Exploratory Intervention to Improve the Conceptual Skills of Students in a Niche MBA Program

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Abstract:
For the last couple of decades, academics and practitioners of management have been concerned about developing managerial skills. We conceptualized an intervention aimed at augmenting the conceptual skills of participants in a niche (Information Technology) domain institution's management program at post-graduation level. Here we discuss the intervention approach and conduct, and measurement of its effectiveness. After the completion of input delivery, the participants were examined to assess the extent of change in conceptual skill. The result has been encouraging and the authors plan to continue with the exploration in years to come.

Keywords: Conceptual skills, managerial skills, management education, strategic competencies.

1. Introduction

The authors have been experiencing an indefinable kind of discontent in the last two decades since they started teaching general management courses to MBA students. It focused on the issue of knowledge-skill-attitude axis of managerial competence as causal factor in creating business identity of the kind accounting concept calls an 'on-going entity'. Like most management practitioners and academics, we believe management-- especially at strategic level, -- plays key role in determining the future of an organization. Even if someone agreed that wisdom is hard to teach, should the same fate befall conceptual skills in management education domain?

This question drove a number of initiatives over the past twenty years at individual as well as institutional levels. It also helped in formulating the theme and design of this study.

Paglis (2013) reviewed the literature on managerial skills training in the classroom. He noted that courses specifically aimed at developing students' managerial skills began in 1980s. This happened in response to criticism of the theoretical and quantitative orientation of business school curriculum. Varela, Burke & Michel (2013) focused on learning goals and assessment procedures with respect to development of managerial skills in MBA programs. They say that B-schools have been attacked for their inefficiency in developing students' managerial skills in MBA programs. They call for greater attention to *intermediate* stages of managerial skill development for establishing learning goals, consideration of knowledge structure for assessing degree of skill development and a focus on skill development as a long-term process.

Such research as above was helpful in guiding the decisions connected with content, pedagogy and evaluation system we chose in our strategic management course as intervention for building the conceptual skills among our students. Following researches also were useful in various aspects of our research:

Mishra (2014) discusses about the relationship between general managerial skills of CEOs and cost of equity capital. It must be underlined here that cost of equity capital is a powerful indicator—either alone, or in conjunction with other financial statement numbers, in gauging sources of competitive advantage. Apart from this it is instrumental in measuring the strength of the link between business-level and corporate-level strategy.

Mihali and Kloutsiniotis (2014) studied the impact of MBA on managerial skills and career advancement in Greece. Zhu (2014) explored the mediating effects of managerial skills on the relationship between values, ethical leadership and organizational reputation.

Finally, we need to remember that evaluation is an important aspect of education and ensures its effectiveness. Mahajan el al (2016) write about analyzing the challenges for management education in India; Whitesell and Holms (2013) discuss assessing business students' research skills for the capstone project in strategic management course.

2. Literature Review

In 2012, Azevedo, Apfelthaler, & Hurst proposed a conceptual framework and industry driven approach for measuring competencies required of business graduates, suggesting that it was possible to investigate industry requirements using an identified cluster of eight generic competencies; competencies that were confirmed by the study to be valuable for students' current job profile as well as for their future career development.

Karlsson, & Moberg (2013) while evaluating the impact of an entrepreneurship program delved into its influence on students' entrepreneurial self-efficacy, attitudes to entrepreneurship and whether or not they started a company during their education. The result did indicate that the entrepreneurship program was effective in enhancing their entrepreneurial self-efficacy, attitudes to entrepreneurship and start up behavior.

Ortenblad, Koris, Farquharson and Hsu (2013), argued that business schools while influencing their business school graduates' future through teaching optimization, efficiency & effectiveness, maximization and profitability, should also be responsible for what type of business graduate they produce – the replacer, the effectiveness increaser, the world improver or the reflectionist. This would require more attention to promoting skills of analysis and critical thinking, mastery of theories, abstract conception and appreciation of moral principles, providing a wider education balancing human, environmental and economic perspectives, giving more credit to the world improver and the reflectionist.

Brady (2013) examined the teaching and learning processes at six key universities using CATWOE & SIPOC models of lean operations theory, concluding that in the process both the students as well as instructors play number of different roles; as customer, actor, supplier, raw material and end product at the same time. Such an awareness among the instructors and staff of the university of students playing multiplicity of role rather than viewing them just as customers could improve their ability to carry out the teaching and learning mission.

