

Identifying Conceptual Blocks to Creative Problem Solving Via the Newspaper Industry

ABSTRACT

This exercise is designed to give late undergraduate students studying management the opportunity to see how difficult the process of generating creative and viable solutions to complex problems can be by introducing a problem that seems familiar and less complex at first glance. More specifically, this exercise helps students experience how problem identification can be a more exacting process than anticipated, how problem identification affects the chosen solution, and how specific and commonly occurring conceptual blocks impede the creative problem-solving process by researching and attempting to solve problems associated with the decline in the newspaper industry.

Key words: creative problem solving

Introduction

As textbooks on organizational behavior or management skills present information on decision making, they often devote part of or an entire chapter to the subject of creative problem solving. This exercise is designed to give late undergraduate students studying management the opportunity to see how difficult the process of generating creative and viable solutions to complex problems can be by introducing a problem that seems familiar and less complex at first glance. More specifically, this exercise helps students experience how problem identification can be a more exacting process than anticipated, how problem identification affects the chosen solution, and how specific and commonly occurring conceptual blocks impede the creative problem-solving process by researching and attempting to solve problems associated with the decline in the newspaper industry.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

The exercise contributes to effective teaching in the area of creative problem solving by using a topic that feels familiar to students – the obtaining of news – in teaching the perils of creative problem solving. In particular, the activity highlights the difficulties in accurately defining a problem and choosing a viable solution. This is particularly poignant because the topic of the decline of newspapers seems fairly straightforward in its elements (e.g., students get their news from free from the internet so that must be the reason newspapers are failing), yet it is difficult to properly define the problem of newspaper decline and thus create a viable solution.

The activity allow students to see the presence of conceptual blocks (Adams, 2001; Tan & Parnell, 2013) in their attempts to define the problem and generate solutions. Conceptual blocks, as explained in Whetten and Cameron's (2016) text *Developing Management Skills* can be categorized into four general categories: constancy (being wedded to one point of view in

defining or solving a problem and being unable to change viewpoints), commitment (being unable or unwilling to change perspectives or to change approaches once a stance has been taken), compression (defining a problem in a constricted way or screening out too much data), and complacency (lacking in mental inquisitiveness or cognitive work).

Learning Objectives

The student learning objectives for the activity are the following:

1. Students will become more aware of the importance of correct problem identification.
2. Students will experience how problem identification affects the ultimate choice of a problem solution.
3. Students will experience and thus be able to better understand and identify specific conceptual blocks that inhibit creative problem solving.

The teaching topics that are relevant to this exercise are the steps in the analytical problem-solving model (e.g., defining the problem, defining solution criteria, generating alternative solutions, evaluating and selecting a solution, and implementing the solution and gathering feedback) and the conceptual blocks of constancy, commitment, compression, and complacency.

Exercise Overview

The exercise involves researching the current state of the newspaper industry, identifying the key problem(s) causing the decline, and proposing a solution to the problem(s). The research is accomplished by students listening to a 25-minute NPR podcast on the declining state of the newspaper industry and researching the state of the newspaper industry via the Pew Research Center's annual report titled *The State of the News Media*, which contains narrative, graphs, and

tables of data on a variety of metrics related to newspaper readership and revenues. Links are provided to students for both the podcast and the last 3 years of the Pew Research Center report.

Ideally, the research is conducted outside of class with the assistance of a learning management system (LMS) (e.g., Blackboard, D2L, etc.). This allows more in-depth research to occur. The instructions for the assignment and the links are provided on the LMS.

The exercise has both a group and an individual component. The initial research is done individually, and then in groups students respond to the following instructions:

1. Define what the problem is that newspapers face based on the facts that you have gathered.
 - a. Provide evidence from your research of the problem you have defined.
2. Come up with a solution that will alleviate the problem you have defined.
 - a. Provide a rationale for why you believe your solution is viable. You may find it useful to draw upon the research from the podcast and the Pew Research Center for your rationale.
 - b. Your rationale for the solution should show thought. Do not simply propose a solution without thinking of the additional consequences and practicality of the solution.

