

**SWP 48/90 EXECUTIVE CHALLENGE: USING THE OUTDOORS
TO DEVELOP THE PERSONAL ACTIONS SKILLS
OF MBA STUDENTS**

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Forthcoming in Organisational Behaviour Teaching Review (Special Edition on Management Action Skills)

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OB teachers are often concerned to allow students to develop knowledge skills and attitudes towards behaviour at work. While OB can be seen as an academic study worthwhile in its own right, many teachers wish to encourage individuals to observe the situations they come across at work more keenly; to understand and explain them; to predict likely behaviour, and then behave in such a way as to influence events.

OB courses stress the difficulties of predicting individual behaviour in particular situations. However, many students of OB are interested in attempting to predict and influence the behaviour of others. This desire is particularly strong in mid-career managers attending MBA programmes. Many are strongly motivated by achievement at work and recognise that influencing others is a key determinant of success. One of the most common complaints of MBA students is that the intellectual understanding of theoretical models that partially explain some behaviour is insufficient. In order to increase their personal chance of success, the development of personal and portable action skills is needed.

Models of organisational behaviour often provide several levels of analysis. A common distinction is between the individual as an individual; the individual interacting with other individuals and small groups; and the whole organisational level of analysis. Robbins (1984) is but one example of this approach.

A process of learning is needed that will allow concrete experience, feedback, reflection and experimentation if individuals are to develop real world skill beyond mere knowledge and attitudes. Kolb (1975) popularised this view, variants of which still have great influence.

One process which can offer substantial benefits in managerial skill development in the interpersonal area and makes use of the Kolb model is "Executive Challenge". Executive Challenge is the use of experiential strategies in the outdoors. The experience of the Otago University Business School (New Zealand) suggests that the outdoor Executive Challenge has a useful place in the teaching of organisational behaviour based action skills in MBA programmes for executives. It has a number of other benefits too.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE OTAGO DEVELOPMENT

Otago entered the outdoor classroom in 1986. There were two main reasons. Firstly there was a need to respond to a major learning process problem which occurred with the entry of students who commenced the MBA programme in 1984. Secondly there was increasing dissatisfaction from graduates with the small amount their personal management action skills were being developed by the use of academic and technique orientated learning strategies. Many technical skills and insights were being gained, but when it came to crucial personal skills - the skills for winning in the post-MBA - world, many believed little changed as a result of the programme.

The Learning Process Problem

A number of factors contributed to the learning process problem. One factor was the success of the programme in attracting students who were very able intellectually and who had substantial previous management experience. The average age of the 28 students admitted each year was around 34 years and the mean GMAT score 620.

A second factor was the existence of a "we must make it hard for them" view of the faculty. Each year more content was added to the papers, leading to very high volume output expectations.

This view, plus the attempt to complete the content of a 2 year programme in 15 months, led to an expectation of very long hours, exhaustion and social and family disruption. In many cases students could only cope through the rapid and effective development of the study group to which they were assigned. These long term study groups were constructed by the school to maximise differences in the group in terms of age, national origin, experience and type of person.

The third factor was the lack of any systematic orientation process or any integrating core courses or material. Many of the papers were taught with little reference to the material covered in the other papers. The synergy and synthesis was believed to come through the study groups.

Pressures grew and as a result the Director of the programme became heavily involved in remedial counselling, peacemaking and group reconstruction efforts. Even with many hours of facilitation it was an explosive mix :- gifted, articulate and demanding students whose high expectations were not being met; growing demands for output and no preparation or equipping to cope within the learning groups.

In 1984 an explosion took place. Very severe interpersonal and learning problems manifested themselves. These were both between and within study groups. In addition to this, the whole entry began

to be divided by issues which were about individuals and learning processes, although they were sometimes couched in "content" terms.