Somers, Passerini, Parhankangas and Casal (2014) delved into the prevalent concerns raised about business school pedagogy limiting students' intellectual development with respect to integrative thinking, synthetic reasoning, and ability to analyze complex problems using mind maps. The study confirmed such concerns being valid, indicating that students' knowledge bases were thin and that they partitioned their knowledge into distinct silos, while at the same time faculty themselves showed dense connections among concepts. Implications of the findings on business school pedagogy are discussed

In 2012 Jones and Kerr, in order to address the issues of lack of engagement, realism and handling complexity in teaching, learning and assessment, outlined a novel approach to developing, presenting and using multimedia case study. The proposed approach as opposed to traditional text based case studies which encourage surface learning approaches, sufficiently addresses the above concerns with greater focus on experiential learning, making it more engaging, realistic and challenging hence facilitating greater student interest, understanding and skills

Donnellon, Ollila and Middleton (2014) argued that despite of considerable growth in demand and availability entrepreneurship education programs, very few of them have actually provided any robust outcomes as actual new venture or entrepreneurial behavior. They identify the reason for same to be the gap in our theoretical understanding of what it takes to become entrepreneurial; suggesting that beyond acquiring knowledge and skills to act entrepreneurially, entrepreneurial learning also involves developing an entrepreneurial identity. Connecting entrepreneurial learning theory with literature on identity, they proposed a set of categories addressing the construction of entrepreneurial identity and suggested entrepreneurship identity construction to be considered as important a goal of entrepreneurship education as development of related knowledge and skill.

Jackson and Chapman (2012) surveyed business graduate competency profile to reflect the current need of Australia employers, identifying three distinct types of graduates: the "Manager", Peoples Person" and "Business Analyst". They discuss the required balance of cognitive and affective competencies important to Australian business graduates and related implications for business curricula and graduate recruitment strategies.

Vos (2015) surveyed or interviewed 43 educators using business-related simulations to investigate the hitherto unexplored aspect of assessment of students' learning from business-related simulations. The findings indicated majority of educators applied creative assessment practices following authentic assessment principles; including offering to student's formative assessment opportunities over the course of simulation, explaining the assessment criteria and ways students could improve their performance, requiring students to undertake reflection on their learning and outcomes, and ensuring that higher order thinking skills are engaged. Authors provide several ideas for simulation educators to develop their assessment and ways to improve student outcomes.

Varela, Burke and Michel (2013) explore the alleged inefficacy of business schools in developing students' managerial skills in their MBA programs. Authors have proposed a reconsideration of learning goals and assessment procedures for managerial skill development within MBA education. They argue that an emphasis on mastering complex managerial skills as an expected learning outcome might be an overly ambitious goal that could lead to neglecting early attainments in skill acquisition and create false impression of MBA program failure. They discuss considering newer evaluation procedures for evaluating skill development, putting greater attention to intermediate stages of managerial skill development for establishing learning goals, and focus on managerial skill development as a lifelong process.

3. Conceptual Framework

3.1. Background

William Gibson's play THE MIRACLE WORKER was about how Annie Sullivan brought Helen Keller to grasp the nature of language. Ours was a similar struggle, only our challenge was different: we had otherwise normal students in a niche MBA (IT Business Management) in an environment captured exactly by The Chronicle of Higher Education article on 'Curriculum' titled: *"If Skills are the New Canon, are Colleges Teaching Them?"*

It asserts: 'Most people agree that students should learn skills like critical thinking. But courses aren't set up that way'. It further explains that though content has been king in teaching, imparting skill has gained greater importance, yet '*how*' remains a slippery—'trickier' question to find an answer of.

The present study discusses one such intervention aimed at adding/aiding 'conceptual skill' as identified by Robert L. Katz (1974). Even though common wisdom says accounting is the language of business, business itself—its identity—is result of 'strategy' of the firm. So, similar to Sullivan living up to her particular challenge, strategy teachers too must be up to theirs.

An analysis of MBA program strategy courses offered by universities in different countries showed that instructors adopt an orientation on following continuum:
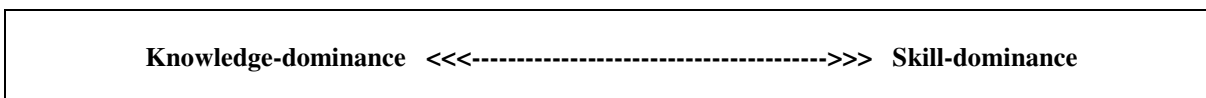
Knowledge-dominance <<<--------------------------------------->>> Skill-dominance

Figure 1: Continuum of Instructor Orientation

At the base of the conceptual framework is the issue of appropriate instructor orientation necessary to successfully build student's conceptual skills of given type mentioned above as per classification by Katz. We highlight with a concrete learning instance: teaching of SWOT analysis to show what difference *orientation change* can bring about in the participants' skill set.