Each group posts its problem definition, solution, and rationale in a discussion area within the LMS. The discussion settings are fixed to allow groups to see each other's postings after they have made their posting. Appendix A provides the instructions for the steps in the assignment requiring group work.

The debriefing for the group portion of the exercise focuses on the viability of the solutions and the accuracy of the problem definition. I allow for 20-30 minutes for the

discussion. Each group summarizes its problem definition(s) and solution(s) which are either written on a board, shown on a slide, or provided by each team on a portable white board. I ask the following questions to mainly point out that the problem identification and solution generation process was incomplete:

- Which groups' problem definitions (or parts of problem definitions) are most accurate?
- What would it take to develop a more accurate problem definition?
- Does each group's solution solve the problem that it defined?

These questions usually lead to students recognizing some constraints in the steps in the problem-solving model (e.g., problems definitions are really disguised solutions, symptoms rather than core problems are labeled as the problem definition, easy solutions are preferred over optimal ones, etc.) shown in a table in the textbook *Developing Management Skills* (Whetten & Cameron, 2016). This also leads to a discussion about the need to spend more time defining the real problem.

Since students access news for free on the internet regularly and few, if any students in class, pay for a daily newspaper, they usually feel they understand the problem newspapers are having. They tend to oversimplify the problem and look for easy and quick problem definitions and solutions.

After I conduct the debriefing of the group portion of the assignment, students submit a short assignment due by the next class period explaining the conceptual blocks to creative problem solving that they saw in their group during the assignment. The students respond to the following instructions:

1. Think about the process that was used in your team to come up with the problem definition and problem solution regarding the newspaper industry.
2. As you think about that process, which conceptual blocks were evident as you tried to come up with a problem definition and creative solution for the newspaper industry?
3. Write about the conceptual blocks that were evident in the process. Discuss the conceptual blocks both in terms of the main categories (e.g., constancy, commitment, etc.) and in terms of the subcategories (e.g., vertical thinking). Give examples from your process as you describe the blocks that you observed.

Appendix B provides the instructions for the steps in the assignment requiring individuals to assess the conceptual blocks.

The debriefing for the individual portion of the exercise focuses on discussing the conceptual blocks that the student observed in their groups. I usually allow for 15 minutes for this discussion. Typically, the class as a whole brings up each of the conceptual block general categories (i.e., constancy, commitment, compression, and complacency) during the debriefing.

A variation is to have the entire exercise occur in class, although this doesn't result in as thorough analysis of the data on newspapers. My experience has been that the discussion of the problem definitions and solutions tend to be shallower, with each group stating in some variation that the time limitations caused by the class period affected their ability to research the issue beyond a cursory review.

Another variation is to have the entire exercise done online. I summarize each group's problem definition and problem solution and share them with the class. I ask the same questions as those posed above in the debriefing of the group portion of the assignment, only with online

students I have them answer the questions as an individual assignment. As with the on-campus course, I have the students explain the conceptual blocks they observed.

I tell groups to collaborate using the LMS group discussion area, Google Docs, Google hangouts, or any other group collaboration tool they feel works best for their circumstances. I likewise tell the on-campus class to also use these online collaboration tools as they create their posting for the problem definition and solution.

Session Description

In a one-hour MOBTS conference session, there is not enough time to allow the participants to experience what students do in class. Consequently, a shortened version of the activity with a few points highlight will be presented. I plan to engage in the following activities.

