

Appendix III-A-1: Experiential Learning Project

An Experiential Approach to Developing Behavioral Skills for Project Managers

Overview:

This document is designed to support instructors who teach project management courses in two different ways:

- For instructors who are looking for a **semester-long experiential project** to complement the PM-2 Course, this document provides detailed guidelines for structuring such an assignment (see pages 2–6).
- For instructors who are looking for **additional resources to complement PM-2 topics**, the articles, cases, and exercises described here (see Sections A–H for details) can easily be used separately to deepen treatment of those topics or to introduce or reinforce technical knowledge modules found in the PM-1 course (e.g., planning, budgeting, monitoring, and controlling). (See **Methods of Procedure** for more information on using **portions of this exercise selectively to complement topics in PM-2**).

Teaching objectives for this experiential exercise are as follows:

- Provide students with an opportunity to experience and develop the skills, in a relatively risk-free environment, required for project leadership by mirroring, as closely as possible, what it is like to manage a project in the “real world.”
- Enable students to see connections between theory and practice of project management by aligning course readings and cases with stages in the development of project teams in order to accelerate and facilitate learning.

***Instructor Note:** Throughout this resource, notes to instructors are labeled and shown in italics, like this one.*

Contents of this document are as follows:

- Overall description of the project
- Teaching objectives
- Student learning outcomes
- Suggested project grading approach
- Methods of procedure
- Perspective on outcomes

In addition, the project Appendices contain the following resources:

- Section A: Suggested project time line and suggested resources
- Section B: Citations/sources for suggested resources
- Section C: Interview questions for project managers
- Section D: Project plan guidelines and format

- Section E: Suggested ground rules for projects
- Section F: Instructions for final project written and oral deliverables
- Section G: Example “expectations” letters
- Section H: Example team assessment and feedback instruments

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Overall Description of the Project

Projects have been conceptualized as temporary organizations. This exercise creates a semester-long experiential project that complements the conceptual content of project management courses emphasizing the behavioral competencies of project leadership, communication, and teams (PM-2). Alternatively, instructors can pick and choose articles or cases that complement their individual approach to course topics and student learning activities.

The knowledge and skills needed to perform successfully on this assignment relate to the following Behavioral Knowledge Modules: Project Team Building and Motivating (B-TB); Project Leadership (B-PL); Plan, Distribute, and Manage Project Communications (B-DC); Project Organization and Context (B-OC); Identifying and Engaging Stakeholders (B-SE); and Ethics and Professionalism (B-EP). Although not the primary focus of this project, students will also gain experience and skills in one or more of the Technical Knowledge Modules (e.g., project planning and integration, project resource management, estimating costs, project scheduling, risk management, and budgeting).

The primary objective of this exercise is to enable students and project team members to develop a clearer understanding of the behaviors needed to be an effective project manager, taking into account current research and practice, their own strengths and weaknesses, and career goals. Understanding the behavioral competencies needed for success in organizations is critical to the success of every project manager. Successful project management requires the project manager to learn and hone both knowledge and skills, like carpentry, accounting, or tennis. Unlike carpentry and accounting, however, project managers practice in the context of other people. So, becoming proficient as a project manager requires what are known as “people skills” or alternatively, “soft skills.” These include leadership and management of the project team—its formation, development and closeout, motivation, effective listening, communication, and decision making. In addition, the project manager must understand the formal and informal roles and structure of teams and be aware of and sensitive to varied perspectives that arise from diverse disciplinary and cultural backgrounds—both within the team and among stakeholders. In dynamic and complex environments, project managers must be skilled at anticipating and adapting to change. Most practicing project managers will tell you that they work every day to expand and enhance those skills.

This exercise entails the creation, staffing, development, and management of a temporary profit-making organization (the “project”) with the goal of donating those profits to a nonprofit organization chosen by the project team members. A competitive process is used to select project managers, who then select members of their project teams—these teams work together for the entire semester and, in addition to executing a project plan, produce both a written and oral report that details the project team’s performance and analyzes the team’s processes and behaviors using what they have learned in the course. The project provides students with opportunities to explore and experience the choices, decisions, and challenges faced by project managers and teams in the course of their daily activities over an extended period of time.

Instructor Note: *It is not uncommon for students to underestimate their own skill levels in effectively leading or working with colleagues. It can be useful to point out that this assignment provides a “safe” environment in which to increase both their knowledge of behaviors needed to be successful project managers and to gain a realistic assessment of their own skill levels so that they can identify areas of strength as well as areas in need of improvement.*

Instructors should be familiar with relevant theories of organizational behavior, especially those concerned with team management, communication, decision making, leadership, and conflict management. Suggested readings and cases have all been well-received by students and can be used selectively by instructors to meet the specific goals of their courses. The project is designed so that students do the majority of project-related work outside of class, although class time is needed for introduction of the project, team launch, and final presentations. Instructors who incorporate the semester-long project assignment will need to schedule regular meetings with project teams throughout the semester to monitor progress.

Please refer to Section A for a suggested time line and Section B for a detailed list of citations and sources for all suggested readings and cases. Sections C through H contain additional guidelines and examples for implementing this exercise.

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Student learning outcomes:

At the conclusion of this experiential project, students will demonstrate the essential knowledge and behavioral skills needed to lead a project or to be an effective project team member; specifically, the student will be able to:

- Communicate effectively to project team members and other stakeholders using appropriate tools and methods.
- Demonstrate the leadership skills necessary for effective project management.
- Explain the stages of team development and how and why decisions about team structure, process, roles, and managing conflict impact team member motivation, cohesion, and project success.
- Show sensitivity to and appreciate the value of perspectives arising from multiple disciplines and cultural backgrounds.
- Recognize and respond to ethically challenging situations in an ethically defensible and professional manner.
- Evaluate and reflect on personal strengths and weaknesses as a project manager and develop a plan for continuous improvement.

