

BUILDING MANAGERIAL SKILLS USING “INSTANT RESPONSE” INCIDENTS

*William E. Stratton, College of Business, Idaho State University, 921 South 8th Avenue, Stop 8020,
Pocatello, ID 83209-8020, 208-282-2281, strabill@isu.edu*

*James P. Jolly, College of Business, Idaho State University, 921 South 8th Avenue, Stop 8020,
Pocatello, ID 83209-8020, 208-282-3455, jolljame@isu.edu*

ABSTRACT

This workshop demonstrates an approach to developing student managerial skills through the classroom use of very short case incidents requiring students to think on their feet to instantly respond to the scenarios described. These “instant response” exercises develop a very different set of skills than those resulting from the analysis of longer cases commonly used in classes. When forced to respond with no time for analytical thought, students react out of whatever reservoir of experience and skill they subconsciously possess and can call upon instantaneously, thus gaining insight into their level of skill development.

INTRODUCTION

In developing students’ problem solving skills, most management programs utilize fairly lengthy classroom cases that expose students to descriptions of realistic problem situations. Students are expected to expend considerable time analyzing the problem situations portrayed to come up with managerial recommendations for their resolution.

A related managerial problem solving skill that is rarely discussed or developed in educational programs is the ability to deal with problem situations that cannot be anticipated but nevertheless arise and require an almost instantaneous response from the manager. These situations afford no time for detailed, well-considered analyses. The manager’s response must instantly arise from subconscious mental programming developed through experience. This program session will demonstrate how to use short, “instant response” cases that have been developed to put students in realistic problem situations requiring them to think on their feet and respond, thereby gaining a degree of insight into the level of their skill development in this area. Participants attending the session will be exposed to alternative ways of using short cases for this purpose and the various learning points that can be derived from them.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The authors use the case method quite extensively in their teaching and are generally quite happy with the results. However, for some time they have been concerned that the longer, analytically oriented cases contained in most textbooks capture only a subset of the skills necessary for becoming a successful manager.

In the real world, managers are constantly faced with situations that require almost immediate responses. There is no time to carefully analyze the situation and develop alternative solutions. Instead, one must think on one’s feet and react accordingly. These reactions come from the individual’s subconscious mental programming that has developed through experience. For example, suppose an irate employee comes storming into a manager’s office, yelling and cursing. The manager is not likely to sit back and

reflect on his or her options as developed in a management text or course. Instead, he or she will simply react based on this unconscious mental program.

As previously stated, this mental program is developed through experience. It may be effective or ineffective, but it is likely to be repeated unless the individual consciously reflects on the behavior and its results. By surfacing these subconscious programs to the level of consciousness and examining them, real learning and skill development can occur. The short incidents presented in this session provide a forum for practice and for examining students' responses, including the process of "reprogramming" certain less effective responses.

The incidents used were solicited from MBA students who described real experiences that had put them in situations where: 1) they were caught by surprise, 2) something important was at stake, and 3) there was very little time (only seconds) to decide what to do and react. The following is one example of the thirty-seven situations developed to date.

The Supervisor's Challenge (issue: enforcing rules)

It is your first week on the job as a line supervisor in a food processing plant. As you walk onto the production floor on your third day on the job to continue getting to know your employees, you are approached by one of them. He spits on the floor and says, "See that? What are you gonna do about it?" His behavior is a clear violation of plant hygiene rules. How do you respond?

These practice sessions can be a bit intimidating for students. However, the authors have found it is possible to develop an atmosphere of experimentation and fun in which students enjoy the exercise and the personal learning that comes from it.

SESSION ACTIVITY

The session begins with a brief introduction (approximately five minutes) describing the use of these incidents and the rationale for using them. Then their use will be demonstrated (approximately 20 minutes) by putting participants in the role of students and asking them to respond to the situations described. Two different techniques that can be used in classes will be demonstrated. First, "students" will be provided with a case incident and will be asked to read it and write down their first, immediate response. Second, participant volunteers will be asked to respond publicly to a different incident. In both cases the responses will be used as the basis for subsequent discussion. The final five minutes of the session will be used for participant discussion of the cases and other potential pedagogical techniques for their classroom use.

INTENDED AUDIENCE AND VALUE TO PARTICIPANTS

This session should be of interest to new or experienced instructors who are interested in skill development of their students. The goal is to help participants make a difference in their students' managerial skill development by demonstrating the value of using "instant response" incidents in the classroom. These incidents provide instructors with an efficient means for students to practice important, yet often overlooked, skills. The presenters will provide additional sample incidents and instructor notes for their use as takeaways for those attending and participating.