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# **Experiencing the Impact of Organizational Structure on Planning and Visioning Tasks**

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## **Abstract**

The various ways natural resource agencies and programs are structured and how that impacts leadership style and products is an important concept for students to understand. Leadership style and organizational structure determine visions, missions, goals and objectives that set the tone for organizations. This exercise demonstrates organizational structure and the impact of leadership style by having students work collaboratively to write a mission statement, goals and objectives within the confines of assigned structures. The class was divided into organizations with different structures by using role cards. The groups had contrasting experiences resulting in dissimilar products. The partnership group for example, was very collaborative and had a comprehensive, well-planned product as a result of shared input. The students deemed the activity as an engaging, helpful and fun way to experience and learn about the implications of organizational structure; while writing the mission, goals and objectives helped students learn the concepts.

*KEYWORDS: Experiential learning, management, organizational structure, planning, visioning*

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## **Introduction**

In leisure service management courses, the various ways an organization can be structured and the impact structure has on leadership style and products is an important concept for students to understand. Reading about organizational structure and seeing a series of organizational charts illustrating positions and their ranks with line relationships aids in understanding but does not give students a feel for how structure and leadership style can impact agency culture and accomplishments. While there are a variety of ways organizations can be structured, the most common structure is hierarchical with one position of ultimate authority such as a director or CEO and all other positions as subordinate. Hierarchical structures, while commonplace, often lead to transactional relationships and competitive environments. Communication is often limited in hierarchical structures as organizational culture often dictates that subordinates follow the chain of command and speak to their immediate supervisor first. While any leadership style can be used to manage an organization, hierarchical structures are often associated with authoritarian or autocratic leaders. Alternatives to hierarchical models include horizontal or flat structures often associated with democratic or participative leadership styles. An organization among equal partners would be an example of a horizontal structure. Participative organizations that use a holistic view or systems approach encourage leadership styles that boost collaboration, team-building, personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation and commitment and thus greater productivity (Edginton, 1997; Edginton, Hudson, & Lankford, 2001; Luthans, 1998; Luthans, Rubach & Marsnik, 1995). Organizational structure and leadership style impacts the delegation of authority as well as organizational culture. Knowing how to recognize and work within these structures may prove extremely important to professional success. The ability to navigate a formal structure versus the casual or informally structured organization or leadership style is an important employment and management skill (Sharpe, Odegaard, & Sharpe, 1994). The delegation of authority within different structures can significantly impact productivity and employee satisfaction (Edginton, et al., 2001).

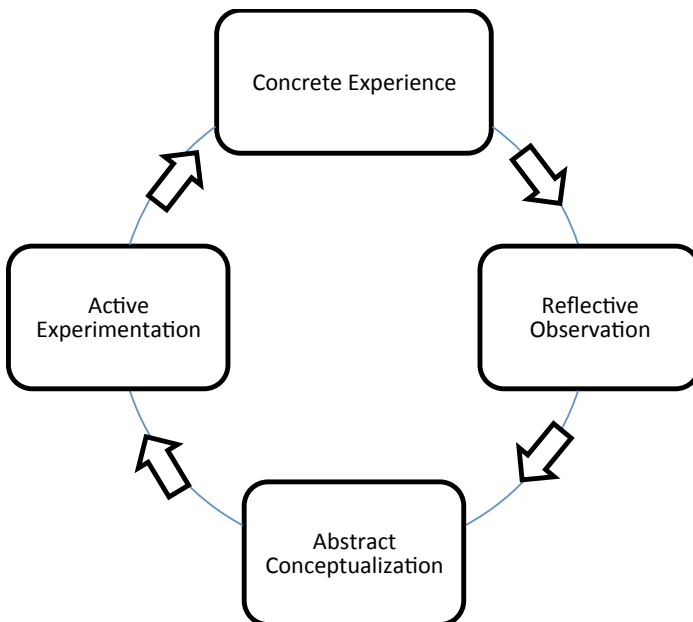
Vision or mission statements set the tone for organizations and are often determined by leadership style and organizational structure as they can be a shared vision or one determined by the top leadership position. Organizational missions should be future oriented, indicative of organizational values and culture, and motivate and direct planning (Edginton et al., 2001). Goals and objectives are the basic building blocks of strategic planning. While goals are broadly defined, objectives need to be measurable. Both need to be attainable within a specific timeline. Writing good mission statements, goals and objectives is often learned through practice and coaching. Therefore, an active or experiential learning method where students experience structure while developing a mission, goals and objectives, is a good approach to encourage learning.

