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Making a Case for Strategic Analysis in ERW/Mine-action Training

As an essential element of training for managerial decision-making, case studies provide managers with applicable scenarios that benefit the professional, day-to-day lives of people working in the explosive-remnants-of-war/mine-action community. While class sessions provide pertinent instruction on how to react to potential scenarios, the opportunity to use that knowledge in well-constructed examples proves highly useful for personnel. This article reports the steps taken to implement appropriate case studies for CISR’s Senior Managers’ Course in ERW and Mine Action and the results.

by Paula Daly [JMU’s College of Business] and Suzanne Fiederlein [JMU’s Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

Understanding the strategic planning and decision-making process is a critical skill for successful managers. Management faculty members from James Madison University’s College of Business have helped develop these skills in mine-action management personnel since 2004, primarily through the Senior Managers’ Course in ERW and Mine Action organized by JMU’s Center for International Stabilization and Recovery. The United Nations Development Programme sponsored this unique and highly successful course through 2007, and the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) has funded it in recent years.

By 2005, PM/WRA was requiring strategic plans of countries seeking monetary aid for explosive remnants of war and landmine remediation. Today, most donor organizations providing funds for ERW/mine-action projects expect not only a comprehensive strategic plan, but also the ability of key management personnel to evaluate strategic opportunities and alternatives, and to engage in decision-making that optimizes resource use and completion of strategic goals.

All Senior Managers’ Courses include several class sessions focused on strategic planning and decision-making. Strategic planning benefits organizations by helping them do the following:

• Define their purpose (mission) and direction (vision) clearly to internal and external stakeholders
• Communicate current strategic goals and objectives to stakeholders
• Promote assessment of internal strengths and limitations as well as external opportunities and threats
• Provide a framework for decision-making throughout the organization
• Provide a frame of reference for budgets and short-term operational plans
• Enhance effective resource use
• Develop a baseline against which progress and performance can be measured

Instructional modules for SMC participants typically include teaching tools such as traditional lecture, PowerPoint slides, class and small group discussion, and experiential learning exercises. Over the years, faculty members tried a number of different instructional methods to ensure that participants have the opportunity to actively engage in strategic planning and decision-making activities during the training course in order to apply the concepts covered during class sessions. The instructors have asked participants to create a strategic plan for their organization, modify or critique existing plans, develop operational goals based on current plans, and evaluate progress accordingly. Additionally, instructors introduced the case study method to SMC participants as an effective tool for enhancing strategic thinking and as a means of applying recently learned concepts to varying organizational situations.

Case Studies

The case study method has been used very successfully in executive-education courses to develop and strengthen strategic decision-making skills in individuals who routinely face leadership and management dilemmas in their professional roles. Case study use and case discussions foster analytical and diagnostic thinking, and force students to confront issues such as lack of knowledge SMC participants could apply in their own organizations. Although the case brought up interesting management issues and generated some spirited discussion, many participants felt that the circumstances outlined in the case were simply not as relevant to their ongoing managerial challenges as they would have liked. Feedback from other course modules also indicated that participants were most interested in getting practical knowledge, skill development or advice on issues they actually faced daily in their own jobs, such as strategic decisions, human-resource issues, and operational problems.

Convinced of the value of application and experiential learning, the SMC management faculty members looked for alternative cases about real organizations in the nonprofit sector. For example, in the 2004 and 2005 SMC, instructors used a case focusing on Mercy Corps, an organization that provides disaster response, health services, emergency and natural disaster relief, as well as fosters sustainable economic development. Instructors hoped to apply similarities between the strategic-management challenges faced by Mercy Corps personnel and those faced by managers within their own organizations, identifying and evaluating strategic alternatives that would provide transferable information or a changing environment—elements that introduce some degree of uncertainty into the decision-making process. When undertaken by a small group, a case analysis forces students to work together as a team, problem-solve, communicate their views and opinions, resolve conflict, justify or substantiate their position, and persuade others of the value of their decisions and actions. The case method is a good way for individuals to study complex or rare phenomena, especially in high-risk environments where the repercussions of actual decision-making may have devastating or irreparable consequences.

The first attempts at using the case-study method in the SMC involved the use of previously published and readily available cases about real organizations in the nonprofit sector. For example, in the 2004 and 2005 SMC, instructors used a case focusing on Mercy Corps, an organization that provides disaster response, health services, emergency and natural disaster relief, as well as fosters sustainable economic development. Instructors hoped to apply similarities between the strategic-management challenges faced by Mercy Corps personnel and those faced by managers within their own organizations, identifying and evaluating strategic alternatives that would provide transferable
The Freedonia case exercise was such a success that a second case was written for use in the 2010 CISR-conducted SMC. This new case focused even more specifically on strategic decision-making within the transition framework that most centers need to address at some point in their existence. The second case, “Midlanda,” required participants to address strategy and management issues such as succession planning, funding and donor relations, as well as organizational mission and direction. Student feedback following the course indicates substantial benefits from tailoring the case method to the unique circumstances managers face in the ERW/mine-action field. Participants spend far less time trying to make the connection between their own situation and an organization in another field, and far more time applying the concepts covered in class sessions to challenges and opportunities relevant to their everyday professional lives.

Conclusion

How is our experience with these cases pertinent to managers and employees involved in routine training efforts in their own centers? With only a small amount of effort, most training in any area of an organization can be improved by developing exercises based on the actual issues and problems employees face daily. Lengthy and complex cases are unnecessary. A “critical incident” can be captured in a paragraph or two, and will elicit a surprising amount of discussion and ideas for addressing the situation. The more real the incident, the more likely employees will see themselves in that particular situation, and will see the value of finding alternative ways to deal with those circumstances. Asking employees to provide information (anonymously or confidentially) about problems they have dealt with in the past, or situations they do not know how to resolve, can provide the basis for a more meaningful training experience.

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