

## **“Puzzle vision”: an experiential exercise on the importance of organizational vision**

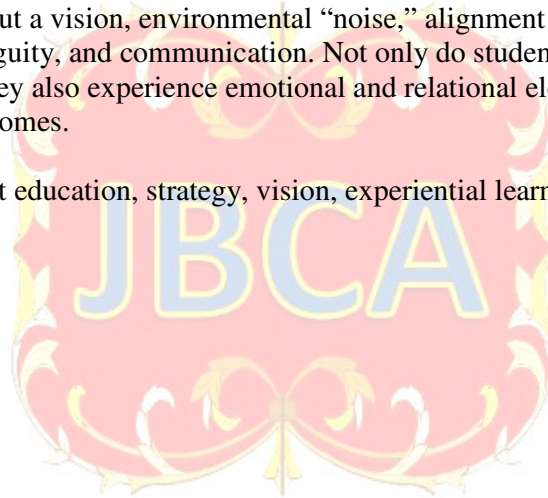
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### **ABSTRACT**

The importance of an organization’s vision and its relevance to strategy and objectives are well documented. The experiential learning activity presented here is tailored to organizational strategy/development courses and emphasizes the role of vision, resources, information seeking, and communication to attaining organizational objectives. Through the activity, students experience how having a vision and the proper resources affect the execution of vision in terms of efficiency and effectiveness. During the activity, issues arise such as operating without a vision, environmental “noise,” alignment of vision and resources, lack of resources, ambiguity, and communication. Not only do students engage the process of executing vision, but they also experience emotional and relational elements that have the potential to impact outcomes.

Keywords: management education, strategy, vision, experiential learning



Unless companies have a clear vision about how they are going to be distinctly different and unique in adding and satisfying their customers, then they are likely to be the corporate failure statistics of tomorrow (Beaver, 2000, p. 205).

## INTRODUCTION

### Vision

Vision is the basis for strategy and its execution and so has a prominent role in organizational behavior. Vision defined is an overarching concept consisting of two components, including (1) an organization's guiding philosophy including its core beliefs and values, and (2) the "tangible image" or the mission and description of the organization that direct employees' efforts toward organizational goals (Collins & Porras, 1991, pp. 33-34, 42; Isenberg, 1984). Furthermore vision has two main characteristics. According to Gluck (1981), the first characteristic is clear focus, which is deep understanding of markets, the organization's position within the market, and the ability to influence the market. The second characteristic is strategic sensitivity, or focused SWOT analyses, insights, and the identification and leveraging of organizational synergies. Another aspect of vision is that its execution is constrained by time; firms do not have unlimited time to implement their vision (Teece, Pisano, & Schuen, 1997). Relevant and effective visions must be supported by leadership and well executed (Gluck, 1981). While vision is considered essential to the success of the organization (Beaver, 2000), it is also considered a "messy" process (Gluck, 1981; Isenberg, 1984) that can be challenging for those ill-equipped to address it (Gluck, 1981).

Individuals who think in visionary terms must be adept at thinking strategically and opportunistically. These individuals are astute, have awareness for new ideas, and are comfortable with ambiguity and messy processes (Isenberg, 1984, p. 93). Gluck (1981) asserts that CEOs create a vision for their leadership teams to follow and subordinates, who by definition need clarity and control, will be frustrated with the visioning process. Others believe individuals at multiple levels of the organization should have input (Collins & Porras, 1991; Wilson, 1994). This set of assertions suggests the need to expose students to and train them in the vision development process.

### Experiential Learning

*"Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience"* (Kolb, 1984, p. 38, original italicized). This definition focuses on the iterative process of adaptation; that is, "knowledge is a transformation process" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38) that reconciles the differences between expectation and experience, leading to successful adaptation to the environment (Kolb, 1984, p. 36). While the measurement of learning (e.g., a test) summarizes the history of what has been learned or the memorization of facts, the process of learning rests on stimulating inquiry and attaining knowledge. Taking this a step further, holistic learning incorporates experience, perception, cognition, and behavior leading to adaptation. This last notion spurred tremendous academic and practical interest in the related concept of experiential learning, which has lasted more than three decades and continues today due its appeal and success. Experiential learning is defined as a "holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). This occurs through methods of play to those of scientific enquiry, and at the intersection of personal and social knowledge (Kolb, 1984, p. 36; Ruben, 1999). According to Dirkx (2001), the result of this holistic approach is meaningful learning.

