Innovative Use of Assessments and Simulations Helps MBA Candidates Become Effective Team Members and Group Leaders

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Paula Caproni, Ph.D., Director of Executive Skills at the University of Michigan's Ross Business School, helps guide MBA candidates through the transition from individual contributor to team leader with a high-intensity class entitled "Creating and Developing High-Performance Teams." Offered only two or three times per year to groups of about 40 students, the class gives Dr. Caproni an exceptionally keen insight into the learning process experienced by the candidates.

As the syllabus explains:

> In today's complex and fast-paced corporate environment, teams are a basic organizational building block. Indeed, in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article…team skills were listed as one of the top skills that recruiters look for in graduating MBAs. Yet despite this growing dependence on teams, as well as the growing body of knowledge about teams, many people don't take the time to learn best practices for leading teams, nor do they apply what they learn about teams to improve their team's performance. As a consequence, they limit their team's potential for success…as well as their own potential for success…The purpose of this course is to give you knowledge and practical tools that will help you become a more productive team member and leader.

"The course is based on self-awareness," Dr. Caproni continued, "and we use a sequence of assessments and simulations to help the students more clearly see themselves as individuals, team members, and team leaders before moving on to look at group dynamics and best practices for creating high-performing teams. It's important to have a consistent model as a foundation for these elements so the students can make meaningful comparisons of the results at each step of the process.

"We use the *Life Styles Inventory*™ (LSI) 1 and 2, and the *Group Styles Inventory*™ (GSI) assessments, plus the *Cascades Survival Situation*™ simulation from Human Synergistics International (HSI) in the class. The assessments are based on task versus people and security versus satisfaction orientations, which are common to both the HSI tools and my own best practices writings and examples."

"There are a lot of models out there, and, frankly, some of them are good. But HSI's model is particularly interesting in that it can be used to assess at the individual, group, and even organizational level, and it provides a structured system to look at what is working, what is not, and how to fix it," she said.

"The goal is to help students, who are often effective individual contributors, become team leaders who can bring out the best in others. Even for professionals, sometimes the behaviors that got them into grad school tend to depend on a set of skills that may not be the best behaviors to help them succeed later on."

Paula Caproni, Ph.D.
Director of Executive Skills
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The process begins with self-analysis using the LSI 1 assessment to determine the student's thinking and behavioral styles. The LSI 1 measures the thinking patterns that drive an individual's behavior. It is designed to help the student answer the fundamental questions, "Who am I, and what causes me to act the way I do?"

Unlike many other self-assessment tools, the LSI 1 is a quantitative assessment that measures both enhancing and self-defeating behaviors, so the individual can be aware of his or her strengths and precisely target the areas to change to become more effective. Based on a combination of respected psychological and management research, the inventory is available in a variety of formats, including online and web-based versions, as well as the self-administered and self-scored paper-and-pencil version Dr. Caproni prefers for the "Creating and Developing High-Performance Teams" class.

"One of the important things for students to learn at this level is that not all behaviors are OK," noted Dr. Caproni. "I use the LSI in class because the kind of feedback students get shows them that some behaviors are more likely to be effective and some are less likely to be. To me, there is a big contrast between assessments that just say everything is OK and the LSI, which shows students what is good and what could be better."

The primary feedback mechanism for the LSI and all of the other Human Synergistics assessments is called the "Circumplex." Developed by Dr. J. Clayton Lafferty more than 30 years ago, the Circumplex provides a way to "see" what drives the performance of individual contributors, leaders, work teams, and entire organizations.

Dr. Robert A. Cooke has conducted many reliability and validity studies of the Circumplex-based assessments to strengthen the underlying model. Over the years, the Circumplex has been updated and improved, and the reliability and validity of these assessments is continually assessed.

The Circumplex displays 12 "styles" of thinking, behaving, and interacting. These styles are grouped into three primary clusters each composed of four styles, which are:

Constructive Styles (Achievement, Self-Actualizing, Humanistic-Encouraging, Affiliative);

Passive/Defensive Styles (Approval, Conventional, Dependent, Avoidance); and

Aggressive/Defensive Styles (Oppositional, Power, Competitive, Perfectionistic).

