

The Trainability of Interpersonal Skills

Guidelines for the business game trainer

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Abstract: In this article the idea is discussed that business games and simulations create an advantage in relation to traditional instruction, the latter primarily focussing on the transfer of knowledge.

Frontal group learning methods are being more and more recognised as educational processes with a low degree of efficiency in learning, especially in behavioural change. Especially in management development these processes will be replaced by more efficient methodologies such as project-based learning, coaching in the field or games and simulations.

The dynamics of a game situation, combined with a multidisciplinary approach enhance the opportunities for social learning, problem solving, and decision making in small groups, in a broader sense real skill building. Without an explicit focus on these skills, learning and change will not occur on a behavioural level.

An integral approach is experienced in *ORSIAM LTD*, an interactive, competitive, computer-based game, in co-monitorship with Professor Em. Henri MULLER (Faculty of Industrial Management, University of GENT).

In the context of business games, guidelines will be explicated as to how the trainer should behave in order to improve the social skills of the trainees within the constraints of the trainability of behavioural characteristics. These guidelines are inspired on some rules of consulting and coaching.

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When learning is the goal, passivity is our enemy.

1. ORSIAM LTD

ORSIAM LTD is an excerpt of the ORSIAM business game, meant for the students taking the two-years' postgraduate programme industrial management, enriched with a consulting experience in-group dynamics.

In fact, ORSIAM LTD is an interactive, competitive, computer-based game which simulates growing responsibility starting from the defining of the company's policy, towards several decision processes: optimisation of a production planning, product marketing, investment in new production facilities, wage negotiations, decision making under time pressure and optimisation of a distribution chain.

Initiated by the committee of vocational training of the Flemish Federation of the Metal Manufacturing Industry, the project started with Prof. Em. Henri Muller and ORBID HR Services. The aim is to enlarge and to deepen the competencies of young professionals with 2 to 5 years of professional experience – academic engineers, economists, and psychologists – in managerial thinking and handling.

The game formula was offered as:

- An eye opener outside of the functional expertise and day-to-day discipline of the trainee
- A self-assessment of skills. By comparing the personal skills with those of others we offered in a sense a benchmark starting from self-awareness exercises through questionnaires.

The learning goals were defined as:

- To improve the skills of the participants in estimating the relevance and effectiveness of alternative approaches. To integrate a qualitative and quantitative approach in problem solving, decision making and the action preparation.
- To create financial awareness in decision making. An introduction in business finances.
- To formulate a strategy and to evaluate the consequences in relation to a previously defined strategy.
- To give the participants the opportunity to acquire experience and skills in general problemsolving techniques. The focus is on simultaneously considering a variety of criteria which all have their impact on the functioning of a company. An example of system thinking.

- Developing interpersonal skills and intrapersonal awareness. The following topic will be discussed in detail.

2. THE TRAINABILITY OF SKILLS

In order to handle this topic, the importance of training is illustrated in the consultancy business.

By analogy with the consultant the business game trainer spends an important part of his time improving skill building. While the formal training programmes serve well for knowledge transfer, the results are rather poor in the more important area of behaviour and skills.

The seven broad areas of competence in management consulting are:

2.1 Diagnostic ability

- A mentality of independence.
- Delving into causes behind symptoms and superficial explanations.
- Conceptual and analytical thinking, which is the art of being able to see a pattern running through diverse pieces of evidence.
- The ability for inductive reasoning.

2.2 Solution skills

- Imagination is an intangible but essential skill for all consultants.
- Courage is a special quality for consultants to possess in order to propose change programmes.
- Teaching ability.

2.3 Knowledge

- Consultants must be in the forefront of knowledge in their fields of experience.
- A lot of specialist areas in consulting require sophisticated expertise in topics such as modelling, questionnaire design and statistics.

2.4 Communication skills

- Sensitive listening skills.
- Exceptional writing skills.
- Oral presentation skills.
- A broad repertoire of intervention skills

2.5 Marketing and selling

An example.

In many consulting firms, there may be a need for training programmes in client contact skills. These should include training in classic client situations such as:

“How do you tell a client he is wrong?”

“What do you do if the client doesn’t like your ideas?”

“Accumulated wisdom within the firm” on these client contact situations should be built into training programs so the firm can disseminate its best expertise. We will not accept the alibi “well, this is my personality and style and I can’t change it”.

2.6 Managerial ability

- Financial insight.
- Strategic planning.
- People management.
- Accounting.
- Creating a climate.

