

# **Mousetrap Minefield: An Experiential Learning Activity to Demonstrate Management Perspective**

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*A fundamental prerequisite for becoming an effective manager is being able to understand how one's decisions will affect others, be interpreted by others, and meet the objectives of the organization. This paper presents an experiential activity using mousetraps and role specific decision making to help students become aware of the different perspectives different levels of management view problems and use strategy and management styles to solve problems. In addition, students develop insights regarding their own decision making processes and that of others from completing a brief strategy and team effort activity.*

## **INTRODUCTIONS**

It is usually early in a student's career when they first realize that managerial hierarchy creates differing perspectives of operations. For the young undergraduate student pumped full of ideas and theories of management it can be difficult to switch perspectives and see the objectives of senior managements decisions, especially when those decisions impact the student's work or career. The conversation with co-workers is often, "When I'm in charge, I won't make a decision that hurts the workers!" Yet, often those words are uttered only to have a promotion occur and the person who once said they'd make better decisions find themselves making decisions from a different perspective.

The purpose of the Mousetrap Minefield experiential learning activity is to have students experience the managerial perspective differences between an upper-level manager and a lower-level manager. Moates, Harris, Field, and Armenakis (2007) researched the leader-member exchange of 91 supervisor/subordinate dyads from a healthcare organization and determined that role of perspective taking serves an important role in the relationship between supervisors and subordinates. Most commonly known as "putting yourself in the other person's shoes". Their findings suggest that a supervisor that takes into consideration the perspective of their subordinates has a positive impact on that subordinate's assessment of the relationship quality. Although not specifically mentioned, it can be assumed that the subordinate can improve their opinion and or acceptance of work assignments via considering their role and the outcomes their role serves when viewed through the perspective of their subordinate.

Recognizing that many management students will be employed in subordinate roles immediately after college and thus not have the opportunity to gain perspectives in upper-level management roles. The objective of this simple in-class activity is to show how perspectives at the different managerial hierarchies can differ and why subordinates should limit their criticisms of supervisors. As described below in Table 1, the Mousetrap Minefield experiential exercise uses a three-step approach. In step one, students learn about the different management styles and strategies that each level of management utilizes

and the reasons for the separation of styles and strategies. Students are quizzed on the material they have been taught to measure their understanding and acceptance of the theories presented in the classroom. The extra step of explaining and showing the benefit of the theories is performed in step two, the experiential exercise step. Whereas the traditional learning methods employed in step one are successful when measured by quiz/test grades, the step two process proves to the students that what they have just been taught, studied, committed to memory, and proven by answering correctly on a test is how real world operations occur. In step three, the students have a chance to reflect on the exercise and how the knowledge they gained in step one can be applied to ‘real world’ management decisions.

## **MOUSETRAP MINEFIELD EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITY**

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this three-step activity is to help students become aware of the different perspectives the different levels of management have and the outcome of each perspective along the way. The activity is a team event and as such each member is not subjected to the same process and objectives. The activity is designed to provide a framework and individual learning occurs in step 3, as seen in Table 1.

**TABLE 1  
MOUSETRAP MINEFIELD STEPS AND LEVELS**

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Individual reflection and choice: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive-focused strategies (contemplation / decision making)</li> <li>• Behavior-focused strategies (observation / competitiveness)</li> <li>• Rewards (increases behavior-focused strategies leading to increase in contemplation / decision making)</li> </ul>	Team activity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership-focused strategies (engaged / directing / supportive / motivating)</li> <li>• Teamwork skills</li> <li>• Dealing with time constraints</li> <li>• Addressing problems</li> <li>• Follow through</li> </ul>	Review and assessment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visualizing leadership styles</li> <li>• Assessing one’s and other’s leadership styles</li> </ul>

### **Participants and Time Requirements**

This activity is not just for business students as it has been used with students that are enrolled in Arts & Science, Engineering, and Pharmacy, although most are pursuing either a business major or a minor in business management. Teams of no more than 4-5 students are required and the activity will take each team approximately 5-minutes to complete. Assuming there are 5 teams and the class session is 50-minutes, the instructor should plan for 15-20 minutes to brief the class on the activity and the balance of the time for the students to complete the activity. The class session following the activity is used to debrief, discuss, and share experiences from the activity and how life will be as a manager post-graduation.

