

THE MANAGEMENT CONSULTING PROJECT:  
UNDERSTANDING MOTIVATION THROUGH EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This session focuses on an experiential learning assignment that I use to help undergraduate students understand how the motivation theories they study in an Organizational Behavior course can be applied in the “real world”. Specifically, students working alone or in teams (a) use creative investigatory methods to gather information about the motivational environment of an organization of their choice; (b) apply motivation theories from their textbook to analyze problems and causes; and (c) develop theoretically-grounded recommendations to management about how to improve members’ motivation in this organization.

Keywords: Motivation, Experiential Learning

PLANNING DETAILS

Proposed audience:	Instructors of undergraduate Organizational Behavior courses. May be especially useful to newer OBTC participants who are seeking ways to integrate experiential learning activities into their courses.
Maximum number of participants:	Unlimited.
Type of session:	Brief explanation of course assignment, followed by group discussion and brainstorming of creative extensions or modifications of the assignment.
Special requirements:	None.
Length:	30 or 60 minutes.
Proposal level:	Student.

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of work motivation is central to the study of Organizational Behavior (O.B.) and is covered extensively in all O.B. textbooks. The typical undergraduate textbook presents the subject of work motivation by describing a collection of theories, one by one, often ending each theory's section with a brief critical review of its validity and practical applicability. Sometimes a structure is overlaid on the theories to help students make sense of how some of them may fit together. Robbins and Judge (2010), for example, use the categorization of "Early" theories (i.e., suspect validity – Maslow, McGregor, Herzberg, McClelland) versus "Contemporary" theories (i.e., stronger validity evidence – goal-setting, self-efficacy, equity, expectancy).

This approach is efficient in conveying factual knowledge about the principles of various theories that O.B. scholars have developed to explain what motivates people. Many O.B. instructors, however, search for ways to take the next step with students – we want to help them see how this body of knowledge can be converted to practical use in the workplace. Toward this goal, I have used an experiential learning assignment called the Management Consulting Project, which I believe has been highly effective in helping students gain first-hand experience in applying theory to the task of improving an organization's motivational climate. This OBTC session's focus will be the presentation and discussion of this course assignment.

Takeaways from this session include the complete handout instructions for the Management Consulting Project, available on the proceedings CD, which instructors can modify easily for use in their own classes. Also, participants will benefit by hearing other instructors' experiences with similar assignments, including the unique challenges associated with integrating experiential learning in O.B. courses. I expect this session will be especially interesting and useful to newer OBTC participants who are beginning to explore the basics of experiential learning and are searching for some relatively simple yet effective activities to try out and gain confidence with in their course delivery.

## SESSION DESCRIPTION

The proposed session can be modified to fill either a 30- or 60-minute time block. In a 60-minute session, time would be allocated as follows:

15 minutes: Explanation of Management Consulting Project assignment, including handout instructions for students.

30 minutes: Group discussion of similar experiential learning assignments participants have used in their courses. Brainstorming of assignment extensions or modifications, for example, integrating team process analysis work into the assignment; requiring oral presentation in class of project findings; conducting a feasibility analysis of consultant's recommendations as part of the written report; requiring presentation to organization's managers and collecting their feedback.

15 minutes: Time permitting, group discussion of the benefits instructors have seen in using experiential learning activities like this one in their classes, as well as the pitfalls or challenges to look out for in trying these kinds of "beyond the book" assignments.

## APPLICATION TO CONFERENCE THEME

This session fits with the conference sub-theme, "The Roots of OBTC". Specifically, newer OBTC participants have reported that they are seeking advice about how to begin experimenting with experiential learning activities in their classes. The course assignment I will be presenting is (a) easy to implement, with simple, straightforward student instructions that participants can modify for their own use (see Appendix); and (b) has wide applicability, as it pertains to the subject of work motivation that is covered extensively in every undergraduate O.B. course. As well, the session will add value for newer OBTC participants through the group discussion in which experienced instructors will contribute their own creative ideas in the same vein as this project. Finally, experienced instructors can talk about some

of the practical challenges, along with the benefits, that can be anticipated when moving beyond a passive learning approach to incorporate experiential learning in class.

