Becoming a better observer – classroom materials

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LEGO™ BUILDING EXERCISE

This exercise is designed to introduce OB concepts, introduce the practice of observation, and serve as a group icebreaker. It is carried out during the first class meeting of the term directly following introductory remarks and discussion of the course syllabus. Students are given verbally the following instructions:

- You are to work as a group to complete a single structure using all of the Lego ™ pieces. All pieces must be connected together, i.e. you may not build a container and fill it with loose pieces.
- The vehicle (small spring propelled wheeled base is provided) must pass through some portion of the structure.
- When completed, I must be able to pick up the structure (gently) without it falling apart.
- Individuals assigned as observers are to put their name on the legal pad provided then record their observations of the group activity. (We provide no guidelines for observation because we want to assess what they notice and how they describe it.)
- Observers may not participate in the activity. Observers will be alternated during the exercise.

After giving these instructions, we assign approximately 25% of the group (regardless of class size) as observers and distribute legal pads. We then evenly distribute the Lego’s™ on 2 or 3 eight foot tables lined up in the classroom such that there is sufficient space around them for all builders to have a place at the table. We provide no additional instructions or organizing suggestions, just tell them to begin building. Initial student reaction ranges from disbelief to enthusiasm. The typical response is for every student to approach the table and pick up two pieces of Lego™ and put them together. Someone will usually make structuring suggestions which are invariable ignored (as enrollees in a junior level course in a very large business school, most of these students do not know one another). Progress usually begins when people with some Lego™ experience create a basic form that can be augmented with sub-structures created by smaller groups that coalesce at points around the tables. Finished construction typically takes between 30 and 60 minutes.

After approximately 7-10 minutes, we assign a new group of observers. This time frame allows us to have everyone serve as an observer at least once during the exercise. In order to complicate the group activity, we typically select the second group of observers from those students most active in structuring the group’s work.

The debrief begins with student reports of some of their observations. We use these reports to point out OB concepts that will be addressed during the term. Typical observation reports focus on lack of communication; lack of, or attempts at, leadership; motivation to participate; group dynamics; and decision making. These student observations tend to be rather basic, e.g. “everybody was talking at once”, “nobody was in charge”. We note some of our own observations then take this opportunity to
emphasize the importance of accurate observation and point out that we will be focusing attention on observation throughout the term.
SHORT STORY

The short story exercise is a quick and easy way to introduce the concept of observation and its role in making inferences about organizational situations. Prior to any discussion about observation, the short story with questions is distributed to the students. Students are asked to quickly read the story and respond to the questions. Upon completion of the short quiz, we ask for a show of hands as to the truth of each statement. We then look closely at the story itself to determine if there is evidence to support a conclusion. It becomes clear to students after the third or fourth question that the authors have created a scenario that results in significant misinterpretation of the pertinent facts. Our discussion then focuses on the perceptual and cognitive mechanisms that result in these errors, and the importance of accurate observation in the workplace.

Short story guidelines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A SHORT-SHORT STORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The lights in a store had just been turned off by a business man when a man appeared and demanded money. The owner opened a cash register. The contents of the cash register were scooped up, and the man sped away. A member of the police force was notified promptly.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Quiz:** Answer the following questions about the story.

1. A man appeared after the owner turned off his store lights. T F ?
2. The robber was a man. T F ?
3. The man who appeared did not demand money. T F ?
4. The man who opened the cash register was the owner. T F ?
5. The store owner scooped up the contents of the cash register and ran away. T F ?
6. Someone opened a cash register. T F ?
7. After the man who demanded money scooped the contents of the cash register, he ran away. T F ?

8. While the cash register contained money, the story does not state how much. T F ?
9. The robber demanded money of the owner. T F ?
10. A businessman had just turned off the lights when a man appeared in the store. T F ?
11. It was broad daylight when the man appeared. T F ?
12. The man who appeared opened the cash register. T F ?
13. No one demanded money. T F ?
14. The story concerns a series of events in which only three persons are referred to: the owner of the store, a man who demanded money, and a member of the police force. T F ?
15. The following events occurred: someone demanded money; a cash register was opened; its contents were scooped up; and a man dashed out of the store. T F ?