### **Student Preparation**

During classes leading up to the activity, a lecture and classroom discussion on managerial hierarchy and the differing roles, perspectives, strategies, and methods that each level of management employs is

given to the students. Prior to the class in which the activity is administered, the instructor lets students know that an in class activity requiring closed toe shoes will take place. Students are not made aware of the details of the activity and previous students are sworn to secrecy to help ensure that what is about to happen is a mystery.

### **Required Materials**

The following materials are used in carrying out this activity:

- 200 standard wooden mousetraps. These can be purchased at a local big box home improvement store and some stores offer an educator's discount and or bulk pricing.
- Blindfolds, enough to cover every student in the class, although not every student will get a blindfold.
- A stopwatch to keep track of and record the student team's progress through the maze.
- A clipboard and paper to record the team's designated upper level manager's estimate of how long their team will take to navigate the maze and to record the team's time through as well as any noted irregularities observed during the activity.
- A video camera and tripod or volunteer to hold the video camera. A cell phone may also work but video needs to be recorded at a resolution sufficient for viewing on a screen in the classroom. The video is necessary to achieve step three as outlined in table 1.
- A preparation area and several pieces of large cardboard, such as tri-fold posters.
- An area with sufficient room for the teams to navigate the maze. Ideally this would be an open area where observers can watch from a safe distance. If space of that size is not available, then the classroom can be utilized with only the team that is to performing the activity and the instructor in the room. As that team leaves, another can enter.
- If the area being used for the activity is a common area and prone to student traffic, then caution tape or other means of blocking the area off should be utilized.

### **Instructor Preparation**

Prior to the class in which the activity is being undertaken, the instructor should find at least three to four volunteers to help set the mousetraps. Time efficiency can be had by setting the mousetraps and placing them evenly on sheets of cardboard and then utilizing two or more individuals to carry the cardboard to the staging area when ready. The objective is to keep the mousetraps hidden from the students until the activity starts. When it is time for the class start, the instructor will provide an overview of the assignment to the class. At the same time, the volunteers will move the mousetraps off of the cardboard and arrange them in a maze with enough room for the average person to comfortably walk through but with sufficient bends and turns so that it is not simply a straight path through.

### **Instructions for Carrying Out the Activity**

#### *Introducing the Activity*

The activity is introduced to the class in terms of the objective that is trying to be taught; differing perspectives at the various levels of the managerial hierarchy. At no time are the students told that they will be navigating a maze of mousetraps. Anticipation of what is waiting for the students is heightened by having the instructor perform a quick shoe appropriateness inspection. Students found to have shoes that are not closed toe are not excluded from the activity, but a sigh from the instructor and light hearted joke about hoping their toes will be okay builds anticipation.

#### *Assigning Division of Labor*

If teams have not been assigned already, they should be assigned at this time. The instructor then randomly picks a member of the team to be the CEO, or the team could elect a CEO, or other method of selection to show randomness. The CEO then picks a manager in the same manner. The remaining students are considered employees.

### *Providing Instructions for Each Division of Labor*

After the teams have been formed, the instructor will escort only the CEO of each team to the area where the mousetraps are set up. The students selected to be the CEO of their team are told that their teams will receive points for the time they take to complete the maze, but that they will lose points if the team does not make it through in the time the CEO says they will. The team with the highest score will be considered the winner. The suggested point structures are:

- 200 if the team makes it through in under 30-seconds.
  - It is unlikely that a team will make it in under 40-seconds without significantly deviating from the path and or bulldozing through the maze without carrying about setting off the traps. The rules are such that it allows for the instructor to “take the team to court” and impose a penalty for safety violations. Just like in the real world, some laws have to be created at the moment of infraction. This creates an additional learning outcome regarding how businesses should strive to meet social and environmental needs and not cut corners to achieve profit.
- 150 points if the team makes it within 90-seconds.
- 100 points if the team makes it within 1-minute.
- Failure to make it in the time bid on will result in a loss of 50 points.
- Teams that finish before their bid on time will receive the points for that time period plus the number of seconds before their bid on time as points. For example, choosing one-minute and completing the maze in 50-seconds will result in 160 points.
- If at any time during the execution of the activity a student wishes to stop and not participate, their team will lose 5-points per team member that leaves.
  - The individual timing the activity will need to pause the stopwatch to allow the student(s) to be safely extracted from the maze and then will resume timing when the team is ready to proceed.