### **Literature Review/Theoretical Framework**

While there have been a number of learning style models such as VAK (visual, auditory and kinesthetic) and Garner's multiple intelligences, learning styles have just two main modes – cognitive and experiential (Rogers, 1994). Rogers believes that experiential learning is more involving, intrinsically motivated and leads to bigger and longer lasting impacts. The impact may be due to the affectively based nature

of direct experiences which are better predictors of behavior than cognitively based indirect experiences such as reading. (Millar & Millar, 1996). Experiential learning is often applied in study abroad, outdoor education (e.g. outward bound), learning trips (e.g. service learning), internships and field experiences (Bacon, 1987; Bielefeldt, Dewoolkar, Caves, Berdanier, & Paterson, 2011; Liu, Xu, & Weitz, 2011). Classroom experiential learning is often associated with trades and labs (Lee, 1986; Shyr, 2011). However, it is becoming more common in higher education where it has been used to learn library research skills, hold mock trials, conduct role plays (Ahmadov, 2011; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb & Kolb, 2006), and aid in online distance education (Richmond & Cummings, 2005).

Kolb's model of experiential learning is based on the premise that learning occurs more effectively through experience (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's model involves four stages in a cyclical model and four learning styles based on the cycle. The stages of the model, which Kolb posits must all be utilized to maximize learning, are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Figure 1). Concrete experiences are dynamic and engaging activities where participants are encountering a new experience. In this stage, participants are task oriented rather than theory oriented and often operate intuitively by feeling and experiencing rather than thinking. Reflective observation is where the concrete experience is observed and reflected upon. The next stage, abstract conceptualization, builds on reflection and facilitates learning by modifying or building on concepts and theories. This stage is highly cognitive and associated with problem solving and logical processes. Finally, active experimentation involves applying or extending what was learned to new situations.



*Figure 1.* Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984)

The model is said to accommodate different learning styles that Kolb defined as accommodating, diverging, assimilating, and converging. The Accommodating style adapts to and enjoys new experiences by following intuition and using trial and error. This style learns best through concrete experiences, active experimentation and is the most prevalent style. Diverging style observes and is then able to imagine the situation from many perspectives, seeing the interrelationships and the big picture. Excelling at brainstorming, this style is creative and learns best through concrete experiences and reflective observation. The assimilating style prefers ideas, concepts and theories over interacting with people. They can assimilate many concepts and theories into integrative models. Assimilators prefer reflective observation and abstract conceptualization. Convergers like technical tasks and finding practical solutions for issues. They are decision makers and problem solvers. Convergers do well in abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2006). Learning styles have been successfully used to improve course content in college courses (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, Kolb & Kolb, 2006; Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998; Richmond & Cummings, 2005; Terry, 2001).

Variations of Kolb's four stage model includes a model adapted for starting lessons with lectures rather than an experience, which is the common teaching mode in higher education. This model moves from abstract conceptualization to concrete experimentation to reflective observation to abstract experimentation (Roark & Norling, 2010). There are also variations of experiential learning models with different stages such as the three-stage model, of doing, reviewing and planning or models stemming from Outward Bound (Bacon, 1987). However, all are based on the foundation established by John Dewey that learning is more effective when established through direct experience.

