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Extreme Customization With LINKS Simulations

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In either of the following situations, an adventuresome LINKS instructor might wish to explore the extreme edge of LINKS, customizing a course and the students' LINKS experience to include "extreme" elements.

- **"Creative" LINKS:** You want to push the limits of the LINKS simulation usage experience.
- **"Serial" LINKS:** You've used a smaller LINKS variant in an introductory course and you now wish to use a larger LINKS variant in an advanced/elective course with the same students who were previously exposed to the smaller LINKS variant.¹

These extreme customization possibilities provide a broad range of interesting, creative, and novel options for an experienced LINKS instructor to embellish an advanced/elective course. These extreme customization possibilities are presumably of interest only to experienced instructors, not to first-time simulation users who face plentiful challenges in mastering a new simulation.

¹ In serial LINKS where students have previously experienced a smaller LINKS variant, special team formation issues arise.

If all students previously participated in a LINKS event, then any team formation protocol is fine. However, it's recommended that you use different teams than previously to permit/require students to work with others throughout their second LINKS exposure.

If only some current-course students previously participated in a LINKS event but others have never experienced LINKS, then it's recommended that the instructor form teams with "diverse" students. Here, "diverse" means spreading around among all teams those students with prior LINKS exposure, so that no team will be perceived to be disadvantaged by a lack of members with prior LINKS experience.

Due to their substantial nature, these options are, of course, meant to be selectively used and infrequently combined. No LINKS instructor, even the most experienced, would use all of these extreme options simultaneously in a single LINKS event.

The standard approach to designing an "extreme" LINKS experience is to activate a large number of brands² (to a maximum of five) and regions (to a maximum of six) during a LINKS event. Since student workload is directly related to brands and regions, this approach taxes advanced and experienced students in obvious ways. However, the creative customization options described here are not just doing "more of the same" to challenge students with a greater workload, but rather are about doing "more different" things.

TEAM FORMATION AS A CLASS ASSIGNMENT

Definition and Rationale: Task the class with creating high-performing teams for the LINKS event.

Which LINKS? Relevant to all LINKS variants.

When To Use? Before LINKS begins.

Details:

- The class collectively (or perhaps in small groups) would: (1) develop relevant criteria for forming high-performing teams; (2)

² The term "brand" is used to denote either a product or a service, depending on the particular LINKS variant. Most of the LINKS simulations are built around set-top box products, a classic high-tech electronics product. However, the LINKS services variants are built around support services. To avoid the continuing clumsiness of saying "product or service," the term "brand" is used.

- develop a specific protocol for forming the teams; and, (3) execute the protocol.
- Significant in-class time would be required to execute this assignment successfully. Class time allocation would probably extend over several class sessions (e.g., problem/process definition and research/study assignments made in class #1, research/study assignments report-outs in class #2, and execution of the team formation process in class #3).
- This assignment could also be used as a cross-course project, where student teams from an HR/OB course serve as consultants to the LINKS class in the formation of high-performing LINKS teams.

CROSS-COURSE PROJECTS INTEGRATED WITH OTHER ON-GOING COURSES

Definition and Rationale: Rather than use “real-world” business clients in course projects, use the LINKS environment as the basis of cross-course “consulting” projects with student teams from other on-going courses.

Which LINKS? Relevant to all LINKS variants.

When To Use? Throughout the simulation event, specific timing related to the specific nature of the cross-course project.

Details: Working as simulated consulting firms to the LINKS teams, the “other”-course student teams are presumed to provide the specific content expertise of relevance to the project. Some possibilities for cross-course projects include:

- Investment Analysis Project (with a finance/investments class).
- Team Building and Team Dynamics Project (with an HR/OB class).
- Consulting Project to Design a Useful and Profitable DSS Tool (joint with an IT/DSS class).

Such cross-course projects require lots of lead time to identify suitable and interested other-course instructors and then to negotiate all relevant cross-course operating details and protocols.