2.7 Personality characteristics

- High ethical standards.
- Positive thinking.
- Self-motivation.
- Teamplayer.
- Energy.
- Self-awareness.

There are various individual properties, which have an important influence on the trainability of behaviour. Some of those properties are

relatively stable and unchangeable in time, e.g. intellectual capacities, personality, etc. Others have a situational or temporary character and may therefore be influenced, e.g. motivation, expectations, standards.

Table 1. Trainable and Non-trainable behavioural characteristics

Trainable behavioural characteristics		Non-trainable behavioural criteria	
Communication skills:	Sensitive listening skills,	Sociability	Being able to adapt oneself in various social situations depends to a large extent on the basic personality of the individual.
	Oral presentation skills	Motivational behaviour Motivation has to do with energy and direction.	Motivation to achieve
	Intervention skills		Enthusiasm
	Running meetings		Energy
	Reporting	Ability to learn	This ability is strongly correlated with what psychologists call the <u>general intelligence</u> .
Persuading	The vision or the capacity to assess long-term effects narrowly linked to analytic and synthetic thinking.		
Management skills	Project management	Initiative Judgement	
	Delegation		
	Administrative skills		
Leadership	Group oriented leadership		
	Coaching		
Problem solving behaviour	Problem analysis		
Social behaviour	Team spirit		
	Empathy		
Personal development	Self insight or awareness		

To speed up the acquisition of critical skills, firms turn to on-the-job-coaching and teaching by senior professionals. Project based learning or games can take up the primary step in this critical asset building. Through the dynamics of the game the eagerness of the trainee

is stimulated. This is an important advantage compared to traditional learning.

A great deal depends on the individuals themselves. Their willingness to learn remains the critical issue. We will illustrate the personal blockages in learning further on.

3. DEVELOPING ABILITIES

At the present time, a widely accepted model for the development of abilities is probably that advanced by KOLB. It is drawn as the so-called KOLB cycle.

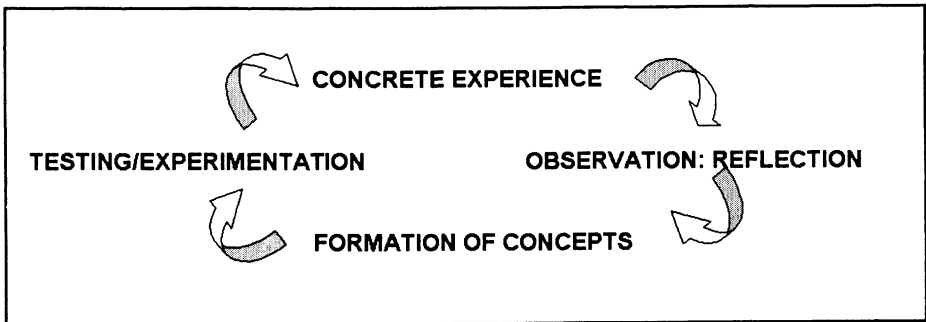


Figure 1. The KOLB cycle

Basic steps are:

3.1 Exercising

By exercising we mean learning by doing.

Example:

Role playing which gives trainees the opportunity to practise and rehearse.

Blocks in learning:

- Lack of discipline in exercising
- The need for immediate results
- Lack of concentration

3.2 Reflecting/Observing

The attitude in this step is one of openness, even naivety, with absolutely no subjective judgement or criticism, agreement or disagreement, or emotional reaction.

Example:

Watching an trainee expert behaving effectively in a problem situation

Potential blocks in learning:

- Lack of openness
- Observing with a preconceived mindset
- Observing with criticism and prejudice
- Passivity

3.3 Connecting

At this step, the learner needs to relate to the outside imprint (the lecture, the experience etc.) in order to give it meaning. The learner takes an enthusiastic interest in what has been observed or experienced. He finds the right questions that the learning process has generated in him.

Example:

Building your own theory of conflict handling

Potential blocks to learning:

- Indifference
- No imagination

3.4 Becoming creative

With the growth of new capacities the trainee becomes far more self-directed. The learning has at this stage been transformed into creative potential.

Blocks to learning:

- Avoiding risks
- Fear of making mistakes
- No active practice in new situations

4. GUIDELINES FOR THE TRAINER

These guidelines to improve social skills are inspired on some rules on the quality of consultative work and the principles of learning.