(source unknown)
VIDEO OBSERVATION

This exercise is used during the first full week of class in order to emphasize the importance of observation skills and to demonstrate the connection between observations and inferences about observed situations. After discussing some specifics regarding observation skills, students view a music video with the sound muted. They are then asked to recall details of what they have seen. Invariable, students quickly jump to making inferences about the video, giving us the opportunity to discuss the connection between observation and inference. We refocus them on reporting observations and subsequently move to a discussion about the song’s possible message. We then re-run the video with sound and discuss the accuracy of the initial observations and the inferences about the message.

The video used, Garth Brook’s “If Tomorrow Never Comes” lends itself to this exercise as it contains a variety of interpersonal interactions as well as interesting physical surroundings. These scenes give sufficient information to infer an overall theme without it being completely obvious. In addition, this video is old enough and far enough outside the musical interest of our students that it is not a giveaway.
This exercise is designed to reinforce the importance of observation as it relates to job-related personal traits. After an in-class discussion of a variety of personal traits, we provide an opportunity for students to observe a “work-place”. Despite the proliferation of published personality inventories, the individual manager is likely to depend upon personal observation to assess the more common job-related personal traits. This exercise reinforces the value of observation and emphasizes the challenges of inferring personal traits from personal observation.

The “work-place” in this exercise is an episode of the formerly long-running and popular television program M*A*S*H. This video was chosen because it is engaging, it clearly exemplifies some personal traits, it is ambiguous about others, and it is not frequently seen by our current students. Students are provided a check list with a number of personal traits identified. They are asked to observe Hawkeye Pierce (the principal character – played by Alan Alda) and note any evidence they observe that would reflect a particular personal trait. We debrief by having students report their observations regarding the traits on the list and discuss the manner in which these traits may be significant in this particular “work-place”. We also emphasize the difficulty in drawing inferences from such limited data. If there are students who are current M*A*S*H re-run fans, they often can provide some interesting longitudinal input to this discussion.
M*A*S*H exercise class handout

M*A*S*H

During our class discussion we considered a number of work-related personal traits. As you watch the video of this episode of M*A*S*H, pay particular attention to the character Hawkeye Pierce. Note any evidence you observe of the existence or absence of these personal traits.

Extraversion

Emotional stability

Agreeableness

Conscientiousness

Openness to experience

Self-monitoring

Risk taking

Locus of control

Need for achievement

Authoritarian orientation

Dogmatism
LOST AT SEA

The lost at sea exercise is one of a number of similar experiences designed to demonstrate aspects of group decision making (see also, e.g., lost on the moon and lost in the arctic – (http://www.wilderdom.com/games/descriptions/SurvivalScenarios.html). These exercises raise such issues as group communication, problem identification, decision making structure, interpersonal styles and the role of individual expertise.

We have chosen lost at sea primarily due to the personal experience of one author who is a former Commissioned Officer in the U.S. Coast Guard. Because of this background, we are able to bring into the classroom all of the items the students are asked to rank. Students are asked to look closely at all the items prior to making their initial rankings. We do not answer questions about the items at this time.

During the debrief it becomes apparent that direct observation of the items has been a factor in group discussion. The sextant, for example, is ranked low by the experts (need navigation tables and accurate local time), however students point out that the small mirror on the sextant could be used in the event the signaling mirror is lost. Our purpose in bringing in the items is primarily to reinforce the message that accurate observation is important in managerial endeavors.

EXERCISE GUIDELINES

The scenario

You are adrift on a private yacht in the South Pacific. As a consequence of a fire of unknown origin, much of the yacht and its contents have been destroyed. The yacht is now slowly sinking. Your location is unclear because of the destruction of critical navigational equipment and because you and the crew were distracted by trying to bring the fire under control. Your best estimate is that you are approximately one thousand miles south-southwest of the nearest land.