One study group ceased to operate. It disbanded with great hostility. One member of the group, trained previously in educational psychology, made a number of damaging assertions about individual members of the MBA class and some individual members of the faculty. The claims centred upon the morality of the learning process and a claim that Pascales (1985) model of socialisation was being deliberately followed, including the generation of humiliating and stressful experiences. The student failed two quantitative papers at the height of the problems and began an academic and legal appeal process which led through all levels of university procedures and finally to the Governor General of New Zealand (as the representative of the Queen). He is the final court of appeal as the Visitor of the University.

The stress upon staff and students led to low levels of performance and the resignation of a member of staff from the teaching faculty of the MBA. It proved impossible to recreate any significant level of trust and openness with the particular entry to the programme.

Clearly some action needed to be taken to ensure that subsequent groups of students entering the programme developed the skills to manage the group centred learning situation and the pressures within it. The skills required were very similar to the interpersonal and group skills needed to function well under pressure as the leader or a member of a management team in industry.

The Need for Skills

The second area of concern, was a growing belief that MBA graduates were leaving with a wealth of knowledge, theoretical models and techniques but little changed in terms of their personal management action skills. This was despite a 30 hour organisational behaviour course being part of the first few months work. It was a course in which many theoretical models were presented that should have offered explanations of the problems occurring.

A minor issue was the lack of any integrating mechanism to make the parts of the programme more than the sum of the parts

First Steps

A first step was to introduce a 3 day orientation programme at the beginning of the MBA. The programme covered a certain amount of administrative information. Apart from that information it concentrated on awareness of self and others; sensitivity to group dynamics and skills in interpersonal

communication and relationships. As part of the programme techniques of interaction analysis were introduced from Rackham (1971). Monitoring and feedback skills were practised. Time was allowed in the first term for groups to examine their processes and way of operating.

The number of unplanned interventions by the Director fell below that of the previous 2 years. Some of the planned review meetings with groups were used as OB teaching review sessions.

At the same time a programme of physical activity was commenced for one hour per week, started on the whim of the MBA Director and a friend in the physical education faculty as a fitness initiative. The one-hour sessions each week allowed students to take controlled risks, see each other in a new light and struggle together towards real life skills. Trust grew by experiencing support on a climbing wall or in a trampoline exercise. Fear and overcoming it became a worthwhile endeavour for some.

The overwhelming response from students was to want both the gym and classroom programmes to become significant and mandatory parts of the MBA. Members of faculty became aware that the level of commitment of students to each other and to learning reached a new level as the year proceeded. Although no causal connection could be demonstrated rigourously, enough of the faculty believed there to be a connection to pursue the issues further.

It had also become obvious that the work that had been initiated to help students to study under pressure in divergent groups would be useful after the MBA's completion and could go some way towards meeting dissatisfaction with the lack of interpersonal skill development. The 8 hours devoted to the skills in orientation merely scratched the surface.

THE FIRST EXECUTIVE CHALLENGE

In 1986 provision was made for a 3 day Executive Challenge programme. Two events encouraged us. A member of the faculty had visited Camp Sargent, the Boston facility used for Executive Challenge. At the same time, a programme was run with great success for the management team of a New Zealand pasta producer (Rae, Grant and Pullar (1984))

Academics in both the business School and the School of Physical Education were sceptical about the whole development.

Objectives

There was a need both to sell the idea to colleagues, and to ensure the participation of students. Time lags in university procedure precluded making participation compulsory, and in New Zealand it was a novel idea. These needs and the need for the faculty who were involved to know what they were doing themselves, led to a great deal of discussion about what was desirable and possible in such a programme. We had yet to discover the accounts in the literature of similar training events.

Perhaps the most important commitment made was to develop management skills using an outdoor environment and not to try to do a whole range of other things.

In particular there was no desire to develop significant skills at outdoor pursuits. The outdoor activity was only as relevant as the building blocks in a classroom tower building exercise. The important process is the learning about communication, leadership, oneself and others, rather than developing skills in building towers.

