LINKing UP

Tweeking Oral Reports at Event's End

Mary Holcomb, multi-time University of Tennessee user of the LINKS Supply Chain Management Simulation, does this very interesting twist at end of her LINKS event ... student teams create a final written report which she reviews and selects a particular topic for each team to present in class.

How do you conclude your LINKS events?

Students do a final written report and then give an oral report. I have customized the report out to a certain extent. All of the teams are in the MBA class in the supply chain management concentration course. We generally have two industries and that means a lot of teams have to give their reports. It gets boring if the students hear the same things over and over again.

It starts at the beginning, when I ask for a summary of their strategic objective for their firm. We have the mid-cycle review where they have done the SWOT analysis. You are keeping track all along the way of where they are with their objective. The final report has a way of pulling it all together. It is the culmination of all of those points throughout the simulation that allows you pull out a very specific aspect that you want them to report on.

How do the logistics work so that you can review the written reports before assigning the final presentation topics to the teams?

I have tried to do a hybrid approach to these reports. I have the students send their PowerPoint presentation reports to me on the Friday of the week before they are to do them.

All that weekend, I review the reports. I know where each team ended up in the simulation. We have done a SWOT analysis in terms of their mid-term review, and they all have submitted what their strategy has been. I have a good idea of where they are coming from.

Late on Sunday or Monday before the session on Tuesday, I send them specific areas I want them to present in class and what to highlight and elaborate on.

This way we are making sure that a lot of things are not duplicated and each of the teams are highlighting specific areas they seem to have gotten a higher grasp on.

How do you assign specific topics to your teams?

Let's say that we have a team or teams that are struggling. They are along the lower range of the cumulative scores. They may have taken longer than the rest to figure things out. I ask them what they would change if they were to be doing the simulation again and why. I tell them it is not enough to tell me they should have been using postponement, but they have to tell me exactly how using postponement would have improved their results. I ask for specifics.

For teams like that, I can't ask them to talk about the learning process, because they usually will say something they think is funny, like "I should have read the manual" which really does not have a lot of value to the group.

For the teams that are struggling, I let them know that a percentage of their grade is attached to the report and the better they do at the report the better their grade on that component will be ... and they need it. They usually take that seriously.

Then I will have a team that will address what the challenges were during the simulation. I try to give that to a team that has been a late bloomer.

One team, for whatever reason, thought that purchasing the bulk materials in quantities to get the high discount was the way to go but they ended up with very low inventory turn-over and very high inventory carrying costs. We talk about understanding the interdependent nature of the decision variables.

In the mid-cycle review, they might say "I don't know why we are getting a low score on customer satisfaction", and I would have a team address that aspect of it.

I might contrast that to a team that has really high market share and strong customer satisfaction and play those two off each other.

If I have a high-functioning team, I may ask them to explain how they felt they were as effective as they were in their decision making.

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What makes this process work with all levels of teams?

Even though we have that cumulative score and have the weighting measures, the instructor has the privilege of adjusting, if necessary.

I have firms that use different strategies. If I have a team that has determined from the beginning that their strategy is that they want to have the highest customer satisfaction then they can go after that market share. I look at how that has impacted their network design and operations and that is the particular question I give to them. "How did you design your network differently to accomplish this strategy? Did you accomplish that? And how would you rewrite those measures that are in the manual differently, so we can get a better aspect of how you did in this simulation." I challenge them that way.

I typically have a team that will make very heavy use of postponement. They understand that strategy and plug into it immediately. I have them talk about what that meant in the beginning about the decisions they made, etc. and have them emphasize that point.

Then I usually have another team that likes to use air transportation. They may do that exclusively and not have any DCs in region 2 or 3. So I have them talk about that design component strategy, how that impacted their decisions and how that affected their performance across key variables.

Almost everybody is interested in forecasting, so I tend to have the firm that has the most consistent and highest forecasting accuracy talk about their approach and how they feel that enabled them to do certain things during the simulation.

The team that has the highest cumulative score is asked to present the three major learning points from the simulation. The rest of the group will always ask "what did they do that we didn't do?" The leading team's insights seem to give an "oh, now I understand what we should have done" to the rest of the group. Having the top teams do that is much more effective than having the bottom teams give their insight.

Several teams address topics like: "Advice to my successor" and how do you see that impacting future performance, and the "Forward-looking business plan" where I ask them to prepare a SWOT analysis based on where they are right now.

That is how I mix it up. It does require getting the reports earlier, and looking at them and asking for very specific things from each one of the teams. There is a little overlap, but not like report after report after report.

How do the students react to this form of LINKS-event conclusion?

It is good preparation for what they are going to face in the future. In many cases they will be asked to do analysis and put together a report.

The teams know I am going to prompt them and ask questions. If they don't hit on the certain aspect I want to hear about, I have my list of questions I ask as well.

I try to find a best practice in every group. Sometimes it is hard to find a "best practice" so it may be a "future best practice".

Depending on how a team's decisions turn around, sometimes a team that is dead last may be the one I ask to give the "advice to my successor" because they can't dig out of the hole they are in but they know what they should have done and if done earlier would have changed their entire position.

It keeps it lively. There are a lot of questions that the winning team gets from all the participants.

What advice do you have for other LINKS instructors who might want to conclude a LINKS event with a final oral team presentation like this?

There has to be time for the instructor to review the reports. I make sure I am up to date with all the team information. I have to be organized so that the teams can get the directive of what their report will focus on, and be able to make a slide or slides to illustrate their point. This has a very quick turn around, and at the end of a semester you are already crunched for time, so you need to plan for this.