Instructor Note: Learning outcomes can be modified to reflect goals of the course and instructor.

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Suggested approach to project grading:

Evaluation and grading of the project should include peer assessment. As it is a semester-long assignment, the value of the project should be a significant component of the course grade—25% to 40%.

One approach to grading is as follows; weights can be modified according to the instructor's preference and learning goals:

Project Goals and Plan	10%	Final Project Written Report	10%
Project Performance	10%	Final Project Oral Presentation	5%
Peer Evaluation	5%		

***Instructor Note:** Above total should typically equal 25%-40% of overall course grade for this activity.*

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Methods of Procedure

The project assignment described in this teaching resource is a semester-long activity, and as a significant portion of the student's grade, it should be referenced in the course syllabus and introduced to students during the first class meeting. The project works best when teams consist of five to seven students and the project schedule allows for the full semester (e.g., 12 to 15 weeks). It can be used in small classes (15 to 20 students) or larger classes, although the investment of time and effort by the instructor is more demanding as the number of student project teams increases. Key project dates and activities should be listed as part of the course schedule.

Instructors who choose not to implement the semester-long project can selectively use the resources in this document to supplement particular topics in their course. Examples of this a-la-carte approach include (but are not limited to):

- If several weeks are devoted to teams, the readings and Army Crew Team case (suggested in the project time line) and/or the instruments in Section H can be used. Students might be asked to gather data from a team to which they belong to assess the degree to which that team's members see the team as effective.
- An in-class active listening exercise as part of a broader discussion of communication can reinforce that becoming an active listener is much more difficult than most people think.
- The realistic dilemma described in the Henry Tam and MGI case, along with suggested readings about organizational culture, can be used to stimulate discussions about diversity and culture as important influences on project team effectiveness.

Introducing the project

During the first meeting, the project and its purpose should be introduced to students. Key elements of the introduction should include:

- This project simulates a real project in that it is temporary, time-limited, and will operate under constraints as specified by the instructor. Project teams will develop a project charter, meet milestone dates established by the instructor, meet on a regular (weekly/biweekly) basis with the instructor to review progress and discuss issues, and submit a final written and oral report that summarizes project performance and analyzes the team's process and lessons learned.
- Design of the course supports success in the project in that the schedule of course topics, readings, and cases parallels the challenges that teams are likely to face as they launch, develop, and terminate over the course of the project—thus, as students gain knowledge and skills, they can apply what they have learned to their project.

- Project teams must develop and execute a plan that generates profits (defined as more revenue than costs) by selling a product or service or holding an event. Profits must be donated to a nonprofit organization; however, it is up to the project teams to decide what nonprofit organization will be their beneficiary and to determine, by mutual agreement, the extent to which the beneficiary organization will be involved in the project.

Instructor Note: *The requirement that project team “profits” be donated to a nonprofit organization has several advantages: 1) it enhances the motivation of team members to be successful if there is commitment to supporting an important cause, and 2) it immediately engages an important stakeholder with a significant interest in the success of the project, and thus the project team.*

Project Team Formation and Launch

Explain the procedures that will lead to project team formation and launch as follows:

- All students must submit a résumé and cover letter that indicates whether they are applying for a Project Manager (PM) or Project Team Member (PTM) position. Applications should be due no later than the end of the first week of classes.
- Explain that PMs will be selected based on qualifications, experience, enthusiasm, and the quality of their résumés and cover letters. All PM applicants will be interviewed by the instructor, with final selections announced (ideally) before the end of the second week of classes.

Instructor Note: *Suggested PM interview questions are listed in Section C.*

- All PMs and prospective PTMs post “expectations” letters online using the university’s course learning management system (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, or similar) prior to the beginning of the third week of class. Expectations letters provide a brief statement of what individual PMs or PTMs expect from their team members and what they expect to contribute to the project.
- All students deliver a 60-second “elevator speech” that summarizes their expectations letter during class (early in the third week).
- PMs will staff out their organizations based on PTM résumés, expectations letters, and elevator speeches. PMs determine the method for team staffing. PMs communicate to their team members and to the instructor.
- Project teams meet before the end of the third week.
- Project plan and performance expectations due before the end of the fourth week.

Additional resources to support the instructor’s use of this assignment are described in the various sections, which begin on the next page.

Instructor Note:

Section A contains a suggested and detailed time line as well as suitable readings and cases that are appropriate to the course topics and the project. It is important to point out that the sequence of topics on the suggested time line is based on the likely needs of project teams as they launch

and encounter challenges. This sequence may be different from that often found in textbooks. Instructors can choose to modify this sequence according to their own goals and experience.

Section B provides an alphabetical list of every resource mentioned in this document as well as some additional resources to consider.

Section C describes suggested interview questions for project managers.

Section D provides suggested project plan guidelines and format.

Section E describes suggested project ground rules to guide project teams as they begin to formulate ideas. It is important to communicate these ground rules (which may need to be modified depending on the specific context of the college or university) to project teams.

Section F presents instructions for final written and oral deliverables.

Section G includes example “expectations” letters for project managers and prospective project team members. Since students will evaluate each other using the project team’s performance criteria, one of the first tasks for project teams is to establish performance expectations. Teams should be permitted to establish their own performance criteria; however, all team members must agree to the final criteria and a copy of those criteria should be submitted to the instructor. At the end of the semester, peer evaluations will be provided by each student using their team’s own performance criteria. This exercise is a good opportunity for teams to experience the challenges associated with determining the number and specificity of performance criteria, and to grasp the importance of evaluating performance in terms of behaviors rather than personal characteristics.

Section H includes three different team assessment/feedback instruments to assist project teams in a discussion of team effectiveness.