

INTEREL ACTION LEARNING FIELD NOTES

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This Action Learning Lab procedure was developed by Maurice L. Monette for management training workshops at University of California–San Francisco.

Interel’s Electric Maze is used for the Action Task portion of the procedure.

Contents of this packet...

- Introduction and overview.
- Instruction sheets for: Facilitator/Debriefers, “Group Leaders,” “Senior Administrators,” “Finance Manager,” and “Observers.”
- Diagram for programming the Interel Maze.
- Diagrams for the senior administrators (2 versions),
- Blank diagrams for the finance manager.

Introduction & Overview

This Action Learning procedure is designed to mirror the work situation of the UCSF Business Manager: the “group leader” role is similar to that of the Business Manager, who reports to the Department Chair but receives administrative direction from the Associate Dean for Business. In this Action Task, the role of Associate Dean is represented as “Senior Administrator.”

Approximately twenty participants are divided by the facilitator into two groups. The groups are positioned at opposite ends of the maze. The goal of each group is to get all of its members to the opposite end of the maze within the allotted time.

At the conclusion of the Action Task, a debriefing or discussion is conducted to highlight cultural features such as:

- Unclear vision and leadership.
- Changing rules that are often learned by making mistakes.
- Timelines that must be met even though necessary authorities are unavailable or unknowing.

The debriefing also introduces key concepts to be presented during the management module at UCSF. These concepts, taken from Peter Senge’s book, *The Fifth Discipline*, include:

- Shared vision.
- Group learning.
- Mental models.
- Personal mastery.
- Systems thinking.

Facilitation

To initiate the Action Task, the facilitator follows this procedure:

- Chooses the two group leaders, two senior administrators and the finance officer and gives each their page of instructions. If there are to be observers, the facilitator gives them each an observer instruction sheet.
- Divides the remaining participants into two groups and positions them at opposite ends of the maze.
- Instructs the senior administrators (2), the finance manager (1), and the observers.
- Instructs the leaders to give their group its instructions and asks the senior administrators to take their posts (after they have heard the leader's directions,) reminding them not to show their maps to anyone in the groups.

This Action Task is designed to allow participants to notice how they cope with ambiguous situations. The maps the administrators receive are arbitrary and the participants have an opportunity to discover other paths to complete the task.

If, during the Action Task, the group becomes paralyzed by the absence of leadership from the two layers of administration, the facilitator should ask, "How is each of you contributing to your group's achievement of its key objective?" The facilitator may also invite the groups to stop and take a few minutes to discuss their approach.

Participants do not necessarily have to wait for leadership from above—they may move ahead on their own. They may discover paths other than those that are known by senior administrators. Or they may attempt various trial and error approaches.

During the Action Task the facilitator may impose silence (due to "computer outage,") switch members to the other group ("reorganization,") and change the rules arbitrarily.

Following the Action Task, the facilitator leads the entire group through the debriefing process. The participants may then meet in separate groups to discuss the work-relevance questions.

Debriefing

Facilitator's debriefing questions may include:

Questions relating to the Action Task's simulation...

What happened? What did you do about it? What did you learn?

What was the task? Was it communicated clearly? ("Vision.")

How would you describe the authority figures?

How was leadership exercised and by whom? Did you provide leadership? ("Personal mastery.")

How did your group perform the task, as individuals or as a group? How effective was this? ("Group learning.")

What were your assumptions (e.g., about competition?) Did they change? Did they hinder or help? ("Mental models.")

How were events influenced by the environment and by other events? ("Systems thinking.")

Questions relating Action Task behavior to workplace behavior...

How do the dynamics in this situation reflect your actual job situation? How did you behave here when facing those dynamics? How do you behave on the job?

How do you deal with the absence of direction/leadership from authorities?

How do you deal with timeline pressures and absent or non-communicative authorities?

How do you deal with uncommunicated or unclear rule changes?

How well do you use your peers as resources for task accomplishment?

What did you learn from this Action Task?

Group Leader's Instruction Sheet (x2)

(As instructed by the facilitator, read the following text to your group.)

You have been hired to work in this organization. I am your group leader. Our task, in general, is to get ourselves from one side of this maze to the other. I am responsible for briefing you on the task.

First, let me give you some instructions about the maze and the task at hand.

You must begin from this end of the maze and make it to the opposite end. You can move from one square to any adjacent square— no skipping over an adjacent square. Only one person from our group can step on the maze at any one time. We will take turns.

The squares on the maze have sensors. Some sensors are activated so that when you step on those squares a buzzer will sound. When the buzzer sounds you must retrace your steps and return to where you began.

I invite each of you to donate \$1 to the group. This money represents the financial resources available to the group. Funds will be held by the Finance Manager. If in retracing your steps as described above you set off another buzzer, our group is financially penalized. The group is also penalized if someone steps on a square that someone else has already set off. At the end of the exercise, the money our group loses will be given to the other group.

You cannot place objects as markers on the squares, nor can you write notes.

As group leader, I have access to a senior administrator who knows a way across the maze I can ask this person for help.

We have thirty minutes to complete the task.

Senior Administrator's Instruction Sheet (x2)

You are responsible for helping the group and the group leader achieve their objective, namely to get everyone in the group to the opposite side of the maze.

Use your map to give helpful information to the group when someone from the group requests your help.

Give information on only two steps at a time.

Never show the map to anyone from the group.

You may be instructed by the facilitator to give the following responses:

I am unavailable at present.

or

I cannot give you an answer until I confer with my advisory committee.

Finance Manager's Instruction Sheet (1x)

Your role consists of the following responsibilities:

- Collect the funds from each group.
- Keep these funds separate.
- Monitor the buzzer. Note on the accompanying sheet the squares that are buzzed by either of the groups.
- When the buzzer for a particular square is set off for the second time, you are to collect \$1 from the group that has stepped on the square. You are to immediately place that money in the funds of the opposite group.
- After the Action Task is completed, hand the remaining funds to each of the group leaders.

Observer's Instruction Sheet (x3)

At the end of the Action Task, you will be asked to report what you observed. Take note of the course of events. "What happened?"

Also be prepared to report on the following behaviors:

- What was the task? Was it communicated clearly? How would you describe the behavior of the authority figures?
- How was leadership exercised and by whom?
- How did the groups perform the task, as individuals or as groups? How effective was this? Did the groups cooperate with each other?
- What assumptions were operative (e.g., about competition? about making mistakes? about the use of the senior administrators?) Did assumptions change? How did they hinder or help?
- How were events influenced by the environment and by other events?







