Defining leadership for college students: A needs assessment approach

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Objectives:
Our presentation provides insight regarding procedures for selecting instructional content in general and leadership in particular. It also demonstrates a needs assessment process by engaging the audience in our presentation activities.

Intended Audience:
The presentation is most appropriate for college program administrators, faculty, and educational researchers.

Activities:
We will invite the audience to fill out our survey, acting in the roles of various stakeholders. After the role-play, our results will be presented for comparison to the responses of the audience.

Abstract:
Recent events in the corporate world have awakened the interest of higher education in the topic of leadership. The business school administration at an eastern land-grant university wanted to modify the curriculum of their Freshman Year Seminar (FYS) to address that topic. Lacking procedures to assess potential content for inclusion in their FYS, they approach our group for advice. We used a systematic needs assessment to model the search process and to assess the topic content by inviting contributions from the range of stakeholders. Those wishing to see an application of needs assessment in higher education and having an interest in inclusion of leadership content in a college curriculum will benefit from our presentation.

Recent literature supports the business school administration's assumption that leadership has not been sufficiently taught though it is important to their students. "Senior executives can graduate at the top of the best business schools in the world … can still be more likely to fail than succeed, unless they also possess the requisite personal and social skills" (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). However, the characteristics of leadership are open to debate. Some sources indicate the following as leadership characteristics, "ethical behavior, intellectual integrity, openness and honesty" (Feld, 2004), while others identify the following skills as being most important: "1.communication (oral and written); 2. computer literacy; 3. interpersonal/social; 4. critical thinking/leadership (tied); and 5. teamwork" (Moody, Stewart, & Bolt-Lee, 2002).

In addition, "Business school courses and curricula are not designed to help students acquire the skills to function as effective team members" (McKendall, 2000; Verderber & Serey, 1996). The dilemma of business schools is that they do not know how to choose what to teach about leadership in the limited amount of time.

Using the established procedures of needs assessment, we carefully studied the context and categorized the problem as new systems and technologies (Rossett & Arwady, 1987) due to the administrator's intention of proposing a new system. We identified needs indicators, discrepancies and performance standards (Rossett & Arwady, 1987) . A variety of analysis techniques were utilized in our inquiry, including extant data analysis, needs assessment, and subject matter analysis (Rossett & Arwady, 1987). We interviewed business school administrators and subject matter experts in leadership content, analyzed the current textbook, and reviewed literature. Using a framework developed from our literature review, we developed an online survey about leadership characteristics. Those characteristics included: vision, ethics, communication skills, teamwork skill, and so on. A large group of stakeholders, that is, freshmen, upperclassmen, faculty members, and alumni of the college of business, responded to the survey..

262 individuals from the four stakeholder groups responded to our survey. Based on the survey results, we selected the characteristics to recommend to our client by employing an innovative task selection worksheet approach (Jonassen, Tessmer & Hannum (1999)). In order to accommodate the needs of all parties, we assigned priorities to their responses. Interestingly, despite the disparity in age and position, all consistently gave high ratings to some of the same characteristics. Although anyone could choose those characteristics intuitively, without a systematic and scientific approach the result would be unconvincing. As the importance ratings of characteristics decreased, so did the agreement among stakeholders. Overall, some of the most important characteristics identified in the survey results were interpersonal, such as communication skill, decision-making ability, and some personal qualities. Our results are congruent with what corporations feel about leadership in general and are supported by strong empirical evidence. Those characteristics are important for today's corporation and should be taught as a first priority in any college of business in order to foster high caliber business leaders.

In our presentation, we will talk about our procedures including subject matter expert interview, survey, and selection. Then, we will discuss our recommendations of what could have been done differently and what topics about the leadership content are most germane to the target students.

Citations:
Feld, C. (2004). How to build a great team: four leadership qualities for getting things done. Chief information officer (CIO), April 2004.

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Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2003). Challenge is the Opportunity for Greatness. Leader to Leader(28), 16-23.

McKendall, M. (2000). Teaching Groups To Become Teams. Journal of Education for Business, 75(5), 277-282.

Moody, J., Stewart, B., & Bolt-Lee, C. (2002). Showcasing the Skilled Business Graduate: Expanding the Tool Kit. Business Communication Quarterly, 65(1), 21-36.

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