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Coaching Throughout The Business Simulation Lifecycle

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Active coaching throughout business simulation events is a key driver of successful student learning and instructor teaching experiences. The following table provides summary best-practice advice to LINKS instructors about coaching throughout the LINKS business simulation event lifecycle.

	Simulation Lifecycle Stage			
	Pre-Event	Early-Event	Mid-Event	Later-Event
Simulation Atmosphere	Anticipation, Disbelief, and “Denial” of the Forthcoming Workload	Confusion as the Full Challenge Becomes Apparent (“Before This, I Didn’t Know What I Didn’t Know”)	“Highs” and “Lows” as Performance Evolves Over the Simulation Event	Grinding Out Profitability in the Face of Vigilant Competitors
Business and Course Challenges	Getting Started	Mastering The Simulation Learning Curve	Business-Wide Strategy Crafting	Synthesis Preparation For Post-Event Learnings Reporting
Visible Characteristics of Superior Business Management Behavior	Efficient and Effective Initial Team Meeting (e.g., Students Have Read the Manual and Browsed Through the Website Resources; Meeting Agenda Created and Followed; Initial Responsibility Assignments Made)	Initial Crafting and Use of Multiple Business Support Tools (e.g., Excel Spreadsheets)	Execution Excellence Plentiful Research Study Ordering and Insightful Analysis Learning From Customer and Competitor Analysis	Experienced-Based Strategy Updating Multi-Period Planning Explicit Resource Allocation Prioritization Sophisticated Business-Wide Analysis
Coaching Posture To Students	“Be Prepared”	“It’s The Real Deal; You Can’t Bluff Your Way Through This”	“Volume Is Easy; Profitability Is Great” “Exploit Information”	Continuous Improvement; “Do Better The Next Time Than You Did This Time”
Coaching Advice To Students	“Read the Whole Manual ... I Really Mean It; I’m Not Kidding”	“Re-read the Manual” “Use the FAQs and the Tutorials” Encouragement (“You Can Do This”)	“Selectively Study Parts of the Manual” “Exploit the FAQs” “See and Manage Your Whole Business”	“Review All Decisions, Especially Those That Haven’t Changed For a While” “Long-Term Planning Is Good”
Explicit Coaching Behavior	Define Simulation Coaching Role (“I’m Available To Help, But You and Your Team Are Responsible For Your Firm’s Performance”)	Obvious and Publicized Availability of Coaching Support Conduct 30-Minute Post 2 nd -Round Private Presidential Meetings With Teams	Ask Questions About On-Going Customer and Competitive Developments, Which Require Insightful Analysis of Research Studies	Prepare Students For Reporting of Post-Event Learnings (in Your Role of Course Instructor)

Some post-event advice, after the coaching role morphs back to the traditional course instructor role, is provided at the end of this White Paper.

Pre-Event: *“This Looks Scary”*



Early-Event: *“The Early Learning Curve”*



Mid-Event: *“Mastering the Competitive Challenge”*



Later-Event: *“Putting All of the Pieces Together”*



Just-In-Time In-Class “Spotlights”

Throughout the business simulation lifecycle in your course, just-in-time in-class “spotlights” are useful time allocations. By allocating 10-20 in-class minutes per class-week to simulation-specific topics, instructors tie the simulation into the full course flow and provide timely emphasis to useful simulation-specific topics. For example, these “spotlights” are valuable within a business simulation lifecycle:

- Simulation Resources Accessible on the Website (e.g., FAQs, Tutorials, and Videos)
- Finer Points of the Round-By-Round Simulation Inputting Process (using website demo for your simulation variant, so as not to reveal any competitive information about your on-going simulation industries)
- Interpretation of Particular Financial and Operating Reports (using the website demo for your simulation variant, so as to not reveal any competitive information about your on-going LINKS simulation event)
- More Complex Research Studies or Interrelated Research Studies (using sample research output from the LINKS manual, so as not to reveal any competitive information about your on-going LINKS simulation event)
- Relevant Course and Simulation Content, Even If Covered In-Class In Detail Before the LINKS Simulation Event Begins (the in-class “spotlight” is in the style of a just-in-time review)

- Forecasting
- Interpreting P&L Statements and Balance Sheets
- Break-Even Analysis
- Technical/Content Topics Relevant to the Simulation Variant (e.g., for a supply chain management simulation, topics such as “Inventory Management and Economic-Order Quantities,” “Postponed Production,” and “Distribution Network Design” might be appropriate)
- Business Planning
- Effective Team Meetings Strategies and Tactics

Some Pre- and Early-Event Strategies and Tactics

Reading the LINKS participant’s manual is the first formal assignment for students in a LINKS event schedule.

