

DEFENSIVE DRIVING AS AN INTRODUCTORY METAPHOR FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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The Strategic Management Capstone course is required of all business majors at our university. It is usually taken in a student's last semester of the senior year, and it represents a significant contrast to the functionally-focused business courses of most of the junior and senior years. To encourage students to become engaged with the topics early in the course, and to transition in their thinking to a more inclusive and cross-functional (managerial) point of view, defensive driving was selected as a metaphor for strategic management in an introductory module in the course.

Defensive driving was selected as a metaphor because it can illustrate so many strategic management concepts that will be emphasized in subsequent lectures and discussions in the class. Driving also represents an activity that every student is familiar with, either as a driver or as an observer of drivers (for example, in the case of some international students who may not be drivers themselves).

Usually this module is presented during the second meeting of the class. The lecture begins with a review of definitions of strategic management and strategy from the course textbook, and the brief introduction of the defensive driving topic as a metaphor. This is quickly followed by discussion beginning with a question to the class: What do we need to know and do to drive a car successfully? This process is interrupted quickly by a discussion focused on what we mean by "successfully" in the driving situation. The class usually responds enthusiastically to these discussion questions, as the topic area is familiar to them, and they have little hesitation in participating.

One of the classic defensive driving frameworks, the one chosen here, is the Smith System, with five major components. These components, or rules for defensive driving, lend themselves well to a discussion of strategic management. They include the following: Aim High in Steering; Get the Big Picture; Keep Your Eyes Moving; Leave Yourself an Out; and Make Sure the Other Person Sees You.

As the "rules of the road" are introduced, each one is extrapolated into the strategic management environment. The components above lend themselves well to brief introduction of such strategic management concepts as environmental scanning, strength and weakness analysis, opportunities and threats in the environment, the need for flexibility and adaptability to changing conditions, planning and implementation of plans, accomplishment of stated goals, evaluation of the process and feedback for improvement, among others. As the lecture ends, the students are more familiar with the major components of strategic management to be covered during the rest of the semester.

Students have been surveyed as to the appropriateness of the module and their level of engagement with this approach, with the intention of reporting what works with this approach and what could be improved in subsequent courses. Their initial engagement with the course is improved, even though the course is required, and though they may at first be unfamiliar with the concepts, models and terms they will be encountering in this course.