Many important outcomes are associated with experiential learning. Armstrong and Mahmud (2008) conducted a study using self-report surveys that found that, when compared to work experience, the way people learn and the context in which they learn are more conducive to gaining tacit knowledge. Another study investigated the effects of using a traditional course format versus a simulation format to teach marketing. Results indicate the simulation was rated higher on learning in several areas including career preparation, educational goals, use of time, personal involvement and satisfaction with learning, and skill development (i.e., strategic planning, problem solving, managing operations, running a meeting, risk taking, and interpersonal skills) (Kling, Mayer, & Richardson, 2010; Li, Greenberg, & Nicholls, 2007). The only two areas where traditional learning and the simulation had no significant differences were course concepts and written-communication. Finally, a study of MBA students compared pre- and post-test scores and found significant differences in overall skills as well as in leadership, decision making, planning and organizing, communication, and teamwork (Hoover, Sorenson, Giambatista, & Bommer, 2010). These findings are relevant to the current exercise and will be presented in the next section.

To garner the benefits of this teaching method, educators embed certain qualities into the learning activity. Kolb and Kolb (2009) discuss experiential learning as a dynamic circle that begins with concrete experience (CE), and moves through reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE), to begin the cycle again with concrete experience. In addition, individuals have different preferences for learning that coincide with the phases of the experiential learning cycle and particular types of work. Individuals in business careers tend to be accommodators. For example, leadership development programs that used a simulation (a form of experiential learning) were rated more highly in areas of career preparation, traditional education goals, use of time, personal satisfaction, and involvement (Li, Greenberg, & Nicholls, 2007). While recent research indicates there are as many as nine learning styles, this paper will focus on the four overarching styles directly related to the experiential learning model (see Appendix A, Table 1, for a summary of the learning styles and their relationships with the experiential learning model).

According to research based on this model, management educators are facilitators of activities that allow students to experience them through their own learning styles; this leads to better learning of topic material as well as students gaining insight into their own learning process (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). This is successfully achieved by integrating all phases of the experiential learning cycle (i.e., experience, reflection, conceptualization, and action) into a learning activity. The relation of these phases and their integration with the puzzle activity will be addressed in the next section. Embedded in experiential learning design are the objectives the activity is intended to achieve. To verify the objectives have been met, they should be assessed. But, learning can be difficult to measure (Gosen & Washbush, 2004) and so other indicators of learning and the effectiveness of learning exercises are often employed. Gosen and Washbush (2004) reviewed past studies that used experiential learning activities and simulations. Based on their review, studies using experiential exercises assessed various outcomes including objective learning tests, perceived learning, behavioral outcomes, and cognitive and attitudinal changes (e.g., self-confidence, moral reasoning, and group cohesion); simulations were assessed using measures such as exams, policy-making principles and policy-related facts, administrative skills, environmental awareness, goal setting, and forecasting accuracy.

**THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITY: “PUZZLE VISION”**

In light of the importance of organizational vision and experiential learning (i.e., course substance and the learning process respectively), a simple exercise was developed with the objectives of capturing the essence and importance of vision and its execution (e.g., development and communication) using a holistic learning technique. “Puzzle Vision” is based on course content, beginning with the introduction of the topic of vision, its definition, function, characteristics, and intended outcomes. In other words, the conceptualization, relevance, and development process of firm vision are addressed. Furthermore, with regard to experiential learning, its phases, and their integration: 1) experiences are the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of completing the puzzle in a team setting, 2) reflection and conceptualization occur during the debriefing as well as during future course activities, and 3) while the fourth phase, action, may not occur immediately, opportunities for action are offered during the rest of the course and other courses, as well as during future work experiences.

Why are puzzles an effective medium for this topic? There is documentation of the very first puzzles, which were luxuries and not widely available, as early as 300 BC (Hantsweb). More general use began circa 1760 (Berkshire Puzzle; Hantsweb). Their endurance makes them a visible representation of successful vision and the strategy based on vision. First, they contain core elements of cognitive, affective, and sensory experience and are highly adaptable (e.g., subject matter, size, complexity, technological effects). In addition, the process of completing them can be executed by a person or group, in an intensive session or over time, and with or without a picture of the end result. Finally, their long-lasting appeal is based on making successful decisions in the context of their environment and market.

