Board Games for Managers

Management training shouldn't be all work and no play.
These three board games can broaden management training by
instigating action, cooperation, and a healthy spirit of competition.

Board games, which most of us have played for fun at some time, are easily adaptable for use as management training tools. In fact, games in general are effective learning tools because they coax players to act, and active learning is the best kind. Games also harness the players' spirit of competition, which is the lifeblood of business. When games are played by teams, the competition also helps build team spirit and cooperation.

Using a board configuration as the basic framework for management training games allows for variety, ingenuity, and flexibility. Many different games can be designed around a basic board. Which variation to use depends on the area of management training on which the game will focus and on the learning objectives the game will emphasize.

Three useful management training games built around a basic board are "Market Share," a business unit strategy game, and "Getting There."

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Market Share

"Market Share" was designed as part of a five-day marketing management course at Nynex Corporation. The game was played on the second day of the course, a day devoted to strategy.

The goal of the game was to use strategic thinking in a market context.

"Market Share"—which is similar to a political strategy game called "Diplomacy"—is played on a 10-by-10-inch board that represents the information industry. The board is divided into 100 squares, which are divided into seven areas: television, cable, radio, newspapers, books, magazines, and software.

Five teams (two to three players per team) compete to gain the most market share. Success is based on the strength of strategic thinking, particularly competitive analysis, and on luck, which simulates the uncertainties of the business world. Play proceeds by rounds during which strategic moves, such as placement of

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chips and challenges of squares, are made. The rules determine what placements are allowed and what constitutes a successful challenge.

At the start of the game, each team has roughly equal market share overall, although teams have disparate holdings within market segments. Play begins with each team deciding

in secret where to place its chips to strengthen its own market share and to challenge that of its opponents. Then, placements and challenges are made. The team with the greatest overall market share after the last designated round is the winner.

The Prudential business unit strategy game

This business unit strategy game was designed to be part of a four-day business conference for middle-to-senior management at Prudential Insurance Company. Prudential's goal was to provide conference attendees with a clear overview of the company's 40-plus business units.

The game combines formats similar to the knowledge base of "Trivial Pursuit" and the game play of "Bingo." Participants compete in teams by trying to match business statements with their corresponding business units. Each team holds a scorecard with six slots. Two slots are for Mission & Strategies; there is one slot each for Structure, Customers & Competitors, Products & Services, and Markets & Opportunities.

Five packs of cards correspond to the five categories on the scorecard. Each card displays a brief extract from a specially written *Business Unit Handbook.* Game components include a die that shows one of each of the five categories per side and a "wild card," the Prudential rock, on the sixth side. The wild card allows a

team to pick any category.

Teams take turns trying to match the cards' strategic statements with their appropriate business units, as they compete to be the first to fill in the scorecard. Given the similarities among many of the business units and the limited information on the cards, players must think analytically to determine which business unit is being described. Representatives from diverse business units in the company are seated together at the game tables to encourage peer learning.

Getting There

"Getting There" is essentially a racing game that is used as a technical training tool for line managers. It is played on a board divided into a network of nodes, buffers, and transmission lines with five end users. A colored button-release tape measure glued onto the board is located at each end-user station.

Each team acts as a single end user whose goal is to send four packet-switched messages over the network sequentially, one message to each of the other systems. Teams make simultaneous moves each round. "Priority" cards resolve conflicts and "Status" cards dictate the state of the network. The winning team is the one who is first to send all four messages successfully.

To send a message, a team has to first create its own circuit by pulling the square metal tape measure head (the pathfinder) onto successive nodes—vertical sticks plugged into the board at network intersections—until the tape reaches another end user. Then, transmission of the packets—represented by square, numbered chips with holes in the middle—can begin over the circuit. Once all the packets have been sent to their destination, the button on the tape measure is pressed, thereby retrenching the tape

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back to base. The team is then ready to set up the next circuit to deliver the next message. "Status" cards add an unpredictable, realistic element to the game by determining whether or not any failure has occured in transmission.

"Getting There" teaches the fundamentals of packet switching—by a practical, active method—to nontechnical people. More formal train-

ing, which supplements the game experience, follows game play in the training course.

Learning through playing

Although the three games described here focus on different aspects of management training, they do have some elements in common. In each game learning occurs actively through playing. Also, each of the games, if played early in a training course, can be used as an icebreaker.

Designed to be played by teams, each of the games also engenders a sense of cooperation and team spirit that can continue throughout a training course. Last, each of the three games is instructor-free. The game and the players—who are peers—are the teachers.

The games differ in their learning objectives. "Market Share" teaches how to think strategically, the business unit game teaches how to acquire strategic company knowledge, and "Getting There" teaches a new technology. The games also differ in design and audience, but all of the designs can be changed to fit other audiences.

Because the game cores allow for flexible design around them, they are easily customized. For example, "Market Share" can be adapted to other arenas simply by changing the marketplace from the media to, say, finance. The game would still retain the learning objective that is "Market Share's" core—strategic thinking.

In the business unit game, the core is a knowledge database. To customize the game, any database can be substituted; game questions would then be created from that database. The parameters of the game—the categories, number of categories, and number of questions, for example—can be adapted to fit the new body of knowledge.

"Getting There" is the least flexible of the games, because its core is learning a specific technology. The board networks can be customized, however, and other changes can be made to teach other technology, as long as the new design uses the appropriate analogy, or model, to facilitate learning.

Clearly, games can be fun, but they can also serve a serious purpose—to facilitate active, peer learning in an accessible, practical, and relatively painless way. ∎