After a time bid has been placed by the CEO of each team, the instructor will bring the managers to the staging area. Prior to arriving at the staging area and before the managers see the mousetraps, they are informed that they will be required to lead their employees through the maze. The employees will walk forward while the manager walks backward holding the first employee’s hand to help guide them and the other employees will hold on to the sides or back of the employee in front of them in Conga line fashion. This is designed to mimic the conditions that line or staff managers often find themselves in; no strategic or forward thinking and more focus on day-to-day or immediate activities. After this rule has been explained, lead the managers to their perspective CEO and ask the CEO of each team to explain to their manager the time increment they have bid on. If the CEO wants to clarify the point structure, let them, the goal is for the instructor not to interfere with the dialogue between CEO and manager.

Lastly, the instructor needs to bring the employees for each team out; but only when their team is ready to proceed through the maze. The objective is to keep the employees from hearing or seeing what is happening to those that proceed them. Before getting to the staging area, the instructor will have each employee put on a blindfold and tell them that they will be navigating a maze of mousetraps relying on their manager to physically guide them. The employees do not need to know the time requirements, although it is okay if a manager or CEO tells them. Lastly, the instructor will let them know that at any time during the execution of the activity that they can quit and will be safely removed from the maze. This is the student’s choice, however if a CEO and or manager intervenes and is able to convince the student to continue then no points should be deducted. Remember to observe the dialogue and only intervene if the dialogue is unprofessional or intimidating.

### *Carrying Out the Exercise*

To begin the activity, the instructor will ask the managers to line up their employees and get in to position at the start of the maze. The CEO of each team is allowed to be in any part of the course and interact with the team however they wish. Although, be on the lookout for unscrupulous behavior like

attempting to push the mousetraps out of the way, directing their team to bypass the maze, or encouraging their team to bulldoze through the maze without worrying about setting off the traps. The latter example earned a team an “OSHA violation” and points were deducted to emphasize the severity of endangering the employees. It is common for a few mousetraps to get set off and the snapping sound adds a bit of excitement to the activity. Although, to date, no students have complained of pain or damage from the mousetraps going off on or around their feet. Upon completion of the maze, the team that just got through needs to work together to reset any traps that they set off while the instructor goes to bring the next team out.

### **Behaviors Typically Observed During the Activity**

During the time bidding stage there exist competition between the CEOs and most often a confidence that their team will be able to navigate the maze. Most CEOs bid the same time frame; 1-minute for the size of maze that is shown in Figure 1. It can be expected that as the CEO explains their time bid to their manager, that the CEO will do so in a reassuring attitude and a few discuss strategies to get through the maze. During the execution of the activity; the CEOs have depicted the following traits:

- Hands-on – This CEO will get in to the maze and put hands on the employees and manager to help guide them through. Often times, the CEO will circle the team looking for moves that will keep them from setting off the traps.
- Coach – This CEO will get in to the maze and shout orders, sometimes encouraging and sometimes directions. The CEO is not as involved physically, but does tend to circle the team looking for moves to keep them from setting off the traps.
- Reliant on others – This CEO will observe the action and provide very little input, unless the team gets in to a situation that has the manager looking for solutions. Most often a CEO will start off in this manner but progress to either a coach or hands-on once they realize their manager is having difficulty navigating the maze while leading their employees or if the CEO senses that the team has lost time and is in danger of not making their time bid.
- Passive – This CEO does not get involved at all and only gets involved when requested. As one manager stated during the activity, “We’d do better if our CEO cared more about us and less about their snapchat account!”

