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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



Members of the Senior Managers' Course in ERW and Mine Action organized by JMU's Center for International Stabilization and Recovery take a field visit to Ft. AP Hill to view equipment and discuss demining issues. Photo courtesy of JMU/CISR.

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 transferrable

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, or other experiential learning exercises that would provide issues and challenges more relevant to course participants. Given the unique circumstances personnel in ERW/mine-action organizations faced, the course instructors attempted to create some teaching materials specifically customized for these professionals. In 2009, faculty members had an opportunity to create such materials when CISR was asked to provide instructional modules for the first Explosive Remnants of War International Senior Managers Training Course organized by Jordan's National Committee



Dr. Paula Daly discusses the case-study project at the ERWTC in the fall of 2009. Photo courtesy of JMU/College of Business.

for Demining and Rehabilitation. Management faculty members partnered with the CISR Associate Director Dr. Suzanne Fiederlein to write a fictional case study especially pertinent to managers in the ERW/mine-action field. Thus was born the “Freedonia” case, the first known case-study exercise specifically tailored to the unique circumstances managers in ERW/mine action face. The case is loosely based on a composite of several real organizations in a variety of countries, and captures the challenges and opportunities a mine-action center experiences in the fictional country of Freedonia.

The first part of the Freedonia case is a narrative describing the situation an incoming mine-action center director faces; the second part is comprised of background information relevant to the case analysis. As with all cases, complete information about every aspect of the situation is not available, and participants needed to augment the information provided with their own knowledge and experience. Participants from different countries and with different job titles were assigned to teams asked to do a thorough analysis of the situation presented in the case. Teams were provided with prior instruction on how to effectively analyze a case, had

to agree on a suggested course of action and were required to present their analysis to the other groups in the training session (as well as to instructors and facilitators). The case focus was identification and prioritization of the problems facing an incoming center director, and the strategic and operational management decisions needed. Participants were required to apply concepts learned in earlier training sessions, such as SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) and stakeholder analyses, and to incorporate this information into their presentations. All recommendations for courses of action had to be feasible given the case parameters and background information provided.

Use of the Freedonia case as a teaching tool generated a level of interest and passion unlike anything seen before in these training courses. Participants were excited to bring their knowledge, experience and opinions to the analysis of a situation that was so relevant to their professional lives. Understandably, participants had strong differences of opinion in identifying problems and deciding the best way to address them, but there was also a remarkable sharing of information and expertise necessary to effectively complete the exercise.



Participants in the SMC are a diverse group of people from many mine-affected countries. They often have never been to the United States and sometimes have been on opposite sides of a conflict prior to coming to the SMC. During the five-week training course, they work together and form lasting friendships that transcend borders. Photo courtesy of JMU/CISR.

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, “Midlandia,” 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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