1. (5 minutes) Break the class into small groups (5 or fewer people)
2. (5 minutes) Summarize the issues evident in the NPR podcast regarding the decline of newspapers (since the participants cannot take the time to listen to the 25-minutes podcast), which are:
 - a. Add revenue profit margins are 80% for print ads, only 20% for digital ads
 - b. Staff has been cut to bare bones
 - c. Bureaus have been shut down or combined around the world for major newspapers.
3. (5 minutes) Hand out instructions with links for Pew Research Center data and provide the same instructions as mentioned above that I provide to my students about defining the problem and providing a solution.
4. (10 minutes) Allow groups to analyze the data on the Pew Research Center website.

5. (10 minutes) Have groups share their problem definitions and solutions, which are bound to have flaws due to time constraints.
6. (10 minutes) Explain how activity can be used to show deficiencies in problem definition and solution generation. In addition, show a slide of the conceptual blocks and assess if participants felt any were presents during the analysis of data.
7. (15 minutes) Hand out my set of instructions for the activity and discuss the implications of the activity with participants. Discuss variations of the activity for online students versus on-campus classes.

References

Adams, J.L. (2001). *Conceptual blockbusting: A guide to better ideas*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Tan, S.N., & Parnell, G.S. (2013). Design Creative Alternatives. *Handbook of Decision Analysis*, 149.

Whetten, D.A., & Cameron, K.S. (2016). *Developing management skills*. New York, NY: Pearson.

CH 3 Team Problem-Solving Assignment

Saving Newspapers (Parts 1-3)

ASSIGNMENT

Due Date

This assignment has **two due dates**:

1. Posting of problem definition and solution (Part 1-3): **due by class time on Fri., October 12.**
2. Posting of lessons learned (Part 4): **due by class time on Mon., October 15.**

Instructions

This assignment is a team assignment, but it also has an individual component. It has four parts to it: (1) a radio podcast, (2) some research and problem solving, (3) posting of a problem solution – one posting per team, and (4) an exploration of what you learned. Part 1 and part 2 are key information gathering activities that will help you derive a problem solution in part 3. The details of each of these parts of the assignment are provided below.

Part 1: Radio Podcast. Below is a link to a story that appeared on the radio news program called *To the Point* produced by Santa Monica, CA, public radio station KCRW. The story is titled “Newspapers in Big Trouble, Should Americans Care?” The story chronicles some problems existing in the newspaper industry 10 years ago that were critical in the industry’s decline.

Listen to the audio podcast. You should listen to 35 ½ minutes of the program that runs for the following minutes of the podcast: 6:55 – 42:18. The first few minutes of the podcast discuss another story, so you can start at minute 6:55.

<http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/to-the-point/newspapers-in-big-trouble-should-americans-care>

When you do some research in part 2 of the assignment, you will see that the issues mentioned in the podcast have not gone away and are, in most cases, worse than they were 10 years ago.

Part 2: Pew Research Center Data. The Pew Research Center is an internationally renowned organization that conducts research on many topics in wide-ranging fields, such as politics, social issues, and business. For many years The Pew Research Center has put out a report on the health of the American news media called *The State of the News Media*. Data about revenues, viewership, circulation, etc. is provided for the different media where Americans get their news, such as radio, public television, broadcast television, cable television, local TV, and newspapers.

The report comes out in June of each year, so the most recent data is from the 2017 calendar year in the June 2018 report. The format changed two years ago. The report used to be a pdf file, but now it is in a web format with links. I am including a link to last two years’ reports as well as the 2016 pdf format report. There is more information in the previous format.

2018 Report

- <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/state-of-the-news-media/>

2017 Report

- <http://www.pewresearch.org/topics/state-of-the-news-media/2017/>

APPENDIX A

2016 Report

- <https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/06/30143308/state-of-the-news-media-report-2016-final.pdf>

Make sure to look at the data on newspapers and on digital news. When using the new format, for each chart you can toggle back and forth between the chart and the accompanying table of data. See what the data is telling you about the problems with the newspaper industry and think about what companies might do to react.

