

# BRIDGING THE CHASM BETWEEN THE ACADEMIC AND CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT: THE IMPACT OF COVEY'S 8<sup>TH</sup> HABIT ON UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN A CONTEMPORARY ISSUES MARKETING CLASS

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## ABSTRACT

*The inclusion and successful implementation of Covey's 8<sup>th</sup> Habit in a marketing capstone class provides an opportunity for students to begin to bridge the chasm between knowledge acquired in an academic setting and marketing application in a corporate setting. "Finding your voice" is essential not only to the young neophyte eager to share his/her ideas but ultimately is essential to the success of the corporate entity as well. In teaching the Covey concepts to another, students come to a far greater understanding of the importance of trustworthiness, a cornerstone of relationship marketing. Furthermore, in doing, academic achievement becomes a by-product of true understanding, not only as a means to an end.*

## THE PROBLEM

The capstone marketing class needs to be more than just a review and integration of prior course material. Too often, particularly when there is a very small marketing faculty, the techniques and course work contain a certain redundancy. This is not in the best interest of the students and it certainly is a most unexciting path for the professor. Although students have matured mightily in the time they have been with the university, the challenge to transition successfully and preparation for admission to the corporate world is a new level of attainment and one that must be met. This is underscored by the American Assembly of Collegiate School of Business (AACSB 2007) incorporation of student skills development into their new standards.

Recruiters are always looking for that impressive new hire that is a walking contradiction. A hire that is young (in age), experienced (but not old), mature (in knowledge and attitudes), enthusiastic, and has great oral and written communication skills. Still in quiet conversation with faculty, the recruiters lament the fact that so many students are "book smart" but lack the experience in "corporate people skills." What recruiters are often looking for and often allude to is "someone who fits in and can read the political climate." In examining the problems that corporations face today, Covey's 8<sup>th</sup> Habit, provides numerous examples of the symptoms affecting the corporate entity, identification of the problems, and finally an approach to resolving contemporary issues.

## THE CHALLENGES

The challenges fell into three distinct categories: structure of the course, integration of traditional course concepts, and implementing Covey's idea of each student teaching another individual about the concepts in each chapter.

### Structure of Course

New teaching pedagogies are always exciting and carry a certain bit of apprehension the first time around. Fortunately, the class was relatively small (n = 24), and about half the students had a previous course with the professor. The following activities were outlined in the syllabus:

- ◆ Students were required to make a four-member team power point presentation on one of six journal articles on relationship marketing selected in advance by the professor. (Demonstration of team work and oral communication and presentation skills.)
- ◆ Essay exam over pragmatic text on Customer Relationship Marketing. (Demonstration of written communication and critical thinking skills.)
- ◆ Creation of three corporate memos related to contemporary issues requiring application and integration of appropriate course concepts. (Demonstration of written communication and critical thinking skills.)

- ◆ Acquisition of Certificates of Achievement on Covey's 8<sup>th</sup> *Habit* via the internet. Examples were shared in class as students began to "find their voice." (The intention was to enhance extemporaneous speaking skills and critical thinking skills. But there was a far greater yield than originally designed that will be covered in the section entitled "Student Perceptions.")
- ◆ Viewing and discussion of selected videos that accompany the 8<sup>th</sup> *Habit* and underscore critical concepts. Professionally designed and contemporary, these videos lend themselves to a lively exchange of ideas among the students while underscoring the most important points.

### Integration of Traditional Course Concepts

This was actually quite easy to achieve through the corporate memos and group discussions. With few exceptions, the quality of the first memos was quite poor. Tremendous gains were evident in successive memos both in form and content. Format dramatically improved, but best of all a complexity and a rich thoughtfulness emerged as students matured throughout the semester. This maturity was aptly demonstrated in subsequent memos. Finally, emphasis was placed on the written exam with students required to identify traditional marketing concepts when presented in an application format. Students recognized that they had indeed come a long way. "Knowledge based on and assimilated with prior knowledge raises the overall value of both old and new knowledge" (Chonko 2007). Further evidence is contained in a survey concerning the need for teaching professional and career development skills by Kelley and Bridges (2005). Their survey found marketing practitioners and educators in agreement concerning student needs and that an integrative approach emphasizing oral, written communication, and leadership skills would lead to better outcomes. The integrative approach in this course addresses AACSB standards, as well as educators and practitioners concerns.

### Implementation of Student's Teaching Another

The course begins with a traditional format of the faculty member covering the first four chapters in class. Then, students were required for the following ten chapters to go to the website and complete the task of their teaching experience. Each student was required to teach another individual a basic concept of the chapter being covered in class that week. (Anyone could be chosen and students were encouraged to select someone who would benefit from this exercise. Most chose family members or friends not enrolled in this course.) Further, this exercise was to have been completed prior to the beginning of the class session. The students were then to receive a certificate of achievement from the Covey organization. Exam-

ples of their experiences were shared during class. Overall, the students became more thoughtful, and insightful remarks were frequently made in class that provided a richness in communication that elevated the class as a whole. Perhaps the students' remarks best reveal their experiences.

