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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION SPECIAL ISSUE

Best Experiential Exercises from the Eastern Academy of Management, 2007

In this issue we present a set of two experiential exercises that were nominated as “Best” in class by reviewers for the Eastern Academy of Management (EAM) conference, held in New Brunswick, NJ in May, 2007. As in past years, we subjected the nominated experiential exercises to a rigorous review process consisting of a “live” presentation at the conference. Since these two exercises were written by long-time contributing members of the Experiential Learning Association, there was high anticipation that the session would be a blockbuster. The presentation of these exercises at the conference, to a group of 35 to 40 participants, did not disappoint.

The two nominated papers for 2007 were, “Where there’s a will...’: A New Exercise to Explore Distributive and Integrative Conflict Management,” by Joseph Seltzer and James W. Smither, both of LaSalle University; and “Teaching the New Generation: The Differences are not Trivial,” by Steven I. Meisel of LaSalle University (apparently a hotbed of experiential exercise fulmination) and David S. Fearon of Central Connecticut State University.

The Seltzer and Smither paper was ultimately chosen as the “best” exercise, though the three secret judges admitted that the decision was a difficult one. This paper offers what organizational behavior instructors have wanted for a long time: a new exercise demonstrating concepts of conflict management, negotiation and conflict resolution. As the authors point out, at this point, using exercises such as the famous “Ugli Orange” and “Border Dispute” negotiations in class carries risks to instructors, because they are so well known. This paper offers instead an exercise that is relatively short (30 to 45 minutes), quite clear and easy to understand, applicable to students ranging from undergraduates to MBAs, and compelling enough to hold attention and demonstrate a wide variety of lessons. Applicable learning concepts include conflict management styles, distributive versus integrative bargaining and functional versus dysfunctional aspects of conflict. Seltzer and Smither also offer a second variation of the exercise that explores the importance of relationships in negotiations and how shifting perceptions of those relationships can shape the negotiation process. In their presentation of the exercise at the EAM conference, participants readily demonstrated the multifaceted potential of the exercise, with some participants withholding substantial information and manipulating known truths, and others demonstrating openness, honesty and authenticity. The debrief was rich and brought to a close only because of time limitations.

The paper by Meisel and Fearon is a clever exploration of differences in generational cohorts’ perceptions of organizational behavior concepts using different versions of the Trivial Pursuit game. The exercise demonstrates that by having students play older (the original Master Game

edition from 1981) versus newer (current) versions of the game helps students to understand how changing cultural contexts and history shape people's perceptions. For example, current undergraduate students, in playing the older edition, are essentially being asked to understand the world (or at least the trivial aspects of the world) that their parents occupied. This is a world they are less familiar with, and one that they are likely to feel they have very little knowledge about. Generating these feelings of ignorance and ambiguity are instructive, because they may parallel feelings they are likely to feel as employees trying to understand other-generational managers and fellow workers. Meisel and Fearon then explore how these divergent perspectives might affect how individuals perceive and live out such organizational behavior concepts as equity theory.

Participants in the exercise at the conference had immense fun in answering Trivial Pursuit questions, and showed that they were quite knowledgeable about both historic and current trivia (which didn't necessarily enhance the divergent perspectives sought by the authors, but was quite fun). The authors suggested that the exercise would work well in settings where students come from multiple generations, as well as settings represented predominantly by Generation Y.

The session featuring these two exercises was characterized by energy, excitement, passion, and a fresh perspective on critical organizational behavior concepts. There was a sense that these kinds of exercises demonstrate what engaged teaching and learning can look like. I urge you to read them carefully and apply them in your own classroom.