The managers, upon being told by the CEO of the time they are to get their employees through the maze are often aghast at the requirement. As a reminder, the CEO does not know that their manager must lead the team through the maze while walking backwards. It is usually during this briefing that the manager expresses their uncertainty and disbelief in the time requirements given their requirement to navigate the maze backwards. This part of the activity is meant to mirror the difference in viewpoints that a high-level manager has verses a low-level manager. The high-level manager sees the benefit of the project and the low-level manager contemplates the details needed to complete the project and focuses on their employees; for this exercise, the employee’s feet and their proximity to the mousetraps. The ability for the two managers to find common ground and work toward a solution before the employees arrive is critical. Sometimes, the two managers will still be discussing the activity while at polar opposites of perspective when the employees arrive. This creates even more apprehension on the part of the employees, although no performance changes in the employees once the activity starts has been noticed.

There is usually mild apprehension from the employees as their manager and CEO explain to them what is about to take place. It has been observed that most of the employees remain silent during the activity and put all of their faith in the guidance of their manager and CEO and no one quits. Admittedly, the activity is not designed to point out an employee behavior, although it could be said that the Hawthorne effect (Landsberger, 1958) is being played out via the employees feeling they are being observed and thus have social pressure to stay in the activity.

Post activity the professor should review the video and prepare it for presentation during the debriefing activity.

### **Debriefing the Activity**

During the class after the Mousetrap Minefield experiential learning activity, the students will have a chance to watch themselves navigate the maze of mousetraps, react to the snaps of the mousetraps, and most importantly identify the management styles and perspectives the CEO and manager engaged in during the activity. The professor can seed the conversations by pointing out behaviors and comparing the performance of the teams while relating the activity to conditions the students will likely encounter in the workplace.

It is typical for students to interact with each other during the discussions and the professor should encourage the CEOs and managers to let the class attendees know their feelings and beliefs that led to their choices and actions during the activity. Since the employees' only action in the activity was to be led through the maze, it is likely they will not add their feelings or beliefs during the activity to the discussion, but it has been observed that they will carry conversations with others about the CEOs and managers. Especially if their CEO or manager put them in a position that caused a mousetrap to go off around them. It has been observed that most of the students won't complain about a few mousetraps going off, but will if the number of traps is excessive.

### **DISCUSSION**

Reflecting on the merits of this activity, the benefit to the students has been the ability to connect the students' learning to the debriefing after the activity. An entire class period should be dedicated to the debriefing step, step three in Table 1. For the debrief, the instructor plays the video recording of the students navigating the Mousetrap Minefield. This gives the students a chance to remember the activity and to get back in touch with their thinking and feelings they had during the activity. This step should not be looked upon as a separate activity but as something that is connected to the exercise itself. For the long term benefit of the participants, the debriefing will be as, or more important, than the activity itself as each student's thought and feelings can become learning material for other students. Documented student statements have not been recorded due to the class discussion format utilized. Although, discussion has been meaningful related to management practices. An unplanned outcome of the discussions was the students' reflection on how they felt during the activity. One student CEO stated that they could not stand by and watch and had to get involved. Discussions had with this student determined that their experience as an athlete and coach played a significant part in their desire to be hands on with their team. Discussions had regarding those CEOs that did not actively participate during the activity determined that most just didn't know how they were supposed to act or participate while acting as a CEO.

### **ASSIGNMENT LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

The Mousetrap Minefield experiential learning activity attempts to simulate work conditions, however not all work conditions nor industries are modeled in the activity. The activity also does not provide every student with the same process allowing for individual performance assessment, as an individual student simulation would. Also, a method to measure outcomes of the activity and other learning methods has not been identified. As a result, anecdotal comments by the students and instructors are the primary means assessing this activity.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Mousetrap Minefield experiential learning activity has been used for three semesters over the course of three years in the Small Business Management (MGMT4741) with an average class size of 25 in undergraduate program. Overall, students and the instructor administering the activity have found the Mousetrap Minefield to be very effective in showing that most everyone, when placed in a position of management, will allow the perspective of their current position to rule their decision making and actions. The activity is generally viewed as fun and memorable to the students and those involved with

administering it. The latter of which is the purpose in administering the activity every year as the memory creates a reference to the subject matter taught by the activity.

## **REFERENCES**

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