 60 minutes

Applicable Courses: Introduction / Principals of Management, Organizational Behavior

Time (min)	Topic	Format	Discussion Points and Activities
5	Welcome	Large Group	Introduce session, learning objectives, and participant expectations.
10	Experiential Exercise: Aces Up	Small Group	Session attendees will participate in an example experiential exercise.
20	Management League Cup Explanation	Large Group	The management league cup will be explained from an overall perspective, and participants will be provided with copies of each of the individual exercises.
20	Management League Cup Improvements	Small Group	Groups will analyze the proposed exercises, and provide possible alternative ideas for different exercises and critique the overall infrastructure and usage.
5	Wrap-up	Large Group	Summarize session and outcomes of discussion topics.
60	Total		

Appendix A – List of Management League Cup Exercise and Associated Course Content¹

Competitions

Winter Survival. Teams are asked to rank-order the importance of 14 items based on their ability to help them survive in the subarctic.

- Course Topics: teamwork, decision-making, critical thinking.
- Duration: 50 – 90 minutes

Aces Up. Teams are given four decks of shuffled cards and asked to sort them from Ace → 2 by suit and color. Only team leaders are given the instructions and must accurately relay them to their teams.

- Course Topics: teamwork, leadership emergence, leadership style.
- Duration: 10 – 30 minutes.

Paper Airplane Corporation. Teams are asked to construct paper airplanes according to the provided specifications. Task interdependence is modified in each round.

- Course Topics: budgeting, forecasting, task interdependence, profitability, quality.
- Duration: 50 – 90 minutes

Marshmallow Challenge. Teams construct a tower out of 20 sticks of spaghetti, one yard of string, one yard of tape, and one marshmallow (must be on top).

- Course Topics: planning work activities, shared mental models, prototyping
- Duration: 40 – 60 minutes

Team Teasers. Teams work together to solve a series of riddles and word problems.

- Course Topics: innovation, creativity, critical thinking
- Duration: 30 – 40 minutes

Give and Take. Teams engage in a series of negotiations based on the prisoner's dilemma, the ultimatum game, and the dictator's dilemma.

- Course Topics: strategy, negotiation, cooperation/competition.
- Duration: 30 – 40 minutes

Friendlylies

Building Better Communication. One team member is asked to build a structure out of 10 building blocks and using different methods of communication (e.g., written, non-verbal, spoken) a different team member is asked to attempt to recreate this structure.

- Course Topics: communication type, product design, noise
- Duration: 40 – 60 minutes

The Infected. This exercise is my own take on the game Mafia, whereby participants attempt to identify the students who have been infected by a virus before it spreads all over campus.

¹ Participants will be provided with documentation to run each of these exercises.

- Course Topics: decision-making, persuasion, communication
- Duration: 50 – 60 minutes

Words in Sentences Company. Student teams are given a short saying (e.g., “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing”) and asked to utilize these letters to make new words that fit into coherent sentences. Teams are organized into either divisional or functional organizational structures, which greatly influences success.

- Course Topics: organizational design, organizational structure, information sharing
- Duration: 40 – 60 minutes

Practices

Creating a Team Charter. Teams are asked to develop a team charter, including team name, roster, expected norms, and goals for the semester.

- Course Topics: goals, norms, shared expectations
- Duration: 20 – 30 minutes

Personality Inventory. Students complete the big five personality assessment prior to class. Teams then attempt to guess where each member fits in each of the five different dimensions, using example behaviors from class as justification. Students report their actual results, and discrepancies are discussed.

- Course Topics: personalities, stereotyping, motivation
- Duration: 30 – 40 minutes

Developing a Peer Appraisal. Teams construct a peer appraisal system that is used to determine team participation grades. Specifically, each team develops ten unique behaviorally anchored items about what it means to be an effective team member in their group.

- Course Topics: human resources, performance, monitoring and controlling
- Duration: 30 – 40 minutes

Help! My Team Sucks. Teams engage in a premortem exercise whereby they attempt to discover what factors could lead their team to failure. For example, a team might not meet expectations due to a lack of communication. Teams are then asked to construct an action plan to prevent this factor from occurring in their team.

- Course Topics: monitoring and controlling, feedforward control, quality management
- Duration: 40 – 60 minutes