

Using Observational Research in Applied Organizational Behavior Classes

Abstract

Observational research is underused in the management field. However, observation is a method through which students can learn what managers do during everyday work routines. For management students, observational research projects offer concrete evidence and experience to help shape career plans. Incorporating such a project into an applied organizational behavior course offers an opportunity for students to learn project management skills, networking behaviors, data collection techniques, basic statistical analysis, and the opportunity to present findings in a professional manner. This tool conveys the importance of the scientific method and positions future managers to use evidence-based management practices.

Introduction

Using the Leader Observation System (LOS), a checklist of 67 managerial behaviors (Luthans and Lockwood, 1984; Luthans et al., 1985; Luthans et al., 1988; Luthans et al., 1993), student observers in management courses explore the state of the current work environment. Students completing this assignment have the opportunity to observe and interpret the behaviors managers enact during a typical work day. In the proliferation of leadership studies over the past 40 years and our romance of leadership (Meindl, 1995), foundational theories of managerial behavior have largely been crowded out, despite the fact that the activities performed by managers and leaders are not mutually exclusive (Petriglieri, 2020). Thus, the aim of this assignment is to allow undergraduate students to experience managerial behavior by observing twenty-first century managers across different industries, educational levels, and types of organizations.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Building upon the work of Mintzberg (1973) and Kotter (1982), Luthans and colleagues (1988) set out to expand the management field's understanding of what managers really do in the workplace. Using rigorous observation methods, they found that managerial behavior varied based on a manager's degree of success within the workplace. That is, the allocation of time spent on four broad categories of managerial behavior – traditional management behaviors, such as setting goals and objectives; human resource management behaviors, such as developing job descriptions; communication behaviors, such as holding staff meetings, and networking, such as public relations – varied based on the objective measures of the observed managers' performance and the level of success managers attained. Importantly, the study challenged the meritocratic belief that performance drives promotion. Likewise, it provided both scholars and emerging

practitioners with concrete examples, the range, and the prevalence of managerial behaviors (Luthans, 1988).

While much has changed in the last four decades, especially within the workplace, the basic behaviors that make up the workday may not be as different as it would seem. Though our collective affinity for and views on the utility of management have taken a downward trend (Kniffin et al., 2020), this assignment allows students to revisit fundamental assumptions about management. The management field is vastly underappreciated in a variety of contexts, including in the popular press, on the internet, and even in B-schools (Kniffin et al., 2020). Indeed, according to Murray (2010), “...*everything we learned in the last century about managing large corporations is in need of a serious rethink. [We need] ...a new science of management that can deal with the breakneck realities of twenty-first century change.*” While this may be an overstatement, this assignment allows students to explore for themselves whether management is measurably different from what they may learn in a textbook.

This project requires students to challenge their own assumptions regarding what managers really do in the workplace. The teaching implications are extensive; in a sense, students receive a realistic job preview through creating connections with working managers, observing the types of behaviors and decisions required in short time allotments, and developing skills in data visualization and interpretation. Not only does the assignment require technical skills, it also involves the softer skills, such as developing relationships, that may be less available to first generation college students and under-represented minorities (Syed et al., 2011). A goal of this assignment is to help students reach out to mentors they can observe, but also to offer the opportunity for further network development. It also generates expectations regarding

the nature of managerial work, which can be a new experience for students without knowledge-work prototypes.

Learning Objectives

Through this assignment, students will:

1. Develop an understanding of basic behavioral theory and its application to contemporary organizations through observation, data analysis, and data interpretation.
2. Apply a scientific framework to become a diagnostician of organizational systems, structure, and processes through evidence-based approaches to management science.
3. Enhance managerial and professional abilities through application of concepts, theories, and frames of reference by active participation in the research study and presenting their results to the class.

In addition to the learning objectives, students must incorporate project management, research methods, quantitative data analysis, and critical thinking to present a holistic interpretation of their observations. Students are required to create a timeline to ensure they complete all the deliverables on time: Observational methods training must precede observations; observations and reviewing the data must precede structured interviews; and so on.

Exercise Overview

This term project requires students to examine the nature of managerial work. It can be used for traditional in-person classes or online courses. The project is best suited to undergraduate students to allow them to incorporate evidence-based approaches to observational research methods in an applied data collection. Prior to the observations, the student must request approval from the managers to conduct the observation using the informed consent process. All students are trained in leadership observation techniques during class time. Each student also

completes a project management plan (listing the deliverables and the completion dates for each) and the university-required CITI training. Once this training is complete, the students can begin their observations using the Leader Observation System (LOS) devised by Luthans and Lockwood (1984). Each student identifies 2 managers to observe for 40 minutes over the course of 4 dates (10 minutes per observation). After the observations are complete, the students analyze the frequencies of the behaviors enacted and create a structured interview template based on their initial observation findings.

Each student submits a final research paper detailing the observation process, their quantitative and qualitative findings presented using visualization techniques available in spreadsheet programs such as Excel or Google Sheets (pie charts and bar charts are acceptable), their interpretation of the data, and their overall thoughts on their learning. Students analyze the data to highlight their findings and make simple comparisons based on similarities and differences in the managers. The challenge for this assignment is to take individual findings, collate those findings into general observations, and generate a cohesive report.

Session Description

This 30-minute session will begin with a general review of observational research. There are two main purposes for the session. First, detailing how the project works and sharing insights regarding the project – things that have worked well, surprising findings, benefits to students, obstacles (such as a pandemic limiting physical contact), and other unknowns. Second, an open discussion to solicit feedback from other faculty to improve upon the activities in a spirit of continuous improvement.

5 Minutes: General Review of Observational Research

10 Minutes: Discuss research project deliverables and challenges

10 Minutes: Open discussion for methods by which the project can be improved

5 Minutes: Concluding thoughts

Total Time: 30 Minutes

References

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