Shown in Exhibit 1 is a list of fifteen items that are intact and undamaged after the fire. In addition to these articles, you have a serviceable rubber life raft with oars that is large enough to carry yourself, the crew, and all the items listed. The total contents of all survivors’ pockets are a package of cigarettes, several books of matches, five one-dollar bills and seventeen credit cards.

Instructions

The general task is to rank the fifteen items in terms of their importance for survival.

Step 1: Each student should closely examine the items displayed on the front table. These are the items you will be considering in you decision process. Working individually, each group member should then rank order the fifteen items in terms of their survival value, giving a 1 to the most useful item, a 2 to the next most useful item, and so on. The least useful item will be ranked 15. List your answers in Column 1 of the grid. (10 minutes)
Step 2: The group will proceed to discuss the value of the fifteen items as a group and to develop a consensus ranking. In doing this, be open to the ideas of others and take advantage of different perspectives. Do not vote or average your answers. Try to reach consensus on the ranking by talking it out. Put your group’s ranking in Column 2 of the grid. (30 minutes)

Step 3: Your instructor will provide you with the expert ranking of the items provided by officers of the U.S. Merchant Marine. Write the expert ranking in Column 3 off the grid.

Step 4: Take the absolute difference between your individual ranking (Column 1) and the experts’ ranking (Column 3) for each item and write this difference in Column 4 of the grid. (“Absolute difference” means to ignore plus or minus signs.)

Step 5: Take the absolute difference between the group ranking (Column 2) and the experts’ ranking (Column 3) for each item and write this difference in Column 5 of the grid.

Step 6: Calculate your individual accuracy score by totaling the numbers in Column 4 of the grid. The lower the score, the better.

Step 7: Calculate the group’s accuracy score by totaling the numbers in Column 5 of the grid. The lower the score, the better.

Step 8: Calculate the average individual score for your group by adding up the individual accuracy scores (Step 6) and dividing by the number of members in your group.

According to the experts (officers of the United States Merchant Marine) the basic supplies needed when a person is stranded in mid-ocean are articles to attract attention and articles to aid survival until rescuers arrive. Articles for navigation are of little importance. Even if a small life raft were capable of reaching land, it would be impossible to store enough food and water to subsist during that period of time. Therefore, of primary importance are the shaving mirror and the two gallon can of oil-gas mixture. These items could by used for signaling air-sea rescue. Of secondary importance are items such as water and food.

**Expert ranking**

- Shaving mirror
- Two-gallon can of oil-gas mixture
- Five gallon can of water
- One case of U.S. Army C rations
- Twenty-square feet of opaque plastic
- Two boxes of chocolate bars
- Fishing kit
- Fifteen feet of nylon rope
- Floating seat cushion
- Shark repellent
- One quart of 160-proof Puerto Rican rum
- Small transistor radio
- Maps of the Pacific Ocean
- Mosquito netting
- Sextant
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE EXERCISE

This exercise is designed to reinforce the importance of observation in the context of organizational culture. Edgar Schien’s (1985) model of levels of organizational culture is used as a framework for the exercise.

Students are divided into groups of 5-6 members. After the assignment is explained, groups wander the business school building for 30 minutes, recording their observations of evidence reflecting the organization’s culture.

Upon returning to the classroom, groups report on their observations. This is an opportunity once again to note the connection between observations and inference. After discussing the relationship of observations to surmised culture, we complete part two of the exercise. This focuses student attention on the less visible aspects of Schein’s model and how the visible (artifacts) may relate to underlying values, beliefs, etc.

Culture exercise guidelines

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE EXERCISE

What is the culture at the DePaul Loop Campus?

Using Schein’s concept of levels of organizational culture, assess the prevailing culture of this institution.

Complete this exercise in your assigned group.

1. Assume that you are a team of cultural anthropologists in the year 2096 and have just discovered the lost city of Chicago. The city was “frozen” in time at exactly 1:00 pm on yesterday’s date in the year 2006 and has been perfectly preserved as it existed at that moment. Your task is to describe and attempt to understand the culture of the organization called “DePaul College of Commerce” which was located at 1 E. Jackson Blvd. The strange time warp allows you to move about the building observing, touching, reading, etc. but, although you can see them, you cannot communicate with the previous occupants as they are in some strange state of time suspension.