There have been studies on narrower areas of managerial skills too. For example, Talukdar and Hawkins (2014) explore a specific country (Newzealand) case in regard to managerial skills and competencies in organizations and observed that it is cause for concern; Eamer (2014) explored developing managerial and people skills using online resources; Snell et al (2014) focused on just political skills dimensions for predicting managerial effectiveness; and Levasseur (2009) examined role of people skills in implementing strategic goals from the change management perspective.

To complete the picture, we need to bring in that Laud, Arevalo, and Johnson (2015) underscored the changing nature of managerial skills, mindsets and roles with a view to advancing theory and relevance for contemporary managers.
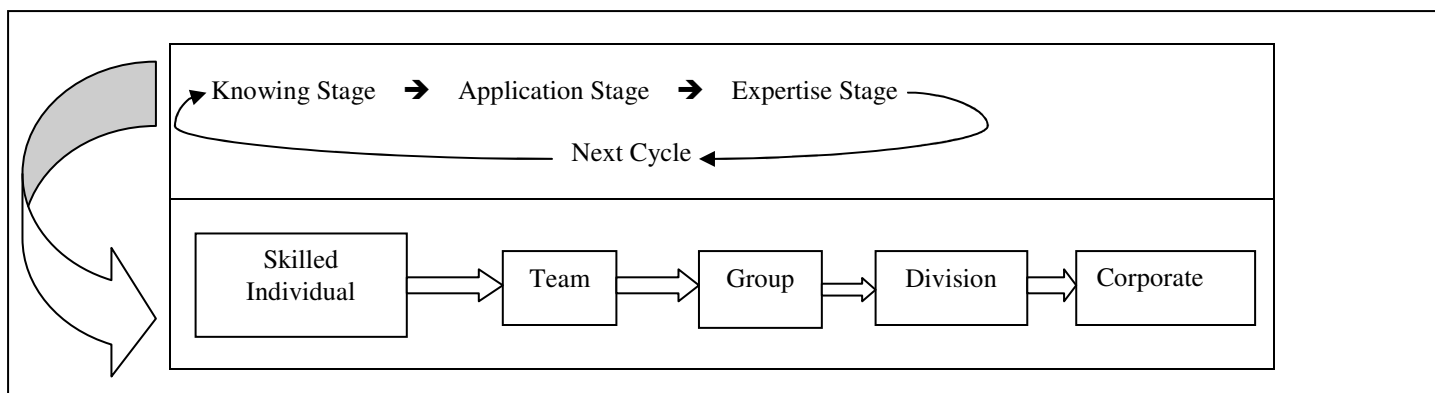

Figure 2: Skill to Core Competencies in Knowledge Organizations

3.2. The Intervention

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it became possible to attempt an intervention to see if a potent way exists that demonstrably raised the conceptual skill. The following serves as brief description of our experience/ result of the intervention.

3.3. Imparting Conceptual Skill

While Helen was suffering from natural limitations—blindness and deafness—management students mostly are physically normal. Whereas Annie got charge of Helen from the beginning of her education, we get students after 15 years of schooling. This created its own absolutes for dealing with the mental difficulties in forming and applying conceptual skills experienced by the students in class and were subject to monitoring/evaluation.

The big picture version of this intervention is depicted in Figure 2 above. The first component in the figure stresses essentials of conceptual skill building process. The second component shows how individual skill diffuses into team level competence, then business level differentiation and finally, into the source of corporate level strategic advantage if managers possessed conceptual skills and built the necessary culture.

Coming to specifics, EXHIBIT -1 mentions the modules comprising conceptual skill building content, pedagogy and evaluation plan. The course was given to students in two programs at the niche domain institute—2-Year Full-time MBA and 1-Year Post-Graduate Diploma in second semester during 30 hours of face-to-face contact in classes ranging from 40 to 55 students in four divisions for MBAs and 16 in single class for PGPs.

The differentiating feature of our course in order to be characterized as a tool of building conceptual skill (as separate from standard/comparable courses on Strategic Management) can be understood with SWOT example. In the latter, the content including, text, readings, and faculty input translate into knowledge product of strategy education. At most, if rigor of well-thought out individual/group project is introduced as essential element of the course, it grows to a much higher level but still remaining a knowledge product limiting students to produce four lists to fill a four-column-table with headings; 'strength', 'weakness', 'opportunity', and 'threat' distilled from situation of a real-life business.