Some of the programmes offered aim to "take people to their limits and beyond". The programme initiators were sure that was not their intention. Also in the minds of the designers was that the programme should not merely be a break from academic work, nor a half term break.

The basic desire was to simulate in an inclusive way some of the key skills and processes of management, and to do so in a way which engaged people's minds, bodies and feelings in experiential learning.

For the first Executive Challenge the stated objectives were:-

"To develop personal and group awareness skills using a non-traditional environment.

Among the areas to be explored are:-

- 1) Coping with ambiguity, new experiences and risk.*
- 2) The development of trust and supportive skills.*
- 3) Communication Skills (in particular; listening, feedback and persuasive skills)*
- 4) Group leadership and contributing skills*
- 5) Decision making*
- 6) Expressive skills "*

In many ways such imprecise statements are inadequate as objectives. Ignorance of what could be achieved and of the process meant that only a general idea of intention was possible. In hindsight, there were other unstated objectives. They were to do with developing a high level of cohesion within the

class, encouraging identification with the MBA process and with the Otago Business School and with believing that cooperation was as important as competition

The six objectives fall reasonably well into the typology of Group Problem Solving; Individual Challenges requiring team support and Individual Stretch Management (including risk taking with support networks) that Long (1987) suggests.

Programme Design and Content

The design reflected the traditional model of organisation behaviour, which was being used in the formal paper in that subject. Some exercises were individual and reflective, some focussed on one to one issues, some on group processes and others on task issues.

The choice of exercises depended upon a business school academic and a physical education specialist standing in a wet field, discussing what might be attempted to meet the objectives, bearing in mind the environment. Only one outdoor lodge was available, set in a valley between fir covered slopes, complete with a confidence course and nearby to a river for white water rafting. The activities chosen together with their purposes are in Table 1. We started with low key icebreaking activities and worked towards riding home-made rafts in rough water. Most other programmes seem to follow that type of development with a highlight at the end.

Table 1

Programme Implementation

There was only a very brief introduction to students leaving for the programme. At the commencement of the programme the facilitators were by no means certain that the students would cooperate and the briefing was very limited. In the event they did.

It rained the whole time and was bitterly cold but the programme was completed. Physical safety was ensured by the presence of a skilled outdoor expert and the facilitation carried out, with some help, by the MBA Director.

Results

It is often difficult to provide concrete evidence that management development has been successful. Springett (1987) came close to demonstrating that executive challenge programmes are worthwhile. He

reported that as a result of one programme, 73% of sponsoring managers claimed significant achievements had resulted. In another example he quotes, 7 out of 12 members of an in-house programme were promoted as a result within 12 months. The normal expectation was for 3 to be promoted.

Using reaction, learning, behaviour at work and organisational benefit as levels of evaluation there was evidence that the first Otago programme was a success.

Reaction was very positive from participants. Evaluation forms completed 10 days after the event gave high positive feedback in terms of content, method and usefulness. The opportunity for free flow comment gave feedback that students were not preoccupied with the outdoor aspect. The chief things they valued were *"getting to know people"*, *"seeing each other in a new light"*, *seeing everybody's strengths and weakness* and *"learning about myself and how I relate to others"*. The activities chosen seem to have allowed the objectives to be reached.

The criticisms were constructive. There was consensus that the programme was too late in the MBA process. It had been held in week 7 of the MBA. The issues needed to be addressed earlier in the course. The inadequate briefing was raised by a number of participants expressing the view that they did not understand what it was all about before the event. If they had more information, a number claimed they would have done some preparatory self-evaluation before the programme. More time was requested for unstructured reflection and also more facilitation throughout the challenge programme.

At the level of learning, the only evidence is the remarks of the participants, the observations of faculty and the improvements in task and group maintenance behaviours during the MBA programme.