### Student Perceptions

At the end of the semester students were asked to write a final memo regarding how useful the book was to them now and in the future. A few selective comments from the students provide an example of the breadth and depth of the experiential learning exercise.

- ◆ I knew nothing about being in a real firm, so at first I was overwhelmed with the business examples.
- ◆ The concept that we are all born with a choice in everything we do made a deep impact. Instead of blaming someone else for MY problems, I can recognize that I have a choice in every situation, and can either choose to fix the problem or let it get worse.
- ◆ Book was large . . . intimidating at first . . . but in the end I really like it. I never liked to read before, but now I see the power and influence behind reading every night.
- ◆ Big rocks (the concept of emphasizing important issues first, giving trivial matters less time and importance). . . . This notion has aided me in striking a balance between school, family, and my social life.
- ◆ Trustworthiness . . . Like the story of the unfaithful manager, all leaders need to exemplify the behavior that their employees undoubtedly will model.
- ◆ I have made a concerted effort to be patient with and empower my group members this semester. I can honestly tell the difference already. I am surprised at what people are capable of with a little direction and encouragement.
- ◆ It is important . . . not to over extend myself, . . . not to make promises that I cannot deliver, and to always do what I say I will. I have found that by doing this more . . . over the past several months that several friends have grown much closer as they have come to realize that I am reliable and always follow through with my work.
- ◆ I would like to work for a company that has a shared vision . . . and I know [now] what I should look for.
- ◆ It is my personal goal to find the "Sweet Spot" where Talent, Passion, Need, and Conscience meet early so that I will be ready to recognize my keys to success later.
- ◆ . . . so many times I have felt frustrated, discour-

aged, undervalued, and unappreciated . . . because I had not realized my “voice.” This book has helped me find the answers to questions I have had for so long.

- ◆ Using the concepts from Dr. Covey’s book . . . I am learning how to express my voice and be able to stand up for myself. . . . I have been teaching my brother the different concepts . . . and can see a difference in some things that he has been doing, so I feel like I have helped a loved one in my life.
- ◆ A . . . very important concept that I had not considered before I started reading this book . . . the freedom to choose, specifically, how I react to a specific situation. When I react by getting angry . . . I was . . . giving that person power over me. I gave them control over me because I chose to react in the way that I did. If I can remember this one concept from this book, and remember to apply it to my life for the rest of my life, I will change my life, and the lives of the people around me, forever.

The comments here are only a glimpse of the impact that *Covey’s 8<sup>th</sup> Habit* had on my students. During class discussions, I was often astonished at the personal challenges students chose to share with others and was pleased with the depth of empathetic listening and positive, insightful, suggestions their classmates offered. There are often moments when a class “comes together.” But in this class, the moments turned into waves and the waves just kept on and on. It was a most unique experience for both the students and the professor.

## RESULTS

The best results in this class were that the undergraduate students began to act more like graduate students who are currently building a career. Students began to ask questions that were insightful, shared growth experiences, and began to focus on truly “discovering their voice.” The fact that they could become a “trim-tab” (a person who stays within their circle of influence and does not venture far into matters that concern them but over which they have little or no control) was an exciting one for them. Trustworthiness became a concept that had impact, not just an abstract ethical “should.” Corporate examples from the text were tied into business issues with contemporary examples being reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, etc. Other student comments capture the students overall assessment of the class format, structure, and outcomes.

- ◆ I was absolutely delighted by the format of the class. Rather than a traditional classroom setting, the course felt more like an open forum for sharing thoughts, feelings, and perception of the

material. While I enjoyed being able to voice my take on the various subjects covered, I know that I benefitted the most from hearing from the other students. This class actually creates an environment in which the material is “learned” and “taken to heart.” Other courses I’ve taken simply require a memorization of “facts” that are immediately deleted from the mind upon course completion.

- ◆ I am personally very discouraged by public speaking and dreaded sharing my opinions on a daily basis. After the first few weeks, this fear quickly diminished and has allowed me to gain confidence in the process. By calling on students to share, it acts as a motivator as no one wants to announce to the class that they have not completed the assignment.
- ◆ I like the fact that we had to present in front of the class. We have all done speeches, but I’ve never had something so formal. It was great . . . I have become more comfortable with my presentations.
- ◆ . . . the development of the ability to become a trim-tab. . . . The development of this skill will be beneficial when entering the corporate work force.
- ◆ The whole class came together while talking about the Covey book and created a positive and powerful synergy.
- ◆ Personally, I believe that this book is an amazing experience because of the ideas that one can apply for future use. People can use this book to gain career knowledge . . . , earn a job . . . , communicate with spouses, siblings, or their children. . . . I feel like I have been granted a great privilege to learn the principles in this book.
- ◆ In his article on “A Philosophy of Teaching . . . and More,” Lawrence Chonko (2007) gives credence to the students perceptions when he says that “the freedom of self-learning and the encouragement to make mistakes allow for many choices and uncertainties, neither of which is high on the list of ‘favorite things of students.’”