Contrast this with what the students who met success criteria after going through this conceptual skill intervention initiative did. They saw the value of dramatically different understanding in their minds with potential to create solid strategies using what we called *row-by-row stories*. Their *orientation* shifted from four water-tight columns of SWOT insight to multiple rows in which each given row connected a *specific strength* that was valuable cover for a *specific weakness* which together could *leverage a specific opportunity* to *counter a given threat* present in the firm's external environment.

3.4. Final Evidence of Presence of Conceptual skill

There are many ways to evaluate management students. A whole science has been compiled around event called examination. Instructors design sophisticated 'Tests' with specified objective in mind. Guidelines are created and shared with instructors by those in charge of academic administration in general and examination units in particular. Literature cited earlier in this paper brings out these aspects.

As described in Exhibit 1 we utilized multiples tools for assessing competence of the participants. This was as much to adhere to guidelines issued by university/ institute academic administrators, as our aim to *definitively spot students* who showed various *degrees of specific conceptual skill* we expected this intervention to have imparted.

An important question in this context, apart from deciding on the nature of given 'Test', was about timing it appropriately. Keeping all these considerations in mind, we decided to use a carefully chosen case (see Exhibit 2) in end semester examination. We reasoned that attempt to answer the case question shall yield *evidence of conceptual skill*.

We then decided to look for a *cognitive-metric* that can serve as *reliable* qualitative measure of conceptual skill. This second and final evidence of 'conceptual competence' (of the type he'll need in performing strategic management tasks) can be called '*competent reconciliation of the most SIGNIFICANT contradiction in the case*'.

4. Summary

Since 1980s management education and training/development has been emphasizing skill building in future managers. A seminal work (Katz, 1974) was the catalyst. Three sets of skills, namely, technical, human and conceptual were essential in ensuring managerial success. Of these three, building conceptual skills has posed challenges for educators and trainers/coaches. The intervention devised by the authors showed that 35 out of over 200 participants showed unmistakable evidences of possessing a *particular kind of conceptual skill* for which they were educated and tested. Remaining participants were only partly successful in *cognitive metric* challenge. Out of these 66 participants did not meet *qualitative requirement* all the way to last step, though they were successful in clearing the first hurdle namely, '*problem definition*'. Except two students who displayed complete lack of desired competencies, all others showed acquisition of specified conceptual skill to some extent but to a lesser degree than the first two categories of participants.

In view of the evidence obtained we are encouraged to try the intervention in coming years also and improve its efficacy by making improvements driven by the experience we have gained.

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Annexure

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EXHIBIT-1

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Strategic Management

A. Day-wise Session Plan

Day-wise Theme	Particulars of Required Reading and Other Activities
1: Strategy Fundamentals	• **Textbook Chapter 1;** • **#Case: FB vs. Twitter—*What has company's vision got to do?*** • James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porros, **Building Your Company's Vision**
2: External Environment Analysis 1	• **Textbook Chapter 4;** • **Activity 1—Sources for Environmental Forecasting [Appendix A; Ch 4]** • Mark W. Johnson, Clayton M. Christensen, and Henning Kaggermann, **REINVENTING YOUR BUSINESS MODEL**
3: External Environment Analysis 2	• **Textbook Chapter 4;** • **#Case: Microsoft Defends Its Empire**
4: Internal Environment Analysis	• **Textbook Chapter 6;** • **Activity 2—Key Resources Across Functions [Appendix A; Ch 6]** • Michael C. Mankins and Richard Steele, **TURNING GREAT STRATEGY INTO GREAT PERFORMANCE**
5: : Internal Environment Analysis	• **Textbook Chapter 6;** • **#Case: The Pet Economy** • Michael C. Mankins and Richard Steele, **TURNING GREAT STRATEGY INTO GREAT PERFORMANCE**
6: Business Strategy	• **Textbook Chapter 8;** • **#Case: American Public Education, Inc.**
7: Implementation	• **Textbook Chapter 10;** • **Activity 3—Functional Tactics [Appendix A; Ch 10]** • Paul Rogers and Marcia Blenke, , **WHO HAS THE D?**
8 & 9: Organizational Structure	• **Textbook Chapter 11;** • **#Case: Mozilla's Crowd-sourcing Mystique** • Gary L. Nielson, Karla L. Martin, and Elizabeth Powers, **THE SECRETS OF SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY EXECUTION**
10: Leadership & Culture	• **Textbook Chapter 12;** • **#Case: The Battle to Be Top Dog**
11 & 12: Assignment & Presentations	• **Course Review and Group Presentations [Division-wise]**