APPENDIX A  
HANDOUT INSTRUCTIONS FOR WRITTEN PROJECT REPORT

Organizational Behavior  
Management Consulting Project – Written Report

- The purpose of this assignment is to use motivation theories we are studying in class to analyze an organization's motivational environment. In essence, you will be taking on a management consultant role, identifying motivation challenges in a "real world" organization of your choice and making recommendations for improvement. You may work with a partner if you like.
1. Select an organization in which you will examine the topic of members' motivation. Typically, students use an organization they are or were a part of, or they study an organization where close personal acquaintances are members. If you feel neither of these are an option, you could use observational methods to study an organization you frequently visit. Note that it does not have to be a workplace – motivation is a relevant issue in any type of organization where people work toward achieving specific objectives.
  2. Gather information about the motivational environment in this organization, using whatever tools you desire. Be creative! Please use good judgment in your investigating – if your inquiries extend beyond close acquaintances, be sure to ask permission of the person in charge. You will need to gather data from the perspective of at least two motivation theories from Chapter 5. You could also use the Job Characteristics Model from Chapter 6 as one of your two theories. If you would like to use survey methods, I may be able to help you find some established tools. Come by my office during office hours, or whenever you see me in.
  3. Prepare a management consultant's report, 4 to 5 pages in length, in which you present your analysis and recommendations for improvement. Please remember that your analysis and recommendations must be based on established theories of motivation, rather than personal opinion. Make these connections explicit in your consultant's report. Use the following structure to prepare it.

*Organization of Consultant's Report:*

- *Overview:* Present a very brief summary of what the organization does, its size, what the work environment is like, kinds of jobs, etc. End this section with a brief explanation of the method(s) you used in your investigation.
  - *Problems and causes:* Identify the motivation problems you discovered. Present specific evidence you gathered to support your analysis. Use at least two motivation theories from the book to explain the causes of these problems.
  - *Recommendations:* Make specific recommendations, supported by the theories you chose to work with, for what could be done to resolve these problems. Develop your recommendations to the point that a manager reading your report knows specifically what s/he should do next. That is, go beyond general statements to present truly actionable plans.
  - *Feasibility:* End your report with a brief discussion of practical limitations or foreseeable obstacles that may be involved in implementing your recommendations.
4. Homework is due at or before the time I collect it during class. A late penalty of 25% per day will be applied to work turned in after collection time. Professional presentation of your

work is expected. Type it using Times New Roman 12-point font, one-inch margins, and double spacing. Acceptable writing quality, commensurate with a 300-level class, is necessary to earn credit on homework. If you are unsure about your writing skills, please take the initiative to seek help from the Writing Center.

5. Upload your report to turnitin.com when you're finished. Class ID: \_\_\_\_\_ Enrollment Password: \_\_\_\_\_. Bring a printed copy to class for turn in.
6. Prepare to briefly present and discuss your findings in class (see separate instructions).

## APPENDIX B HANDOUT INSTRUCTIONS FOR PROJECT PRESENTATION

### Organizational Behavior Management Consulting Project – Presentation Instructions

- Plan on about ten minutes. This is an informal presentation during which you will share with us the highlights of your work. In other words, don't plan on summarizing your entire consulting report. Rather, you will be extracting a few sections to discuss with us. Specifically, your presentation should consist of these three parts:
  - Organization and methods. Name the organization you studied and its primary product, service, or activity. Explain your methods for gathering information about its motivational environment.
  - Problem. Select the most significant motivational problem you identified and discuss how you used one or more motivation theories to analyze its cause or causes. Note that you are editing down your longer report to a single issue that you think is the most interesting and significant one.
  - Recommendations. Explain the specific plan you are recommending to management to address this motivational problem.
- You are not required to use visual aids. If you feel a few visuals will be helpful for clarity, I recommend you bring them in printed form and use the document projector at the podium. You can also use the dry erase board. I would prefer that you not use PowerPoint for this presentation.
- Your presentation will be evaluated based on completeness, depth of analysis including theory support, and presentation clarity.
- See the schedule on the next page for your presentation date. If you wish, you can negotiate a date switch with another student or pair. I will need an e-mail from both parties to confirm the date trade.
- While it is not required, I would be happy to discuss with you your presentation plan before your date. Come by my office during office hours, or whenever you see me in.