Better evidence is available concerning the transfer to the work situation and the benefits to the organisation. During the year the number of times interventions were necessary by the MBA Director fell again. Only two interventions were required after the executive challenge programme. Both of these were in the study group where two members did not take part. Only 4 hours were required. Another 6 hours had been necessary prior to the challenge programme making 10 or so for the year. The previous year more than 15 hours were required. The year before more than 100 hours failed to achieve successful learning groups. In the following year (1987) the need for interventions fell again and in 1988 became insignificant. Table 2 shows the reduction.

Quality of learning was enhanced. Students achieved higher grades and more MBAs were awarded with Distinction. The whole level of commitment seems to have been raised. The MBA Director who ran the

challenge programme was also the organisation behaviour teacher. He reported a quantum leap in the perceived relevance of his classes and the application of theory to real life.

Table 2

THE SUBSEQUENT EXECUTIVE CHALLENGE PROGRAMMES

The following years (1987 and 1988) saw a number of changes as a result of the experience of the first programme. More structured preparation for students, further instruments for structuring feedback and much more immediate facilitation during the programme-after every exercise. Participants are also provided with formats to reflect on the experience before, during and after the event.

The MBA programme now begins the development of the skills in the orientation week and continues with one session per week and the Executive Challenge in week 3 or 4.

The level of commitment and effectiveness in group learning and whole class learning has remained high with no significant personal or process problems. In 1989 a new style programme was introduced with an integrating core of papers and personal development. Executive Challenge remains a significant part of that process and the development of action skills.

DISCUSSION

While it would be rash to suggest that cause and effect can be established between the introduction of Executive Challenge and the improvement in learning and reduction in process problems, the Otago experience encourages the view that the method has substantial advantages.

Advantages

1) It is real:-

Perhaps the most significant advantage of Executive Challenge is that managers find it real. Cresswick (1989) finds:-

"managing an outdoor situation is like managing life. It is full of unpredictable events and people; a result has to be achieved and there are limited resources and time available....because the tasks are so different to normal work the underlying processes are laid bare."

2) It can turn theory into practice:-

Mid career students found the outdoor situation of the Otago experience real. The theoretical models from organisation behaviour were reinforced and made part of real life. This provides a challenge to the OB teacher when the models are questioned and the difficulty of individual prediction is made real as well.

3) It is experiential:-

Executive challenge allows organisational behaviour to be encountered with the whole person, mind, body and emotions. The meaning of good communication, trust, leadership and group dynamics is more fully experienced. The learning has a clear element of discovery by the individual.

4) It is levelling:-

Everybody is placed on the same footing and previous experience is unlikely to be helpful. All participants are faced with a challenge that cannot be ignored. They are forced to be vulnerable and open to others for support. Shared inadequacy overcome is a powerful producer of cohesiveness.

5) It builds transferable skills:-

Skills can be built and not merely understanding, because experimentation, feedback and practice are present. When the tasks are well selected, management skills can be practised and developed that have good transferability to the workplace. Some of these skills are clearly not developed by traditional classroom methods.

Bhogal (1988) suggests that the key skill developed is a habit of analysing experiences and self which is a powerful assistance to exercising leadership at work.

6) It enhances ability to learn:-

Executive challenge does not only allow personal management skills to be developed. The groups involved learn how to learn as a group. If groups are continuing as students they are able to learn together better. Obviously in the organisational behaviour field there are direct spin offs in terms of content, but learning improves in other areas of subject matter.

Disadvantages

There are a number of disadvantages with Executive Challenge.

1) Misunderstanding:-

Using the outdoors for management teaching is often misunderstood. It can be seen as either forcing individuals to their limits in physical activity or as a boy scout activity.

2) High Risk:-

It is a risky activity for both the facilitator and the participant. The risk ought not to lie in the physical environment which can be safeguarded to a large extent. The risk lies in the vulnerability required of participants and the unpredictability of people. The uncertain outcomes with exercises and programmes lead to a high possibility of failure.