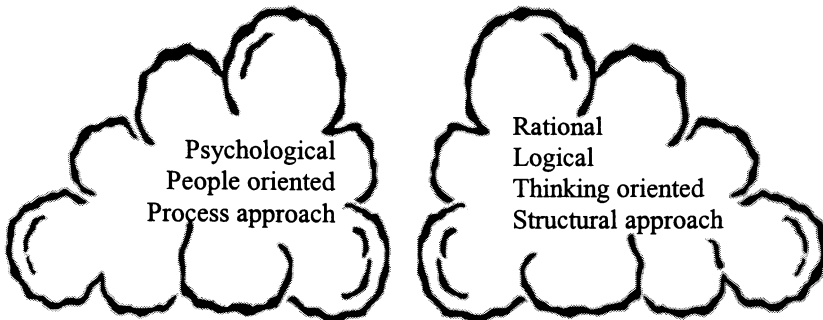
4.1 Knowledge of results/Feedback

- Information about one's attempts to improve is essential for learning to occur. Feedback is one of the essential prerequisites for learning.
- To be accepted by performers as accurate, feedback should include positive information first, followed by negative information.

Illustration:

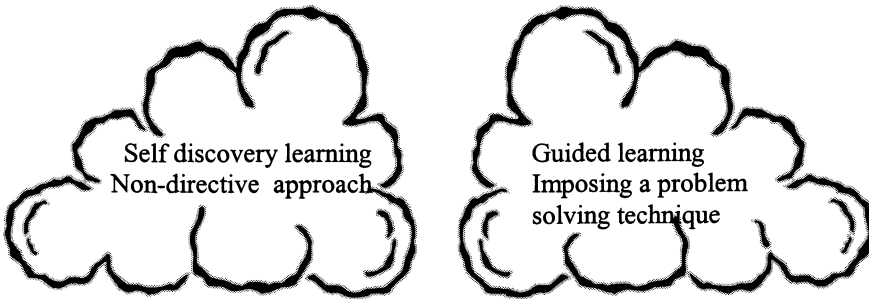
- In ORSIAM LTD the videotapes where the trainees performed a wage negotiation, were discussed. Constructive and destructive approaches were identified.

4.2 Working in the middle



Don't solely discuss the results but dig into the problem-solving process. Illustration

- During the game the game leaders discussed the methods that were used to come to a solution as well as also the group dynamics.



4.3 Make changes through interventions

All teaching is intervening, therefore the focus is on stimulation and enabling the participation of the learner in the learning process

In order to make effective interventions a sound knowledge of the professional environment of the trainee is essential.

4.4 Invisible effectiveness

The game leader works as a catalyst, a facilitator. He guides the student in his discovery step by step.

Don't try doing the thing yourself, so that only the result counts. See to it that the student is on the right track.

4.5 Co-development/Interaction

Grow with your student. Invent your own concepts.

The best theory is good practice.

Make the concepts a part of yourself.

Maintain an energetic, positive attitude about learning.

4.6 Self Assessment

Use questionnaires. Such questionnaire is not meant to be a refined or highly valid measurement device. Rather it is intended to give the individual insights into how much the student already knows about the skill in question. Self-awareness is a point of departure to improve interpersonal skills. To know your basic behavioural tendencies and inclinations for dealing with others create new learning goals.

Illustration:

- The sharing and reviewing of the results of the Career Anchors questionnaire, the Belbin roles etc.

5. POINTS TO RECONSIDER

- **Simulated responsibility is no responsibility**
The game concept maintains a low risk situation compared with project based learning which is directly connected to the work situation.
- **Separation of learning from the real world**
Game activities are mostly disconnected from work activities. The trainee doesn't always see a connection with his day to day duties. The issue of transfer of the training is still fragile.
- **Involvement of the organisation**
The trainees' immediate supervisor is likely to provide for the most powerful coaching. But if he does not reinforce what is learned in training, the results of the training will be ineffectively transferred to the job, if at all.
It is always an advantage to establish a clear link between training and career progress.
- **Educators need to be less trainers/instructors, and more facilitators of learning.**
- **An organisation culture based on clear answers and quick solutions will inhibit true learning.** Rather we need to create a "question culture", because learning arises from living with and struggling with questions.

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7. BIOGRAPHY

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Eddy De Clercq has a Masters Degree in Organisational Psychology and a Postgraduate in Managerial Economics. Both obtained at the University of Leuven, Belgium. He has been given several international management seminars.

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