Some of these styles are effective and productive; some are not. Whether effective or not, they all describe what's happening at the individual, group, and organizational level, and provide a direction for change and development.

Plotting the individual's scores in each style on the Circumplex provides an easily interpreted visual representation of the thinking and behavior styles identified by the inventories and assessments. The unique advantage of the Circumplex is that it provides a consistent feedback format at the individual, leader, group, and organizational levels.

After completing the LSI 1, Dr. Caproni's students move on to the LSI 2, which is an external assessment completed by five trusted associates selected by the student. The LSI 2 provides individuals with feedback from others on their behavior, which can help them address "blind spots" that can hinder performance. Participants can compare LSI 2 feedback to their LSI 1 results to help them identify gaps between how they see themselves and the perceptions of others.

"Having results from both LSI 1 and LSI 2 is very eye-opening and useful," Dr. Caproni said, "because it compares the way students see themselves with the way they are seen by the five people they have chosen."

"Typically, for about half the class, the LSI 2 is very different from what they thought about themselves and it's slightly different for another quarter of the class. These differences can be sobering for students who tended to overestimate themselves, and inspiring for those who tended to underestimate themselves."

"For the remaining quarter, the two inventories are pretty much in line overall," she continued. "The feedback to the last group indicates that they are in a good place in terms of self-awareness because research demonstrates the most effective people perceive themselves as others perceive them, and maybe even slightly more humbly, because when people are humble about their abilities, they may be more open to learning."

Hand-scoring the LSI 1 gives students an opportunity to examine their styles, and they can refer back to the questions to help them understand exactly how the various styles revealed on the Circumplex are measured.

Completing the LSI 2 online builds on the base of understanding created by hand-scoring the LSI 1, and provides rapid feedback the student can immediately apply to subsequent class activities.

"First we complete the LSI 1 and 2, and as I'm describing the model in class, they're looking at their results, and that really engages them," Dr. Caproni explained. "As soon as we are done with that, we do the HSI *Cascades Survival Situation*™, which shifts the focus from the individual to the group level."

HSI simulations provide an opportunity to examine how group members work as a team to solve a common problem. Interaction styles can be isolated and evaluated based on the group's performance during a simulation by using the *Group Styles Inventory*™ in conjunction with a simulation.

In survival simulations, the group is presented with a hypothetical survival challenge in a remote area. The *Cascades Survival Situation,* for example, is built around an airplane crash in a remote area of the Cascades mountain range in the Pacific Northwest.

By placing the team in an unfamiliar situation, participants are equals, regardless of their knowledge, background, or organizational position. Participants work individually and as group members to assess the value of a series of items in terms of their survival value in the scenario. Individual and team solutions are compared to answers provided by an actual survival expert, and students can compare how well they fared as individuals to their work as a team. The expert's answers give the exercise high credibility and minimize disagreements about the "right" solution, freeing the participants to focus on the group's interaction styles.

"Before I share the expert's solution with the students," Dr. Caproni said, "I have them do the *Group Styles Inventory* so they do not bias their scores. Then, we hang the group scores up in the room and talk about each group's profile, and explore their recommendations for managing each of the groups based on the profile."

Managing the transition from individual contributor to productive team member and effective team leader is an important component of the Ross Business School's MBA program. Dr. Caproni's innovative use of assessments and simulations that help students develop the skills to do so is one of the reasons the "Creating and Developing High-Performance Teams" course is so eagerly sought by MBA candidates.

"As a package, LSI 1, LSI 2, GSI, and the *Cascades Survival Situation* simulation work together cohesively to support the teaching perspective," she observed. "This is a very useful model that makes the point that not all behaviors are good, which is something all people should learn at some point in their lives. I would highly recommend this process for graduate students in business, medical, social work, and other professional schools pretty much across the board."

