

Using Virtual Organizations to Deliver Online Content and Create an Applied Learning Environment

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Abstract

Online course delivery does not provide the same opportunity for role playing or discussion of controversial topics as traditional courses. Using a virtual organization to facilitate applied learning engages the student in group activities that foster discussion, investigation of root causes and critical analysis resulting in development of short and long-term solutions to various organizational issues. Moreover, using a virtual organization allows students to cooperate, discuss, and share their ideas just as they would in an actual employment setting. This paper will describe the content and techniques used to deliver an upper level undergraduate course concerning the administration and management of a large organization.

Keywords: Administration, planning, management, organization, personnel, confronting corruption, problem solving, problem identification.

Birth of an Idea

Administration and Planning is a 3 credit course in our Criminal Justice Program. The course description is as follows: An overview of administration and management in criminal justice organizations. This course utilizes both historical and current organizational theory, leadership, and planning. Examines the impact of communication, legal issues, ethics, and changing social standards. Prerequisite: Completion of 9 credit hours in criminal justice or legal studies.

Administration and Planning covers all of the basic challenges faced by a criminal justice organization and was delivered in a traditional lecture and discussion format. The online version mirrored the traditional delivery; however, most assignments were completed independently and did not involve applied learning.

The administration of any organization is a group endeavor often frustrated by unforeseen circumstances, personality conflicts, budgets, weak managers, marginal employees, and in many cases union contracts. An experienced instructor and good text book do not necessarily create real-life headaches and problem solving required to manage and improve a large organization.

Personnel issues are the primary challenge for any executive. Regardless of the organization, the basic challenges are the same. Nevertheless, each employee is unique and the approach to addressing the situation depends on personalities, performance history, an employee's value to the organization, and internal politics. Additionally, all decisions have unintended consequences that must be foreseen and addressed.

Creating a virtual organization that accurately reflects the challenges faced by the administration requires personnel; complete with personalities, employment histories, disciplinary histories, and personal histories including family life and pre-employment issues. Among unique materials developed for the course were the personnel rosters for 89 sworn and civilian members of a virtual police department. Students were assigned on a rotating basis to command and support positions and challenged with several management problems each week related to performance, misconduct, community relations, crime fighting, equipment deficiencies, and other miscellaneous problems. Problems included minor infractions requiring counseling to events warranting termination and criminal charges.

Tables of organization depicting a typical tall hierarchical paramilitary organization were developed for the police department and each bureau. Chain of command was emphasized to facilitate future discussions on the value of "tall organizations", traditional management models, contemporary management models, and the impact on communication and progress.

Each problem required the group to identify a problem's underlying issues, and short-term and long-term strategies to prevent re-occurrence of the problem. One student was designated as the commanding officer and submitted a memorandum explaining how each problem was resolved.

The Department

The Virtual Police Department (VPD) consisted of an Operations Bureau with three police precincts¹, a Detective Division, and an Administrative Services Bureau that encompassed an Internal Affairs Section, Budget Section, and Training Division. Students rotated every 3 weeks through command positions in the Operations and Administrative Bureaus. There were three major command positions that were rotated on a 5 week basis: Deputy Chief, Internal Affairs Commander, and FOP President. The three students assigned to leadership positions were carefully selected and closely coached by the instructor to ensure that student commanders were held to a high standard. Furthermore, leaders were coached to intentionally frustrate the student commander's recommendation.

For example, the FOP President is the union boss and regardless of the severity and credibility of the allegations against the officer, the President's role was to defend and excuse the officer's actions. The Internal Affairs Commander was to always exaggerate the allegations and recommend harsh punishment. The Deputy Chief was to always challenge the respective student commander's recommendation and demand an alternative solution.

The Headaches

Each week students were given a series of problems for consideration. Initially, the problems were simple and solutions varied. Unknown to the students, the initial simple problems were symptoms of greater of cultural problems that would manifest in the department. For example, the first set of memos referenced complaints such as certain officers not wearing their name tags, other officers missing a few rounds of issued ammunition, and yet other officers not wearing their uniform hats.