Your team leader is concerned about your safety so has authorized only thirty minutes on scene to observe the physical traces of this culture.

What do you observe?

What conclusions do you draw from your observations?
2. After a number of days on site, a space/time continuity shift suddenly results in your being transported back to yesterday’s date in 2006 as invisible observers of real life. Your team discovers that you can observe normal activities, read the thoughts of the humans you are observing, and, on periodic occasions, even manipulate the thoughts and behaviors of some of the subjects.

How will you use this opportunity to clarify your picture of the culture of this organization?

What do you discover that fills in the gaps of Schien’s framework?

Model of organizational culture

Organizational Culture – A system of shared meaning held by members that distinguishes the organization from other organizations.

Organizational culture is a pattern of basic assumptions that are considered valid and are taught to new members as the way to perceive, think, and feel in the organization.

Edgar Schein suggests that organizational culture has three levels.

ARTIFACTS
- Personal enactment – individual behavior that reflects the organizations values – e.g. Sam Walton modeling appropriate customer service
- Ceremonies and Rites – relatively elaborate sets of activities that are enacted time and again on important occasions. These occasions provide opportunities to reward and recognize employees whose behavior is congruent with the values of the company – e.g. retirement dinners, annual picnics, award ceremonies
- Stories - stories give meaning and identify to organizations as they are told and retold – Nordstrom’s tire, stories about bosses, relocation, “stockroom to executive suite”, crises situations
- Rituals – everyday organizational practices that are repeated over and over. – e.g. referring to employees by Ms./Mr./Mrs., etc. rather than by first name, always placing fresh flowers on the security desk
- Symbols – communicate organization culture by unspoken messages – logos, badges, pins, clothing, decorating schemes
VALUES
- Testable in the physical environment – as evidenced in conversations, printed material, mission statements, etc.
- Testable only by social consensus – as evidenced by general behavior patterns

ASSUMPTIONS
Deeply held beliefs that guide behavior – members are often unaware of their assumptions and may be reluctant or unable to discuss them or change them – e.g. “people are inherently good”, “people want to learn and grow”, “people care about the natural environment”, etc. These assumptions may become evident by observing aspects of artifacts and values
ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR-observation assignments

OBSERVATION # 1

Observe a work or school-related social perception situation. Briefly describe 3 characteristics from 1 or more categories (see social perception handout) and explain why you think that characteristic may have influenced perception.

OBSERVATION #2

Observe and describe a situation in which it was clear to you that an individual’s attitude was critical to the outcome of the event.

OBSERVATION #3

Observe and describe a work/school/other situation that involves motivation. What could YOU do to enhance the motivation of one of the participants?

OBSERVATION #4

Describe a dysfunctional group situation you have encountered. What was the primary cause of the problem?

OBSERVATION # 5

Describe a current work or non-work situation in which you have power. What makes you powerful?

OBSERVATION #6

Observe and describe a work or non-work organizational situation that involves at least four interacting elements of organizational behavior.
In class assessment.

This brief anonymous assessment is given at the end of the class session in which we present the M*A*S*H personal traits exercise. It is designed to give us a sense of whether the students are making the connection between the exercise and our goal of enhancing awareness of the importance of observation.

One of the overall objectives of this class is to enhance your awareness of the importance of accurate observation and to increase your skills at observation.

How did the M*A*S*H exercise address this objective?

Note: Greater than 90% of students clearly articulate the connection between the course objective and the class exercise.

Mid-term exam question

The object of observing the Garth Brooks video in class was primarily to:

a) Get you to become country music fans.
b) Demonstrate how everyone comes to the same conclusions based on their observations.
c) Practice being careful observers.
d) Demonstrate how silence makes it more likely we will all agree on our observations.

Note: 85-90% of students correctly answer this question.