**Paper Tank Tracks for Learning Humanistic Management**

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**ABSTRACT**

Teaching humanistic management can be challenging because it differs significantly from traditional management models prioritizing profitability. A gamified group exercise called “Paper Tank Tracks” was conceptualized to fully engage students in learning about humanistic management. This structured experiential learning activity will allow students to have fun while critically exploring humanistic management's values and contrasting them with classical management. In a world where we are once again witnessing war, the concept of paper tank tracks is a sharp contrast to teaching humanistic management. However, this dichotomy can be innovative in highlighting it against conventional management practice, which also goes beyond the traditional case method and business simulation.

**Keywords:** *humanistic management, principles of management, experiential learning, instructional innovation*

"Principles of Management” is an introductory course undertaken in the first year. One of the course learning outcomes is to compare and contrast various management, leadership, and motivation theories and how these can influence employee behavior in the workplace. The suggested learning methods are often case studies and group project papers, but I am interested in creating an engaging activity highlighting the core principles of humanistic management. Balancing the idealistic principles of humanistic management with the practical realities of the business world can be difficult, and students may feel frustrated as they try to reconcile these two aspects. They may also be skeptical as they challenge existing paradigms. However, this can encourage critical thinking by allowing them to consider the broader implications of their future decisions on individuals and society through an experiential learning method.

**Theoretical Foundation**

Melé (2016) defined humanistic management as a people-oriented management that seeks profits for human ends. It is oriented toward obtaining results through people and caring for their flourishing and well-being (Melé, 2016). The terms humanistic and management first appeared in a 1967 book by David Lilienthal entitled “Management: A Humanistic Art” (Lilienthal, 1967; Melé, 2016). The book contrasts scientific management and other mainstream “mechanistic” approaches focused on executing strict and detailed managers' orders (Melé, 2016).

Through the years, some scholars have already published articles on humanistic management. However, there is no unified view on what it essentially covers except that it rejects the reductionist view of people and uplifts human dignity (Laszlo, 2019; Melé, 2016).

Swart (1973) refers to humanistic management as a set of innovative proposals to overcome the monotonous repetition of tasks established by scientific management to improve productivity. Daley (1986) concluded in his research that humanistic management is considered by many as a means for organizational productivity and human potential development. Ghoshal and Bartlett (1997) suggested that organizations should focus on people-centered policies instead of the conventional mechanistic approach of the traditional rigidity of structures and systems.

Current literature does not provide an experiential learning approach to humanistic management. However, incorporating humanistic management into classes alongside the economistic paradigm ensures that students who will become future managers are well-equipped to address the complexities of the modern business landscape, where financial success goes hand in hand with ethical considerations and social responsibility.

Students must be exposed to humanistic management principles to develop a strong foundation in ethical leadership and social responsibility (Treviño & Brown, 2004). Without this foundation, they may not fully understand the ethical implications of business decisions and how they can impact employees and society.

**Learning Objectives**

After completing the exercise, students will be able to…

1. articulate fundamental principles of humanistic management, such as focusing on human dignity and integrating economic and social goals.

2. compare humanistic management with the purely profit-driven economistic management approach.

3. identify critical elements, challenges faced, and successful outcomes of humanistic management.

**Exercise Overview**

“The Paper Tank Track[[1]](#footnote-2)” is an exercise where students must build their simulated tank track, a vehicle propulsion system running on a continuous band of treads driven by two or more wheels. Using uneven resources determined by drawing lots, groups will only be given limited time to construct their paper tank track. During this time, they can also negotiate and trade resources with other groups, but only provided materials can be utilized during the construction. Next, groups will prepare their paper tank tracks for a race, and the group that can successfully transport the paper tank track without being torn in the shortest possible time will win. Finally, the students will reconvene for a debriefing session. The exercise can be completed in 60 minutes, as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

*Timeframe for Exercise Components.*

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| --- | --- |
| **Exercise portion** | **Estimated Time for completion in minutes (min-max)** |
| Introduction to the exercise, group formation, drawing lots for assigned resources | 5 - 10 |
| Students build their paper tank tracks | 20 |
| Students participate in a paper tank tracks race | 5 - 10 |
| Plenary session and debrief | 15 - 20 |
| Total | 45 - 60 |

**Logistics**

The exercise can only be conducted in a face-to-face setting. All chairs must be neatly arranged on the side and corner of the room to provide enough space. Before the activity, instructors can request students to bring the following materials: fifty full sheets of old newspaper, one adhesive tape, one masking tape, and fifteen surgical face masks. The indicated number of materials is intended for five groups with five to six members. The instructor prepares the materials and groups them into five uneven distributions for drawing lots. The following is written on small pieces of paper: *twenty sheets of newspaper*, *fifteen sheets of newspaper*, *ten sheets of newspaper*, *five sheets of newspaper and masking tape*, and *adhesive tape only*. The instructor should also mark the starting and ending points of the race using masking tape. A stopwatch or timer should also be on standby to record the speed of each group during the race.