Recommended student activities immediately after the LINKS participant’s manual reading include:

- Completing the (ungraded) 10-question True-False quiz on the LINKS website.
- Accessing and completing at least one LINKS tutorial.
- Accessing (downloading and printing) the post-initialization game run Word doc results file for review and analysis well-before the first scheduled LINKS game run. Obviously, this is a **required** student activity, to begin work within a LINKS industry.

All of these LINKS resources are accessible on the LINKS Simulations website.

A LINKS instructor **might wish** to provide the following detailed three instructions/suggestions to a LINKS class, especially if some (many) students are asking “what do we do next?”

These three instructions/suggestions should be viewed as the minimum decision-making scope in the initial LINKS round, **not** the limit or maximum of possible decision input changes.

First, your initial round of decisions (for month #4 or quarter #4 depending on your LINKS Simulations version) presumably begins with sales volume forecasts, since such preliminary sales volume forecasts impact (drive) supply management decisions.

1. Access/review/analyze the historical sales data in your firm’s most-recent financial reports (at the bottom your firm’s Forecasting Accuracy Report).
2. For each product/service in each market (channel and region in the LINKS products simulations, region in the LINKS services simulations), forecast sales volume for the next round assuming that firms in your industry make no significant changes in their current customer-facing decisions (e.g., service and marketing decisions).
3. Record your sales volume forecasts in the LINKS Simulation Database. You can always change these sales volume forecasts as your analysis and decision making for the next scheduled LINKS game run evolves.

Second, if your LINKS version has manufacturing decisions (LINKS products versions) or service capacity decisions (LINKS services versions), make these supply or capacity management decisions in the LINKS Simulation Database. Note that the previous inputs of your sales volume forecasts are reflected in the data reported on the “Manufacturing Decisions” or Service Operations Decisions” input web-screen. In making these supply management decisions, take into account your existing supply or service capacity to balance supply and potential demand as well as the costs of having too much supply or service capacity versus having emergency orders or unfilled orders.

“What do I do with a team that seems to be ‘clueless’ about LINKS?”

Spend time with the team in the style of a Presidential Review Meeting. (See LINKS White Paper #9, “Planning and Executing Effective Presidential Review Meetings.”) Ask a lot of questions of the form: “How is your firm doing?” “What is happening in your industry?” “What are you doing and why?”

Usually, “clueless” firms (and individual students): (1) haven’t prepared and haven’t really read the manual; (2) spend little time on LINKS; and, (3) have little/no competitive information about their LINKS industry (i.e., they order little or no research studies).

Strongly encourage such “clueless” students to work through the LINKS tutorials for your LINKS Simulations variant. And, have another Presidential Review Meeting with such a team after the next decision round, to review progress.

Third, work through the sample output descriptions for each of the research studies in the LINKS manual. Identify which research studies would be useful or valuable to have with your next-round financial reports. Record your orders for those useful or valuable research studies in the LINKS Simulation Database.

Private “Presidential Review” Meetings

The most important within-event best-practice in coaching business simulations is scheduling private “presidential review” meetings with teams. These are private, pre-scheduled, 30-minute meetings with each team to permit the instructor (as coach) to review a team’s business and performance, to answer team members’ questions, and to sense the progress that teams are making in the simulation. This is a “one-with-a-few” style of teaching/coaching, rather than a “one-to-the-masses” lecture-hall style of instruction.

- Presidential review meetings are private meetings (i.e., instructor and one team only present) due to the competitive nature of LINKS.
- Presidential review meetings provide a different kind of powerful teaching/learning opportunity (instructor as coach) at key points during the simulation event. They simulate business review meetings with a “boss” or senior management official.
- Re-assigned class time is recommended for presidential review meetings, with teams not meeting with the instructor using that time for their own private firm deliberations. Meeting schedules may have to extend beyond class time, due to the number of teams involved in a particular instructor’s course.