3) Failure can be very costly:-

Failure can lead to the destruction of individual self esteem, damage to the working groups involved and even loss of life. Gahin (1988) records that from its beginning, outdoor training has been hampered by fatalities, injuries, illnesses and drop out. He cites a wilderness expedition sponsored by a school in Oregon in 1987 in which 9 of the 11 participants were killed and the other 2 severely injured; and also the death of 5 advertising executives rafting in British Columbia. Even with the mild, cautious programmes run at Otago, 2 participants have broken ribs and one broken a nose.

4) High order skills are required:-

The facilitation skills that are required are of a high order. Reacting to the unexpected and making learning out of the unforeseen in which individuals integrate theory and gain skills is a rare skill. The process of acquiring the skills in this environment takes time and great sensitivity.

5) Some programmes can discriminate:-

Programmes that rely upon physical strength and fitness sometimes discriminate against women and those who are older.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

A number of things need to be considered in the use of the outdoors for teaching management skills either as part of an OB programme or as an activity in its own right.

The *objectives* that are to be achieved need to be clear and related to the particular situation and not just the adoption of a standard package. The strategy of integrating the learning into the overall programme and for encouraging transfer need to be considered.

Facilitation is a key activity. Preparation by participants, reflection during the programme and facilitator inputs need to be well designed and concentrate on confidence building. Gall (1987) contends that facilitators must be skilled in organisational development, team building, organisational communication and

dynamics, change management and leadership development. The Otago experience suggests that such people are few and far between.

The *choice of physical activities* needs to be varied and appropriate. They need to be graphic, demonstrating cause and effect; unfamiliar, with no one an expert; fun, so that laughing together occurs; and involve some touching, which lowers barriers. Activities need to be flexible, allowing changes in the programme to meet needs that arise during the process. They must also have a perception of risk and be achievable, resulting in success not failure.

Safety needs to be a consideration. Physical as well as psychological safety. Growth requires vulnerability - but challenges must allow growth not demand quantum changes in people.

The experience at Otago suggests that the teaching of OB can be enhanced by the use of the outdoors. The teaching in areas such as learning and skill development, using a non-experiential methodology, tends to make the content less believable. Executive Challenge has the characteristic of allowing OB and management skills to developed in an environment where the methodology enhances understanding by its nature. This account has been largely descriptive and much more could be done to explore the ideas.

Cranfield, January 1990.

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Table 1
Executive Challenge 1 - Activities.

DAY ONE

Afternoon

1) *Competitive Group Activity*

- building a bridge over a stream with large poles and rope.
- an immediate activity to begin involvement in a physical task (icebreaking as well)
- staff and one member of each group provide some feedback , but willingness to talk the main

objective.

2) *Touching and Trust activities:*

- trust falls, human knots and people passing
- becoming used to physical contact and trusting others

3) *Group Problem Solving*

- a variety of tasks with 7 metre poles and inner tubes
- systematic focussing on roles in groups and decisions

Evening

1) *Night orienteering in groups using compasses*

- communication, problem solving, trust and support of less agile.

2) *Self awareness and Disclosure*

- indoor exercises involving self and other evaluation; giving and receiving feedback

DAY TWO

All Day

In smaller groups rotating between :-

1) *Use of confidence course*

- a) sighted
- b) blindfolded

- becoming comfortable with risk; fear and the unknown and developing more trust.

2) *Communication exercises*

- blind and mute pairs; active listening.

3) *Problem Solving*

- focussing on decision processes

Evening

1) *Values clarification exercise.*

DAY THREE

Building a raft from scrub and inner tubes. Transporting the group 2 miles through a gorge with some white water.

- bringing together many of the previous elements in a memorable event to underline learning.

Table 2
Unplanned Interventions in support of group learning process

YEAR	NUMBER OF HOURS INTERVENTION	COMMENT
1984	Very many	severe problems
1985	15	First orientation
1986	10	Exec.Chall. week 7
1987	4	Exec.Chall. week 3
1988	Insignificant	