**Instructions**

Students are randomly divided into five groups, each with five to six members. Group leaders draw lots from the five folded papers to determine their initial materials. All groups will be given exactly 20 minutes to build their paper tank track. No time extension is allowed, so students should manage their time negotiating and trading resources with other groups.

Afterward, each group selects five members to maneuver their paper tank track from the starting point to the finish line by moving in cohesion inside the tank. All members should always ensure their heads and feet are inside the paper tank track while standing one behind the other. Three members will be blindfolded using a face mask, and one member guides the team during the race. Please refer to Figure 1 at the end of the paper. The goal is to successfully transport the paper tank track without being torn in the shortest possible time. A group will be disqualified during the race once their paper tank track is completely torn or detached. The first group that finishes the race will be rewarded with bonus points or an exemption from submitting an individual paper requirement.

**Variations**

The grouping can be increased or decreased depending on the total number of students in a class. The indicated number of materials is based on five groups with five members inside the paper tank tracks if all materials are equally shared. However, this exercise works best with only small groups of five to six members. The race can be done simultaneously with all five groups racing, or it can be done in two groups at a time, depending on the classroom space. Groups that will be doing the race later may gain an advantage through observation. The estimated time will increase if the race is not executed simultaneously.

**Debriefing**

The plenary session will first ask students to reflect and share their insights about the exercise using the following questions.

1. Describe your group’s situation when you were only given your drawn resource.
2. Did your group encounter unexpected obstacles or difficulties while preparing your paper tank track for the race? How did you adapt and solve such situations?
3. Looking back on the exercise, what aspects of your group’s performance would you like to improve? Why?
4. Did your group demonstrate empathy towards other groups’ needs and challenges? Why?
5. What lessons did your group learn from this activity that could be applied to real-life management situations?

The exercise should reveal later that instead of competing with other groups, all of them belong to one army but are only separated into groups. The announced reward is intended for the entire army, not just one group.

In a world where we are currently witnessing war, it is a sharp contrast to teaching humanistic management when we use the concept of paper tank tracks. But the best way to highlight humanistic management is to use conventional management practice, whose terms like chain of command and span of control, among others, were inspired by the military and war.

In this exercise, students were allowed to face the difficulties of working as a group and managing resources. The goal was to simulate the importance of respecting each other and working collaboratively even if they were separated into groups. It is also important to consider instances where empathy and cooperation were crucial to achieving the common goal when resources were unevenly distributed.

The competitive element added an exciting dimension to the exercise. Consider how this competitive spirit influenced group dynamics and decision-making. Did it enhance or hinder collaboration within the class? The limited resources provided through drawing lots presented an opportunity for negotiation and resource sharing. Students should reflect on how they handled this aspect. Did their negotiations reflect a fair distribution of resources, considering the principles of fairness and equity associated with humanistic management?

In humanistic management, trust plays a crucial role. During the blindfolded race, team members had to rely on and trust each other to succeed. They also need to reflect on how they felt while blindfolded and guided by their peers and discuss the impact of trust on the group's success and overall experience. Students should consider the lessons they can apply to real-life management situations where trust is crucial for building a successful team.

Humanistic management also encourages problem-solving with empathy for all stakeholders. Consider the challenges the groups faced during construction and execution. How did they address these challenges while keeping their interests versus others? As a group member, each individual played a unique role. Reflecting on how their contributions aligned with the collective goal is essential. In humanistic management, recognizing and valuing each person's contributions while prioritizing the collective good is crucial.

Furthermore, it is essential to consider how the insights gained from this activity can be applied to real-life management situations. How can we incorporate these principles into our future management practices and ensure a more human-centered approach?

**Conclusion**

Humanistic management emphasizes the well-being of individuals, fair resource allocation, trust-building, and empathy (Laszlo, 2019; Melé, 2016). The lack of education on humanistic management may lead to a short-sighted focus on immediate financial gains (Laszlo, 2019). This may cause graduates to overlook the long-term advantages of ethical decision-making and stakeholder-oriented practices, impeding organizational sustainability (Elkington, 1997). Neglecting humanistic management may result in graduates prioritizing financial success over social and environmental considerations, which could lead to negative perceptions of businesses and limit their positive impact on communities (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

Encouraging humanistic management cultivates a space where varied viewpoints are appreciated (Audi, 2022). If students are not exposed to these ideas, they may not realize the benefits of embracing different experiences and perspectives, which can lead to innovative solutions (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). This perspective aligns with the teaching community’s goal of preparing students to make decisions that have positive and lasting impacts. Teaching these concepts encourages students to move beyond a narrow focus on profits and address business's social and environmental dimensions.

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**Figure 1.**

*Paper Tank Track Example.*

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*Note. Own photo taken inside the author’s classroom.*

1. The video link of the exercise can be accessed at https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ORPlV6u7wzDxnMtQsRFjmCxL9aFLO2rD/view?usp=drive\_link [↑](#footnote-ref-2)