In shorter LINKS events, a single round of review meetings might be scheduled, perhaps just after the second scheduled decision round. In longer LINKS events, several waves of presidential review meetings might be scheduled with the second round of review meetings occurring just after the event’s mid-point.

Pre-scheduled meetings permit teams to pick their own preferred meeting times from a range of available meeting times. Classroom-hours meeting times might be rotated around all teams, if multiple presidential review meetings waves are held. With a single set of presidential review meetings, assigning classroom-hours meeting randomly is a reasonable protocol.

Some potential coaching questions to pose during presidential review meetings include:

- What are the largest problems facing your firm?
- What’s your best and worst team decision to date? Why?
- Who is the best performing competitor in your industry? Why?
- To your customers, what differential advantage does your firm offer (compared to competitors)?
- What are your most and least important markets?
- How is your firm organized (e.g., by function, by region, as a committee of the whole, etc.)? Is this organization arrangement “best” for the problems and challenges facing your firm now? There’s no right answer to this organization arrangement question, but the students should have at least addressed this issue even if the answer is working as a “team of the whole on everything.”

The likely outcomes arising from presidential review meetings include:

- For Students: (1) Greater emphasis on research study needs going forward. (2) More attention to issue identification and prioritization. (3) More focus on the really important issues. (4) More systematic attention to within-team division of labor and responsibility assignments.
- For Instructors: (1) Deep appreciation for team and individual-student progress. (2) Ideas for in-class discussion and tutorials, based on common issues and concerns arising across teams. (3) Follow-up meeting scheduling for “lost”/“deeply troubled”/“unprepared” teams.

Some variations on private, single-team presidential review meetings can arise in special situations.

- With many industries in very large courses, schedule joint meetings with each firm “1” from all industries meeting with the instructor simultaneously. Repeat for firm “2,” etc. Only non-competing teams from different industries are jointly meeting with the instructor during these pooled (cross-industry) presidential reviews.
- In distance-learning contexts, actively use teleconferences for presidential review meetings. Online chat sessions are certainly possible, but a free-flowing, in-depth discussion is more likely to occur within a teleconference setting.
- Schedule automatic presidential review meetings immediately with any firm with two successive rounds of negative profitability (i.e., negative net income).

Predictable Within-Event Questions and Suggested Responses

During LINKS simulation events, students pose predictable questions in public within class sessions and in private during hallway or instructor-office conversations. Predictable questions and suggested responses follow:

<p><i>“What the most important thing to do to be successful in the simulation?”</i></p>	<p>Work hard. “If the day isn’t long enough, use the night.”</p> <p>Exploit your teammates’ talents and capabilities. Work hard at sharing insights and teaching your teammates what you’ve learned. “This is a team sport.”</p> <p>Think!</p>
<p><i>“Something is wrong with the simulation. These numbers don’t make sense.”</i></p>	<p>Verify in excruciating detail every element of such a claim. Experience demonstrates that students usually don’t “tell the whole truth” ... especially during the earlier part of the simulation event. Students often make reading and interpretation mistakes when examining their financial, operating, and research studies results. And, there’s the natural tendency to blame “others” (especially the simulation) for one’s own shortcomings.</p>
<p><i>“What should we do now?”</i></p>	<p>Ask lots of questions back ... rather than leading with specific recommendations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the “problem”? • How important is this “problem”? • What are this “problem’s” symptoms? What are this “problem’s” causes? What are this “problem’s” consequences? • What else is relevant to understanding the nature of this “problem”? • What else is relevant to resolving this “problem”? • What have you done so far to resolve this “problem”? • What trade-offs must be balanced and weighed to resolve this “problem”? • Have you looked at the FAQs about this “problem”? <p>And (1), verify all ‘factual’ claims by students, to ensure that they haven’t misread or overlooked things in their financial, operations, and research reports.</p> <p>And (2), remind students that they are ultimately responsible for the long-run health and welfare of their business simulation firm.</p>

Post-Event

Post-event, the coaching simulation role morphs back to the traditional instructor role. Instructors normally include either a final team-based report or in-class public presentation as a simulation conclusion. Best-practice instruction in the post-event phase includes specific and detailed instructions provided by the instructor about the suggested or required format of the final report or presentation. By “overdoing” formatting specifics and report/presentation structural guidelines, the best-practice instructor helps students get quickly through to the content portion of the report/presentation without over-worrying about formatting and organization.