The officers who did not wear their name tags had several misconduct complaints in their personnel history. The astute commander would suspect that these officers were intentionally not wearing name tags to make it difficult for a citizen to file a complaint. Furthermore, the student should realize that the immediate supervisor was a veteran sergeant who was most likely not doing his job. Although the complaints were minor, the implications are quite serious and required more action than a mere reprimand.

Future problems involving the same officers were foreseeable considering the records of the offending officers. Complaints would involve brutality, drinking on duty, and an out of policy shooting. In each case the student commander would be charged with identifying an appropriate course of action including ways to prevent future occurrences. All problems forecasted future problems often indicating symptoms of bigger issues.

One such problem involved several officers with good track records missing ammunition. Their claim was that they had either lost it when cleaning their weapons or just did not know what happened to it. In reality, missing ammunition is a serious matter because officers must account for all of their issued equipment. A reprimand was the appropriate sanction; however, a future

¹ All three precincts were identical with the same personnel and problems. Students were rotated through a precinct command, detective command, and two Administrative Services Bureau commands.

complaint would involve some of the same officers shooting at rats in an alleyway in a warehouse district on midnight shift. The biggest issue in this matter is that the officers who were involved in shooting rats were also the ones missing ammunition. When questioned about the missing ammunition the officers were not candid and probably lied. Integrity is major issue in law enforcement and lying and concealing the truth are serious matters. The correct response to this problem would involve harsh sanctions and warnings that any future deceit could result in termination.

The uniform hat incident was a minor incident with no future implications. Nevertheless, the situation indicated a minor lapse in supervision and uniform protocol that warranted a verbal reprimand. Overall, given the students non-experience in policing, they handled the situations well. The exercise required the students to communicate and discuss issues in order to properly address the problems. Students were also challenged to look beyond the immediate infraction and identify larger issues that may explain the reasons for the minor violations.

Each week the problems became more complex and often related to previous misconduct and performance problems requiring progressive discipline. The ultimate personnel problem at the precinct level involved an out of policy shooting and a drinking initiation for a new officer. All of the officers involved were on the same shift and squad. All of the officers had poor misconduct histories and were supervised by the same veteran sergeant.

The best solution to the problem was forcing the veteran supervisor to retire to save his pension and legacy, termination of the out of policy shooter, and transferring all officers from the shift to different precincts and squads. Typically, the students fired the offending officers, but did not address the cultural issues on the shift. After de-briefing it became clear that cultural issues are the bigger problem than the resultant offensive conduct. The students also understood that the new shift should be composed of a strong sergeant and mix of veteran and rookie personnel with good performance histories.

The Challenges

Not all problems concerned minor and major misconduct. Students assigned to administrative command positions were charged with reviewing personnel records and identifying the best minority candidates for promotion to supervisory positions and detectives. Part of the exercise included drafting a 5 year plan to promote minorities. The personnel regulations required 10 years of service for eligibility which frustrated the entire promotional process. The student commanders were quick to identify suitable candidates and reduce the service requirement to 5 years in order to accomplish the goal and ensure sufficient experience for promotion.

Of course the students were met with unintended consequences: some minority candidates were insulted that promotional requirements were lowered which undermined their credibility as supervisors and the FOP objected because the changes created a larger candidate pool that threatened the promotional opportunity of senior members. Student commanders held their ground against the union and moved forward with the changes.

The Special Operations Division Commander was given a unique problem: writing a letter to a 10 year old boy whose pet dog was shot and killed by the SWAT Team during a high-risk search warrant entry. The Student Commander struggled through several drafts, but ultimately did a great job.

Another difficult issue involved an officer who smoked marijuana while on vacation in Colorado. Although the activity was not unlawful in Colorado, federal law was violated as well as federal firearms laws regarding possession of a firearm by habitual users of marijuana. The Student Commander was focused on counseling and therapy. The Internal Affairs Commander was focused on federal law violations and termination. The FOP Commander posited that all actions were legal and the officer was on vacation. Significant discussion occurred between the students. The Deputy Chief (at the direction of the Instructor) recommended termination due the violation of federal law. Reluctantly, the student commanders agreed to terminate the officer.