Part 3: Problem Solution. For this step, you need to do two things as a team

1. **Define what the problem is** that newspapers face based on the facts that you have gathered.
 - a. Provide evidence from your research of the problem you have defined.
2. **Come up with a solution** that will alleviate the problem you have defined.
 - a. Provide a rationale for why you believe your solution is viable. You may again find it useful to draw upon the research from the podcast and the Pew Research Center.

Your rationale for the solution should show thought. Do not simply propose a solution without thinking of the additional consequences and practicality of the solution.

Post your problem definition and problem solution to the discussion area for this assignment. Make only one posting for your team (i.e., each team member does not make a separate posting). Begin the title of your posting with your team number (i.e., Team 1 – Newspaper Problem).

Working as a Team. You can collaborate using the D2L group discussion area, the D2L group locker (where you can deposit files), Google Docs, Google Hangouts, or any other group collaboration tools you feel work best in our circumstances.

Part 4: Lessons Learned. The instructions for part 4 of the assignment regarding lessons learned will be provided at class time after the discussion posting is due. Giving those instructions out early might interfere with the process of problem definition and problem solution. Part 4 is an individual assignment rather than a team assignment. The length requirements for that portion of the assignment will be the same as for this portion of the assignment (i.e., 3/4 page). See the information above for the due date of part 4.

Length Requirements

The length of your posting for part 3 that includes the problem definition and the solution, with the accompanying evidences and rationale, should be at least the equivalent of 3/4 of a double-spaced page of writing with 1” margins using Arial 10-point font.

Grading

The assignment is worth **30 points**. The posting associated with part 3 (problem definition and solution) will be worth **20 points**. The short assignment associated with part 4 (the lessons learned) will also be worth **10 points**.

SUBMITTING THE ASSIGNMENT

As mentioned above, the posting related to part 3 of this assignment occurs in a discussion posting. Place your posting in the discussion with the title *CH 3: Newspaper Solutions*. This can be found by selecting the link for “Discussions” from the menu along the top of our D2L class homepage. As stated above, begin the title of your posting with your team number (i.e., Team 1 – Newspaper Problem). There is a drop box for part 4 of the assignment

Chapter 3: Saving Newspapers (Part 4)

ASSIGNMENT

Due Date

Part 4 of this assignment is **due by class time on Mon., October 15.**

Instructions for Lessons Learned (Part 4)

This assignment is an individual assignment. Each student will turn in a short paper. The details for this part of the assignment are provided below.

Part 4: Lessons Learned Regarding Conceptual Blocks. This part of the assignment is to help you apply the material on conceptual blocks discussed in the chapter 3. The conceptual blocks are summarized in Table 3.3 and are discussed in detail in the chapter.

Here is what you need to do to complete Part 4 of this assignment:

1. Think about the process that was used in your team to come up with the problem definition and problem solution regarding the newspaper industry.
2. As you think about that process, which conceptual blocks were evident as you tried to come up with a problem definition and creative solution for the newspaper industry?
3. Write about the conceptual blocks that were evident in the process. Discuss the conceptual blocks both in terms of the main categories (e.g., constancy, commitment, etc.) and in terms of the subcategories (e.g., vertical thinking). Give examples from your process as you describe the blocks that you observed.

Format and Length Requirements

The paper should be written in Times Roman 12-point font. Use one-inch margins. Place identifying information (i.e., name and assignment title) at the top of the page aligned with the left margin. The two lines of identifying information should be single spaced.

The length of your paper should be at least 3/4 of a double-spaced page.

Grading

This portion of the assignment is worth **10 points.**

SUBMITTING THE ASSIGNMENT

Please submit the assignment as a Word file. Place the file in the appropriate dropbox by selecting the “Assignments” option from the navigation menu along the top of the page. Once in the “Assignment Submission Folders,” select the assignment folder from chapter 3 labeled “Saving Newspapers-Lessons Learned.” Attach your file by selecting the “Add a File” button, browsing for your file which will be located on your computer, and then selecting the “add”, “upload”, and ultimately the “submit” buttons.