### **Activity Background**

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers an undergraduate course in Park Management (HRTM 340). This course focuses on the management of leisure services in a park. Part of the focus included skill development in issues managers have to deal with including safety, grant writing, working with employees and the public, and planning and managing facilities. Other objectives include understanding management and how leadership style and organizational structure interact and impact products. This exercise seeks to meet some of these management objectives by demonstrating various types of organizational structures and how they are impacted by leadership styles when students work collaboratively to write a mission statement, goals and objectives for a recreation center. Students had previously learned about mission statements, goals and objectives but had not learned about organizational structure or leadership style. By beginning with a concrete experience rather than a definition of terms, students experienced organizational structure and leadership styles and learned through the experience. Other stages of the experiential learning model also occurred as the reader will see in the description of the activity. Students were given time for reflective observation both during the activity and afterward in the discussion. Abstract conceptualization occurs as students discuss mission statements, goals and objectives during the activity. It also occurs in the discussion when organizational structure and leadership concepts are introduced and related to the activity. Applying their plan for a visitor center with prior knowledge to write goals and objectives involved the active

experimentation stage. Discussing how planning could be modified and leadership style addressed in future situations, involves active experimentation.

### **Description of the Activity**

**1. Introduction to the activity (5-10 minutes).** The class was assigned to develop a recreation center adjacent to a piece of land that is owned by the University Foundation. The tract of land is a 230-acre conservation area called 9-mile Prairie that is one of the largest virgin tallgrass prairies remaining in Nebraska. 9-mile prairie is home to 392 plant species and 80 birds making it hospitable for nature-based recreation. In addition, the prairie is located within a half-mile of an elementary school and it abuts campus recreation, the local airport, a few World War II storage bunkers and several private properties. Background information about the University's management of the area was relayed to the students. A website with an aerial map was shown on the screen. The students were told that their classroom assignment was to decide what type of a recreation/education/visitor center would be put on the property and where, and to write the mission, goals and objectives of this center – which could be anything they agreed upon.

**2. Role assignments (5 minutes).** The class was then divided into two groups: a hierarchically structured park board and a multi-agency partnership. A structure was created for each organization by giving each student a role card describing the organization or agency they worked for, their job title, role in the process, leadership style, and any other pertinent information. The partnership group included the State Director of The Nature Conservancy, the Public School Superintendent, an ecology professor, the Director of Outdoor Recreation for Campus Recreation, the Game and Parks Director, and the City Parks Director. The single agency group, the City's park division, included the Director of the City's Parks and Recreation Department, the Director's Administrative Assistant, the Parks Division Director, the Recreation Division Director, the Chief of Interpretation, and the Camp Director. As can be seen in how the roles were set up, the single agency group was designed to be a hierarchical structure with authoritarian, top-down leadership, and the partnership group is a horizontal structure. Role cards are in Tables 1 and 2.

**3. Explanation of Task: (5 minutes).** The task was to decide what type of recreation or visitor center groups would develop including the center's location, vision, and purpose through creative brainstorming. The task included writing a mission statement, goals and objectives for the center. Students had learned about what a mission statement, goals and objectives were previously. At the end of the brainstorming and work portion, groups would need to explain their vision and read their mission, goals and objectives to the class. Students were told to follow the role on their assigned card as they interpreted it, without revealing pertinent information or style to fellow students.

**4. Time on Task (30 minutes).** Students worked in their groups developing their plans and writing their mission, goals, and objectives.

**Table 1**

*Partnership Group*

State Director of the Nature Conservancy	You are in charge of all TNC properties and business in the state. This includes fundraising and acquiring property; which is by purchase, easements and donations. TNC is interested in saving all biologically unique areas. They are interested in preservation. You report to an involved board and constituency.
Public School Superintendent	You are in charge of the school system in the city. As top administrator, you establish school policy. You want more after-school and summer programs for area youth. Your budget is tight.
University Full Professor of Ecology	You use the prairie for research and teaching. You have several ongoing projects in the prairie. You are also managing the prairie to restore ecological integrity.
Campus Recreation, Director of Outdoor Recreation	You are in charge of campus recreation which includes 2 recreation centers on campus and the outdoor recreation challenge course facility located next to the prairie. You are also in charge of recreational outings and trips.
Game and Parks Director	You are the head of the state Game and Parks organization. You are ultimately in charge of all divisions below you such as wildlife, parks, hunting and fishing, and conservation. You are interested in getting youth engaged in outdoor recreation, especially hunting and fishing where participation has been declining. Your budget is being cut.
City Parks Director	You are the chief administrator for the city parks department. You are ultimately in charge of all divisions and departments below you. You are therefore responsible and accountable for everything in the parks. You are politically appointed. You are very good at delegating. Your budget is tight.