NEW BRAND PROJECT PLANNING ASSIGNMENT

Definition and Rationale: The LINKS simulation environment is a rich backdrop for project planning assignments, since the full plan-do-assess-learn cycle in project planning occurs within LINKS.

Which LINKS? Relevant to all LINKS variants.

When To Use? Presumably relatively early in a LINKS event, so that the results of the project planning effort can be observed and a full learning-after-doing assessment review can be conducted.

Details: A project planning assignment focuses on the design and launch of an additional brand beyond those available at the start of the LINKS event.

- LINKS students might be advised that an additional brand will become available to all firms in two rounds from now, sufficient advance warning to permit the creation of complete (written) project plans for the design and launch of the new brand in one or more regions.
- Each team would be tasked with creating a complete project plan for the design and launch of the new brand (segmentation, target market selection, strategy selection and brand positioning, launch program, and forecasted results and financial performance). Obviously, this project plan would be based on a substantial research program conducted within LINKS.
- A written project plan would be submitted prior to (or at the time) of the brand launch. Alternatively, a private presentation to the LINKS instructor might be required, in a longer-than-normal (60 minute) private presidential review meeting. A follow-up review/assessment document might also be required, several rounds after the brand’s launch.

More Possibilities: More complicated (and richer) new brand introduction project planning assignments might include:

- Advance notice that two additional brands will become available to all firms in three rounds time. Then, the project planning assignment must take into account even broader product portfolio management issues. With the usual

within-LINKS constraint of a maximum of one reconfiguration per round, interesting trade-off and prioritization issues arise regarding reconfiguration and launch sequencing of the two new brands.

- LINKS products variants might include the addition of another product attribute (“memory disk capacity”) and/or the extension of the bandwidth technology limit from 7 to 8, the latter technology change might be accessible by all firms or selectively accessible by competitive bidding winners.
- Depending on the length of the LINKS event’s schedule, one or more research-only rounds might be included in the event’s schedule.
- Immediate-access research might be included in the LINKS event throughout the duration of the project planning assignment.

QUALITATIVE MARKETING INITIATIVE

Definition and Rationale: To add a qualitative dimension to the quantitative nature of LINKS and have that qualitative dimension ultimately reflected within LINKS, task teams with creating alternative-media executions of a brand’s positioning (i.e., the same positioning executed in two different media).

Which LINKS? This qualitative marketing initiative is relevant to LINKS variants that include the positioning decision variable (e.g., xLINKS Enterprise Management Simulation [Extreme Edition], LINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation, xLINKS Marketing Strategy Simulation [Extreme Edition], LINKS Services Management Simulation, and xLINKS Services Management Simulation [Extreme Edition]).

When To Use? Simulation event mid-point.

Details:

- Each firm creates alternative-media executions of a brand’s positioning (same positioning executed in two different media). The same brand’s communications positioning is reflected in advertisements crafted for any two of the following media: (1) direct mail; (2) e-mail; (3) outdoor; (4) print; (5) radio; (6) video; and, (7) web.
- The advertisements are ultimately presented in class. A class vote and/or instructor evaluation and/or outside marketing professionals’ evaluations of the ads occurs.

These summary evaluations are quantified with the judged effectiveness of the firms’ ads being encoded into LINKS (as modifiers of “judgmental marketing effort” which has a standard default weight of 1.0 for all brands in all markets).

- This could also be used as a cross-course project, where student teams from an advertising/communications course serve as consultants to the LINKS teams in the crafting of the advertisements.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Definition and Rationale: Ethical dilemmas are not an explicit part of LINKS. But, instructors can build ethical dilemmas into LINKS via interventions into the overall simulation experience.

Which LINKS? Relevant to all LINKS variants.

When To Use? Simulation event mid-point.

Details: After each intervention plays itself out, instructors would lead a public in-class discussion/debriefing to review the nature and outcomes of the intervention.