The marijuana issue was significant because many applicants to criminal justice agencies disqualify themselves because they exceed the maximum number of experimental marijuana uses allowed by the respective commissions. Furthermore, federal law is clear that a habitual user of marijuana is prohibited from possessing a firearm.

Another administrative issue involved officers assigned to the K-9 Unit requesting a stipend of \$600 a year to reimburse them for expenses related to cleaning the carpet at their residences. The Deputy Chief, Support Operations Commander, and Budget Officer had to discuss the expense and rationale. They agreed to pay the cleaning fee. Next the K-9 Officers requested that they be allowed to “take home” the K-9 patrol vehicles because the dogs soiled their personal vehicles. The students approved the request. Then the K-9 officers requested additional leave time for caring for the dogs. The cumulative impact was comical and the student commanders eventually realized that the K-9 officers were demanding more and more. One of the students decided that the K-9 dogs could be kenneled at the police station and no stipends were required.

Other budget issues were assigned to the Budget Commander such as the loss of federal funding for the DUI Task Force which was responsible for a 37% decrease in alcohol related accidents. The Budget Commander, Traffic Commander, and Operations Bureau Commander had to re-organize the Bureau to find 6 officers to staff the DUI Unit. Of course there were unintended consequences. Senior officers reassigned from administrative positions to DUI enforcement filed for retirement – creating more vacancies to fill. Eventually, the students crafted a solution.

The Support Operations Bureau Commander was awarded a federal grant of \$250,000 to purchase a helicopter. The objective was for the Commander to realize that an appropriate helicopter, maintenance, and staffing would far exceed the grant award and that the best course of action was to decline the grant.

Overall, given their level of knowledge and limited experience, the students did well. They started to anticipate the unforeseen consequences and learned to look beyond the immediate problem and solution.

Love Shack

Criminal Justice text books and courses do not typically address the work place complications concerning male and female employees dating, having affairs, and breaking up. Want no more: three scenarios were used. The first involved a veteran training officer dating a junior officer on another shift. There was no violation of policy or any complication as long as two worked different shifts and the relationship did not impact their performance.

Another situation involved a senior male officer having an affair with a junior female officer on the same shift. Complications included that the senior officer was often placed in a supervisory role when the sergeant was off and the senior officer was married to the precinct captain's administrative assistant. Additionally, adultery was a misdemeanor offense and the administrative assistant wanted both officers charged with a crime. The students struggled with this one. After some guidance by the instructor, the senior officer was transferred to another station. Counseling services were offered to all officers and the administrative assistant. Discretion was exercised after consultation with the prosecutor's office and no charges were filed.

One of the precinct squads was staffed by 5 young female police officers. Over the course of 3 weeks, 4 of the officers reported that they were pregnant. The Precinct Commander had to manage the 4 officers without violating federal law. Two of the Officers wanted to continue working, and two wanted to be assigned administratively. Of course officers displaced from administrative positions objected to being re-assigned to the street in order to cover the vacancies created by the pregnant officers. Eventually, the Commander was able to treat all employees fairly and re-assign personnel. Some student commanders did not believe it was safe for the pregnant female officers to work the street, but once they understood employment law, they made the correct decision.

Conclusion

Instructors can craft problems common to their respective organizations. The objectives for each exercise should include exposing the student to organizational problems, cause the student to identify the immediate problem, the underlying causes, identify root causes, and to fashion a short and long term solution. Moreover, the Virtual Organization model allowed students to engage one another, employ critical analysis, and work together to solve a problem and do so in an online environment. Course evaluations validated that the students found the delivery method superior to other online courses they had completed. Grade distribution and the quality of work indicated that students understood and properly applied traditional course materials.

Creating a virtual organization gives students the opportunity to be exposed to unique problems faced by a particular discipline. Students will be better prepared to face organizational problems and craft solutions.