**5. Presentation (5-10 minutes).** Students presented their group's product to the class.

**6. Reflection (10-15 minutes).** Students discussed what it was like to work in their group, the differences in the two groups including the resulting plans, mission, goals and objectives. During this time, concepts such as hierarchical and horizontal structures as well as authoritarian and democratic leadership styles were introduced and discussed in relationship to the activity. The discussion included how the organizational structure impacted the process and the products.

**Table 2**

*Single Agency Group: The City Parks and Recreation Department*

City Parks and Recreation Administrative Director	You are the chief administrator for the city parks and recreation department. You are ultimately in charge of all divisions and departments below you. You are therefore responsible and accountable for everything in the parks. You are politically appointed. You are a top down manager and not good at delegating. Your budget is tight.
Secretary to the Parks and Recreation Director	You are staff – there is no line below you. You are the Director’s “right-hand.” You do all the scheduling and are the Director’s “eyes and ears.” You value structure and rules.
Division of Parks Director	You report to the Administrative Director. You are in charge of all public lands and their management.
Davison of Recreation Director	You report to the Administrative Director. You are in charge of all recreation programs in all park properties and centers.
Chief of Interpretation	You report to the Division of Recreation Chief and indirectly to the Division of Parks Chief as the Parks Division manages the land and the Recreation Division provides programming. You supervise all interpretive programs and sites. You value collaboration.
Camp Director	You supervise and coordinate all of the city’s afterschool and summer camps. You report to the Chief of Interpretation. You collaborate with the City School system for these programs and to serve youth. You need to be cognizant of the chain of command.

**Outcomes**

After sharing their work, the class participated in an open forum discussion similar to a focus group, during which the instructor made record of student comments. At this time, students discussed the differences in their organizational structures as the groups had contrasting experiences resulting in dissimilar products. Students in the traditional hierarchical organization thought the plan was more a product of the leader than the group. Indeed the group’s leader said the creative process undertaken by the group would have benefitted had she been less concerned with maintaining authority and let others have more input. The horizontally structured partnership group was very collaborative and had a comprehensive, well-planned product as a result of shared input. Upon reflecting on the results, the class discussed the merits of each type of organization and how it would impact productivity, loyalty and satisfaction. All

students deemed the activity as an engaging, helpful and fun way to experience and learn about the implications of organizational structure. Students found that writing the mission, goals and objectives when given a “real-world” example of the prairie they had visited while working in groups was more thought provoking and helped them better learn the concepts. Quiz questions on organizational structure, leadership style, missions, goals and objectives showed high student learning for these concepts.

### **Variations**

The class can be divided into more than two groups that function differently. The organizations can include for-profit businesses such as concessionaires and outfitters and can illustrate various types of organizational structure including matrix structures and variations of hierarchical structures. Various leadership styles can also be added to all types of structures including laissez-faire, servant, transformational, charismatic, transactional, etc. The role guidelines or role cards can vary as to detail for leadership style, constraints and other pertinent information. A group that serves as a Board that reviews the group proposals can also be added.

### **Conclusion**

This activity was designed to demonstrate leadership and organizational structure through the task of developing a mission and writing goals and objectives for an organization. The activity followed Kolb’s model by beginning with an activity rather than a lecture about concepts. It allowed for reflection during and after the activity and abstract conceptualization during the discussion when concepts of leadership style and structure were introduced and discussed. The activity also appealed to the learning styles described by Kolb. Working in groups to solve the problem of developing a mission worked well for accommodators. Envisioning possibilities and brainstorming ideas is ideally suited for divergers and also works well for assimilators. The assimilators also enjoyed assimilating the ideas and forming the missions. Applying knowledge to solve the problem and the detailed task of writing goals with specific objectives was a good fit for convergers. The students’ positive reactions, the difference in results that occurred based on group condition, and the successful learning of course concepts made this activity a success and a welcome addition to classroom activities.

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