## CAVEATS (LIMITATIONS)

In order to be certain that students are well prepared to discuss each class time, it would be best for them to print off the example they contributed at Covey’s website. This would assure that *all* students have completed the assignment prior to class time. Since this was a small seminar class, there were only one or two (at any time) who were unprepared to share. This adjustment would also make it much easier to keep a large class on track as a group. Further, in a large class, the most “interactive” students

would realize that others will be called upon to share their insights and experiences. Points were assigned for each chapter completed and took the place of a major exam. With a mega class, and at the professor's discretion, an exam over select chapters could supplement the assessment process, if desired.

## IMPLICATIONS

### **Application of Innovation to Principles of Marketing Classes**

This approach has been utilized over two different semesters with excellent, and most importantly, consistently outstanding results. Students emerged far more thoughtful, mature and responsible due to their experience in this class. Thus, the technique will receive wider diffusion throughout the curriculum by including it in the Principles of Marketing class. Next semester, students will be required to teach another student (preferably a non-business major) the most important concepts contained within the first seven chapters of the text. A one page memo will be due at the beginning of the class prior to the discussion of the chapter. It will have three parts: identify the most important concepts, the response of the individual volunteer to the teaching session, and the analysis of the session and insights gleaned by the experience. The benefits of this innovation will impact three parties: the student, the volunteer, and the faculty member.

The student will benefit by having read and taught the marketing material to the volunteer prior to covering the marketing concepts in class. A written, formal memo will allow the student to present results and thoughtfully analyze each chapter's contributions to their knowledge base.

The volunteer will benefit by applying marketing concepts to marketing themselves in the job market. Students outside the business college would benefit most in considering their competition, target market, unique advantage, niche, etc. These concepts will enable both students to see the value in building a resume, contacts, skill sets, etc. that will be of interest to their target market upon graduation.

The professor will encounter students who have read the chapter and attempted to teach the important concepts to another. Imagine, a classroom full of students who have actually read the chapter and are interested, as well as prepared to discuss the major concepts and their application! The memo due at the beginning of class will serve as an instant "reward" (points) to the student and provide documentation of who in class is coming prepared to discuss the marketing material. Further, students who have writing difficulties can be identified early on and directed to university resources designed to help them.

Finally, instead of the usual "first read, while cramming for the first exam," the marketing principles will be far more familiar, critical thinking in applying the concepts will have been utilized and all students should be able to demonstrate greater competence and understanding via the first exam.

After debriefing the class, following the first exam, the professor may choose to either allow the exercise for each chapter to continue, or formally discontinue the exercise. Student input can be an integral part of this next step. Greater, active, student involvement from the very beginning of class and positive feedback from the volunteers can be a most enriching experience, especially for the non-marketing majors and those "undecided" majors in the acquisition of marketing knowledge. Far too many times, students approach a class outside their major as a trial to be endured not realizing the value until well into the material. The outcomes in the capstone class are so superb, that if any part of it can be replicated in the Principles of Marketing class, learning outcomes will reflect a commitment to learning and application of concepts rarely encountered in a "core" class.

## DISCUSSION

Covey's work is cutting edge, and as students in class were about to learn, some of his examples from his consulting work included in his book preceded a corporate crisis reported in the *Wall Street Journal* headlines during the semester. A case in point: the resignation of Harry Stonecipher, Boeing's CEO, due to an affair with an employee. Midway through the text, Covey drives home the importance of the "voice of trustworthiness – modeling character and competence." In this example a young bank president, after a meteoric rise, struggles with declining productivity, decreasing profits, and downward spiraling morale. His affair with an employee is known by all in the firm and undermines the sense of trust and character that was necessary to successfully lead. Students throughout our university programs have been told repeatedly about the importance of ethics, but the resignation of the Boeing CEO following our discussion on the importance of trustworthiness underscored contemporary problems and old world values. With the merging of our personal and professional lives, more than ever, it is important to integrate a whole self . . . and even CEOs are not exempt.

## CONCLUSIONS

Literature abounds on the importance of learning by doing and the need for "reflective observation" (McCann-Nelson, Vaidyanathan, and Morris 1995). The Contemporary Issues in Marketing course can be designed to underscore these elements. But even more critical is the

students' acquisition of a business orientation that begins to capture the essence of understanding and successfully navigating a corporate environment.

In teaching others, students recognized the importance of "finding their voice" amid a chaotic corporate environment. This serendipitous outcome resulted in a depth and maturity often found in graduate students who have been in the workforce for some time. These qualities are often found in the non-traditional student in an undergraduate class but rarely seen in the traditional student. Recruiters will find these students who have participated in teaching concepts to another individual to have a sense of self and demonstrate the type of critical thinking skills more often possessed by graduate students. But perhaps the most surprising improvement was in the collective

ability to listen empathetically to other students and help them (when possible) to resolve the challenges encountered.

A capstone class is an opportunity for the students to begin to bridge the chasm between an academic and corporate environment. This innovation enriches and enhances the educational experience of the students while preparing them for successful entry into the corporate world. Overall, students held overwhelmingly favorable attitudes throughout class and were conscious of the tremendous gains achieved with this approach. Finally, an unexpected outcome was the students' collective understanding of the importance of their initiative and contribution to life long learning.

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