C. Pedagogy
Interactive sessions; Case/Article Studies; Presentations; Assignments.

D. Required Class Preparation
1. Readings and Activity-of-the-Day –if any--completion: from Text-Book ##

        (As indicated in Day-wise Session Plan**)**

EXHIBIT-2
PART-III CASE ANALYSIS

Read, understand, analyze and then answer the question given at the end of the case.
Personal or Professional Character
The Governing Board of International Finance Agency (IFA) convened its special meeting in Mumbai to discuss the promotion of Mr. Subhash Gupta as Chairman of Hindustan Zinc Limited (HZL). IFA is one of the major shareholders of HZL, holding 31% of its equity. IFA has also recently funded the new business initiatives of HZL through long-term bonds. These initiatives and present healthy growth of HZL were the result of Mr. Suphash Gupta's dynamic leadership. Mr. Gupta, a chemical engineer, has been with HZL for last fifteen years. He became company's managing director three years back. The Tapdiyas, promoters of HZL have been very happy with Mr. Gupta's overall performance. Mr. Gupta made the company a major player in the international market. It was under his visionary leadership that HZL went into three major international collaborations in last two years. Company's share price grew from Rs.27 to Rs.51 in last three years and turnover increased by 30% per annum.

Mr. Gupta, after becoming company's managing director, rectified its human resource policy and entire wage structure. He also corrected the distribution network. Both, employees & distributors are very happy with these alterations. He improved company's relations with senior bureaucrats in the government. There is a possibility that Mr. Gupta may be adjudged as 'Executive of the Year' by one of the top national business confederation.

Mr. Gautam Tapdiya, the promoter of HZL wants to step down as Chairman and vacate the chair for Mr. Gupta. Mr. Tapdiya views this move as an attempt to differentiate between ownership and management. He wants the company to be managed by the professional managers. Pragmatically, he feels that, the top managers now be given share in company's equity so that 'entrepreneurship among executives' could be promoted. This 'sharing of ownership' should happen after Mr. Gupta becomes company's chairman. Hence, Mr. Tapdiya has called a special meeting of shareholders and other financiers to consider his decision and to promote Mr. Gupta as Chairman.

IFA and other institutional shareholders and lenders are very happy with Mr. Tapdiya's decision, as they have good confidence in Mr. Gupta. But, soon after Mr. Tapdiya's announcement of his intention, a small group of executives and some minority shareholders together wrote to IFA and other institutional shareholders about Mr. Gupta's personal character. They expressed strong objection to his candidature for the Chairmanship stating that he took divorce from his wife. They further stated that he had an affair with his earlier colleague from the same company. Later on, his colleague left the company. As this affair continues till date and his wife has abandoned him, he may not be an ideal candidate for company's chairmanship.

Mr. Gupta's affair and divorce are true facts. His grown up children are working abroad. It was very unfortunate that he and his wife separated at this stage of life. His wife is a professional accountant and is employed with a multinational company. She too has built up a good corporate career, despite her marital problems.

Mr. Gupta's image among the female employees of the company is very good. Except his ongoing affair with his ex-colleague, there has not been any adverse news about his personal character. Company's union, executives and present chairman have written a letter to IFA and other institutional shareholders saying that they did not bother about Mr. Gupta's personal affairs. Mr. Gupta's personal life has not affected company's performance. His wife was aware about his affair for many years but she took divorce recently. A few frustrated executives might have instigated the minority shareholders to write against Mr. Gupta, as they did not want him to become company's chairman.

Mr. Brown, the country manager of IFA, India, personally feels. That IFA need not bother about Mr. Gupta's personal affairs. As long he continues to be a great corporate citizen, he should be acceptable as a chairman. Mr. Pandit, the deputy of Mr. Brown also echoes same sentiments, with one reservation that in Indian social environment, 'personal character' is equally important. He suggests that IFA should ask for a formal 'no objection' from Mrs. Gupta for Mr. Gupta becoming chairman. Such 'no objection certificate' from Mrs. Gupta will automatically shut up the mouths of those frustrated executives and minority shareholders.

- Case Q: Will it be strategically proper to promote Mr. Gupta—would you recommend this?