"Moreover," she added, "you feel confident using it because it's supported by extensive academic research. And just as important, it's very easy to use."

About the Circumplex

Human Synergistics International's Circumplex provides a way to "see" what drives the performance of individual contributors, leaders, work teams and, in short, the entire organization. It illustrates the factors underlying performance in terms of 12 styles of thinking and behaving. Some styles lead to effectiveness and productivity; some do not. Regardless of their impact, they all describe what's happening inside the organization and provide a direction for change and development.

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show STRONGER tendencies along the Constructive styles.

12

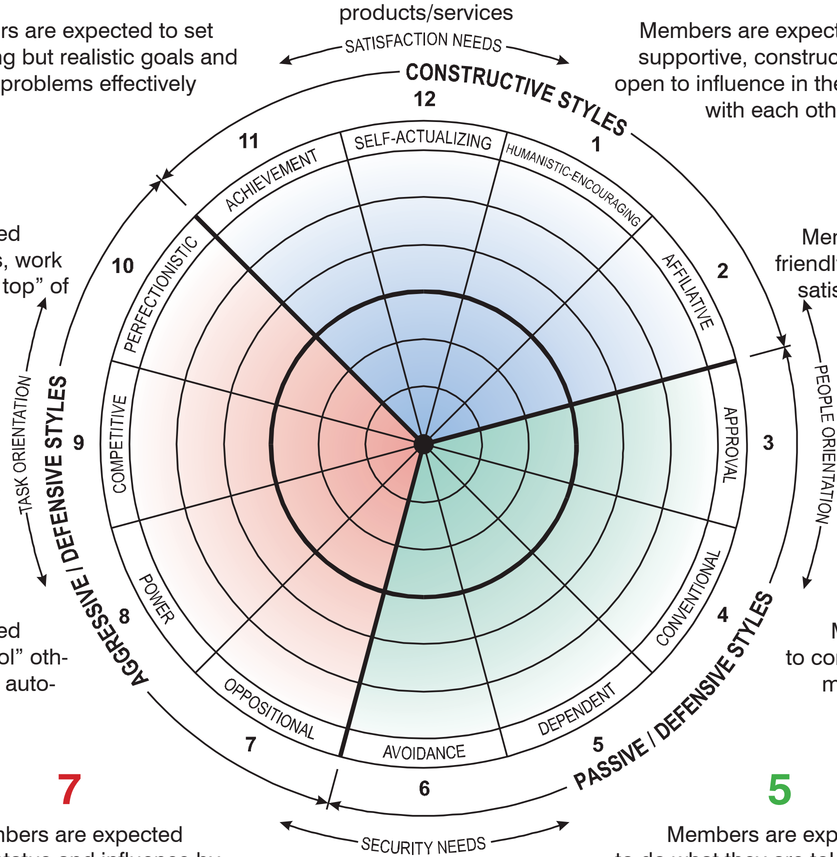
Members are expected to gain enjoyment from their work and produce high-quality products/services

11

Members are expected to set challenging but realistic goals and solve problems effectively

1

Members are expected to be supportive, constructive, and open to influence in their dealings with each other



10

Members are expected to avoid making mistakes, work long hours, and keep "on top" of everything

2

Members are expected to be friendly, open, and sensitive to the satisfaction of the work group

9

Members are expected to operate in a "win-lose" framework and work against their peers to be noticed

3

Members are expected to agree with, gain the approval of, and be liked by others

8

Members are expected to take charge and "control" others, and make decisions autocratically

4

Members are expected to conform, follow the rules, and make a good impression

7

Members are expected to gain status and influence by being critical and constantly challenging one another

5

Members are expected to do what they are told and clear all decisions with superiors

6

Members are expected to shift responsibilities to others and avoid being blamed for mistakes

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show WEAKER tendencies along the Aggressive/Defensive styles.

Effective individuals in groups and organizations show WEAKER tendencies along the Passive/Defensive styles.