INTEREL
ACTION LEARNING
FIELD NOTES

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This Action Learning Lab procedure was developed by Interel, Incorporated for use in management training workshops.

Interel's Electric Maze is used for the Action Task portion of the procedure.

Contents of this packet…

—Introduction and overview.
—Instruction sheets for: Facilitator, "Top Managers," "Middle Managers," "Group Members."
—Diagram for programming the Interel Maze.
—Maze maps for the Top Managers (maps A & B.)
—Set-up diagram.

This Action Learning procedure is designed to mirror the work situation found in many organizations. It gives participants the opportunity to observe methods and behaviors used to cope with complex/ambiguous situations.

Approximately 20 – 25 participants are divided by the facilitator into four groups. Each group contains a "Top Manager," "Middle Manager,"and 3 – 5 "Group Members." The groups are positioned at opposite corners of the Maze (see set-up diagram.) The goal of each group is to get as many of its members as possible to the opposite corner of the Maze within the allotted time.

At the conclusion of the Action Task, a debriefing or discussion is conducted to delineate specific problems that participants are encountering in their daily work situation, such as:

- Unclear vision and leadership.
- Changing rules that are often learned by making mistakes.
- Timelines that must be met even though necessary authorities are unavailable or unknowing.

Alternatively, if the Action Task is preceded by information on leadership skills or organizational concepts, it provides a chance for participants to practice these in an environment offering many of the challenges they face in the workplace.
Some of these concepts, as taken from Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*, include:

- Shared vision.
- Group learning.
- Mental models.
- Personal mastery.
- Systems thinking.

To initiate the Action Task, follow this procedure:

- •Read the following general rules to all participants…

  Group members must start from their designated corners and cross to the opposite corner.

  When on the Maze, a group member may move only to an adjacent square. Squares may not be jumped or skipped.

  Only one member of each group may be on the Maze at any time. Group members must take turns in attempting to cross the Maze. Only one person may occupy a square at any given moment.

  Group members will receive tokens at the start of the activity. Each member must have at least one token to be allowed to cross the Maze.

  If a group member sounds the alarm when crossing the Maze, they must surrender a token and return to their starting side, reversing their steps exactly. If they sound the alarm while returning to their starting side, they must surrender two tokens.

- •Assign functions, groups, and Maze positions.

- •Ask "Top Managers," "Middle Managers," and "Group Members" to gather together by function (All TMs, all MMs, etc.) , and then distribute the appropriate instruction sheet to each individual to read.

- •Go to each gathering of like-function participants and answer any questions regarding the instructions. Your answer may be deliberately vague, e.g., to the question "Are the maps oriented correctly?" you might answer "I don't know," or "I think so."

- •Remind participants that communication must be verbal; no writing materials are allowed.

- •Specify the time limits: *X* minutes for group planning, and *X* minutes of Maze activity. Distribute maps and tokens. Then announce that time has begun.

- •As this Action Task can become chaotic, you must remain attentive and in control, making sure rules are observed and penalties properly assessed.

- •If a situation occurs where it's unclear which participant sounded the alarm, request a "freeze." All persons on the Maze must immediately stop. Then ask everyone to reverse their exact route one square. When

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all have done so, ask each person in turn to advance one square, thereby determining who sounded the alarm. (It's possible that more than one person will have sounded it.) If there is still confusion or delay, ask everyone to retrace their steps to their starting sides and wait their next turn.

•Additional activity elements that may be utilized if you wish:
   —Each top manager may be given extra tokens, which team members do not know about. These are available only if the manager is asked for them.
   —You have additional tokens. You may give them out to the first team that asks for them.

•This Action Task is designed to allow participants to notice how they cope with ambiguous situations. The maps the administrators receive are deliberately arbitrary and the participants have an opportunity to discover other paths to complete the task.

•If, during the Action Task, the group becomes paralyzed by the absence of leadership from the two layers of administration, the facilitator should ask, "How is each of you contributing to your group's achievement of its key objective?" The facilitator may also invite the groups to stop and take a few minutes to discuss their approach.

•Participants do not necessarily have to wait for leadership from above— they may move ahead on their own. They may discover paths other than those that are known by senior administrators. Or they may attempt various trial and error approaches.

•During the Action Task the facilitator may impose silence (due to "computer outage,") switch members to another group ("reorganization,") or change the rules arbitrarily.

•Following the Action Task, the facilitator leads the entire group through the initial debriefing process. The participants may then meet in separate groups to discuss the work-relevance questions.

Facilitator's debriefing questions may include:

Questions that relate to the Action Task's simulation…

What happened? What did you do about it? What did you learn?

What was the task? Was it communicated clearly? (*Vision.*)

How would you describe the authority figures?

How was leadership exercised and by whom? Did you provide leadership? (*Personal mastery.*)

How did your group perform the task, as individuals or as a group? How effective was this? (*Group learning.*)

What were your assumptions (e.g., about competition?) Did they change? Did they hinder or help? (*Mental models.*)

How were events influenced by the environment and by other events? (*Systems thinking.*)

Questions that relate Action Task behavior to workplace behavior…

How do the dynamics in this situation reflect your actual job situation? How did you behave here when facing those dynamics? How do you behave on the job?

How do you deal with the absence of direction/leadership from authorities?

How do you deal with timeline pressures and absent or non-communicative authorities?

How do you deal with uncommunicated or unclear rule changes?

How well do you use your peers as resources for task accomplishment?

What did you learn from this Action Task?

You will have a limited time period to accomplish the objectives of the exercise. This will include initial planning time and time for your group members to traverse the Maze. These time periods will be announced prior to the start of the Action Task.