“Free/Found Money” Intervention:

- Use the Special Consulting Fee option in your industry’s “firm-0” (instructor) webpage in the LINKS Simulation Database to give each firm a one-time unexpected and unexplained - 1,000,000 consulting fee bonus. (Consulting fees are an expense, so a negative consulting fee is a bonus.)
- Wait a while (perhaps two subsequent game rounds) and see if any firms notice this accounting irregularity which is in each firm’s favor (overstating their profitability by 1,000,000 before tax and 500,000 after tax). Firms that notice it and report it to the instructor should be rewarded by permitting them to keep 25% of this “free/found money” as a finder’s fee. Firms that don’t notice and don’t report it should have this amount extracted later via another Special Consulting Fee of 1,000,000, to reverse the previous “erroneous” accounting entry.

“Lost-and-Found” Intervention:

- After the submission deadline for a mid-event LINKS written report, “sprinkle” some copies

of all firms' reports in a conspicuous public area in your institution's main building. Have a student assistant discreetly observe (and film?) the area of the "sprinkled" reports to see if anyone notices and walks away with them.

- Wait and see if any LINKS industry members report finding these "sprinkled" reports.

"Cross-Firm Personnel Movements" Intervention:

- At about the mid-point of a LINKS event, announce that (as in real-life) management personnel do move from company to company. Randomly select a member of each firm to move to another firm as a new management team member ("recruit"). Then, provide a brief confidential memo to each "mover" advising them of their fiduciary duty to keep their former firm's business practices confidential with any new "employer."
- During an end-of-event public in-class debriefing, query the class about how this confidentially provision played out in practice.

JOINT-TEAM FINAL PRESENTATIONS

Definition and Rationale: While not really "extreme," the concept of joint-team final presentations is certainly novel and creative. With joint-team final presentations, two LINKS teams jointly create and deliver a final in-class presentation at the end of the LINKS event.

For larger-sized classes, joint-team presentations help "solve" the problem of too many presentations for a single final presentation class. I've successively used joint-team final presentations in executive education contexts where there were more than five simulation teams in the event and there was limited time for final presentations.

My experience with joint-team final presentations in executive education seminars is that the quality is higher than single-team final presentations ... **if sufficient in-class time is available to create the joint-team presentation.** But, there's also great learning that occurs within the pairs of teams as they create their joint-team final presentation. This is student-to-student teaching, as the pairs of teams interact to create their joint presentations.

Which LINKS? Relevant to all LINKS variants.

When To Use? At the end of the LINKS event.

Details:

- Teams might be more-or-less randomly paired for joint-team final presentations. With multiple industries in an instructor's class, teams might be paired across industries for greater learning diversity.
- There is a significant time cost associated with joint-team final presentations. Significant in-class time must be allocated to the final presentation preparation activity, since it will often be difficult for joint-teams to find convenient outside-of-class working/meeting times. In an academic degree-granting program context, two 1.5-hour classes (or one 3-hour class) might need to be allocated to final presentation preparation. In an executive education seminar context, three hours rather than two hours might be needed for final presentation preparation.

MORE EXTREME CUSTOMIZATIONS

Competitive Bidding:

- For extra plant capacity (in those advanced products versions of LINKS with plant capacity management decisions).
- For early access to another brand (with other firms receiving access to the additional brand later in the simulation event).
- For firms, based on continuing with a pre-existing LINKS industry where teams bid for firms before the LINKS event begins.

Multiple Large-Scale, Written Marketing or Business Plans

Mid-Event Innovations and Interventions:

- LINKS Blitz: Four Decisions Rounds in One 12-Hour Day
- Auctioning Access To New Regions, Products or Services, or Technologies
- Splitting Teams at the Mid-Point and Continuing With Matched Cloned Industries
- Teams Promote a Member To General Manager, But the Promoted General Managers Are Then Reassigned To Lead Other Teams
- Firm Prospectus Presentations and Individual-Student Investments in "Other Firms" in Another Parallel Industry