During the Maze crossing period, you, as Top Manager, must sit in the designated chair, screened or positioned so as not to be able to see the Maze.

You may speak only to your group's Middle Manager, with the following exceptions:

- A total of 4 minutes of "manage-by-walk-around" time, purchased at the rate of one token per minute.
- There may be occasions when the Maze is turned-off, at which time all rules are suspended.

Top Managers are responsible for the overall performance of their group. Success will be based on how many team members have traversed the Maze within the allotted time period and the number of the tokens the group has at the end of the action task.

You are responsible for helping the group achieve its objective, namely, to get as many group members as possible to the opposite corner of the Maze within the time allowed.

You are responsible for managing the team members and for distributing and surrendering team tokens. No writing material are allowed unless provided by the facilitator.

You may move freely and talk to anyone.

Top Managers may speak only to you and to no one else, with the following exceptions:

- Your group's Top Manager may utilize a total of 4 minutes of "manage-by-walk-around" time, purchased at the rate of one token per minute.

- On occasions when the Maze is turned-off, all rules are suspended.

At the start of the Maze crossing time, each group's Top Manager will receive a map showing a safe path across the Maze. The map must remain with the Top Manager at all times. Your group's Top Manager can **tell** you about the map, but can not show it to you.
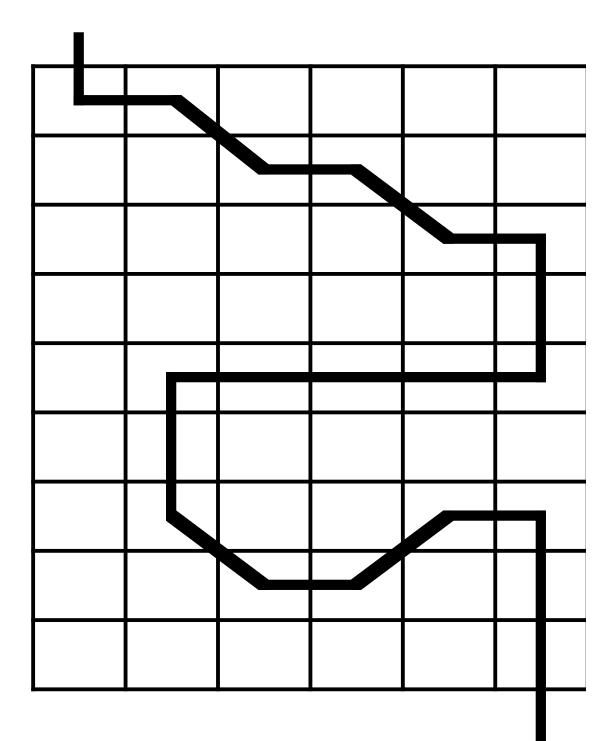
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(x20)

Your group has a limited period of time to accomplish the objectives of this activity; this includes both planning time and Maze crossing time.

At the start of the Maze crossing time, your group's Top Manager will receive a map showing a safe path across the Maze. There are, however, some conditions associated with the map—
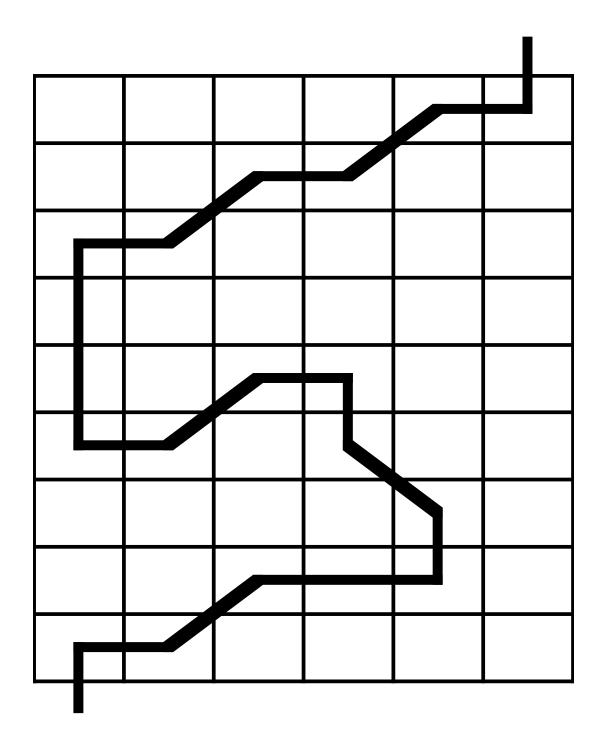
- The top manager and the middle manager can not show you the map; the middle manager can tell you about it.

- If members of several groups are on the Maze at one time, they may be on conflicting paths. Only one person can occupy a square at any time, and team members may not jump around other members to avoid this conflict. The top manager's map does not show where by-passes may exist.

- If a situation occurs where it's unclear which participant sounded the alarm, the facilitator will request a "freeze." All persons on the Maze must immediately stop. The facilitator will ask everyone to reverse their exact route one square. When all have done so, the facilitator then will ask each person in turn to advance one square, thereby determining who sounded the alarm. (It's possible that more than one person will have sounded it.) If there is still confusion, all may be required to retrace their steps to their starting sides and wait their next turn.

You may talk during the activity, but you may not use writing materials unless they are provided by the facilitator.

In general, the facilitator is aware of what actions are appropriate during the activity and any directions or rulings should be followed. Inappropriate team behavior may be penalized in loss of tokens.

(map A)

TM

MM

Group

(map B)

TM

MM

Group

Maze Grid

Group

Group

MM

MM

TM

TM

(map B)

(map A)