Still, this is information; it does not adequately capture the *experience* of the importance of vision as well as the challenges of implementing and achieving it. The small-group experiential learning activity that was developed is analogous to the topic and its issues. Table 2 (see Appendix A) presents the analogies embedded in the exercise. Generally speaking, participant groups have an allotted amount of time to complete a puzzle under differing conditions that affect the process and outcome. The team that completes the largest percentage of the puzzle wins an award, such as bonus points, an assignment deadline postponement, or nominal gift cards (e.g., \$5 from a coffee shop).

There are several important goals associated with the puzzle activity that impact career preparation, educational goals, and skill development. From the standpoint of the course material and educational goals, one focus of the activity is the importance having a well-developed and well-communicated vision. The second focus is having the proper resources that are aligned with the vision. Third, the activity highlights the impact of environmental influences such as a chaos, differentiation, or similarity on the strategy and execution of vision. Fourth, having other groups in the environment provide the opportunity for competition and collaboration between or among them. And last, the different conditions (missing puzzle picture and pieces, as well as the presence of other groups) provide opportunities to seek additional information, an essential component to successful vision development.

While the focus on the course material is significant, there is another dimension of vision that is vital to its success: the human factor. It is individuals and teams that devise and execute firm vision; this human experience comes with cognitive, affective, and behavioral elements that both create and respond to vision and its implementation. Therefore to adequately teach students about vision, they must also experience the human, more elusive aspects of the material. “Puzzle Vision” is designed to capture the intangible effects of and on people.



First, individuals and teams have the opportunity to begin developing several important skills. Specifically, individuals and teams cognitively experience the puzzle activity when they work through it and attempt to identify and define the challenges of the different manipulations. This process requires them to assess the task, organize the work, and communicate; in themselves these endeavors elicit different emotions, interactions, and behaviors. The missing resources have the potential to create uncertainty, which may result in negative affective responses such as frustration, judgments, and socio-emotional conflict. Additionally, individuals and groups experience competition between groups. Navigating these process challenges will result in varying puzzle completion rates; generally, groups with missing information have lower performance than the group with the puzzle picture and all the pieces. This adds to the experiential learning; if the groups communicate they will discover one team is performing at a higher level thereby causing additional affective responses.

This simple activity is a much better representation of the way firm vision is experienced and executed than a traditional lecture or case study because participants experience the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of experiential learning. First, their cognition is engaged when they problem solve the conditions they are working under as well as actually working the puzzle. They will also learn about affective dimensions with regard to their individual, team, and environmental experiences. Specifically, the debriefing asks them to consider when they experienced certain individual emotions such as anxiety or satisfaction, intra-group dynamics such as conflict or cooperation, and environmental influences such as similarity/differentiation, uncertainty and inter-group competition. Finally, they will review their behavioral choices in light of successful performance of the task and their affective experiences. Learning about these dynamics not only helps to reinforce their knowledge about vision, but also provides a reference they may use to understand and proactively or reactively engage their human experiences within firms.

## **“PUZZLE VISION” PROCEDURES**

### **Time Requirements and Materials**

The activity takes approximately 30 minutes to prepare, and one hour to administer (instructions: five minutes; puzzle completion: 30 minutes; debrief: 25 minutes). To prepare the activity, three puzzles with the same theme (e.g., cats, cities, landscapes, etc.) must be purchased. The puzzles should each be 500 pieces and a moderate difficulty level; this adds a reasonable level of challenge to the exercise and minimizes the likelihood of boredom. The theme represents a unique industry and having a timed exercise replicates the time constraint related to vision implementation. Each puzzle is placed into its own opaque bag. The first bag, or the Control Condition, contains a picture of the completed puzzle and all the puzzle pieces. The second bag (Condition 1) contains the puzzle pieces only; the picture of the completed puzzle is not provided to the participants. The third bag (Condition 2) contains only the “inner” pieces of the puzzle; the edge pieces of the puzzle are removed so that they and the picture of the puzzle are not given to the participants. Table 3 (see Appendix A) summarizes these conditions.

The activity should be executed shortly after the students are introduced to the concept of firm vision, but before they work with the material extensively (Rouvrais, Mallet, & Vinouze, 2010). Announce the activity, place participants into groups of five-to-six people, and read the instructions to them (see Appendix B). Also, providing an incentive for participation will generate greater engagement with the activity and create a more realistic context for team dynamics and competition. Accordingly, consider offering each member of

the “winning” team a gift card, course bonus points or a deadline “postponement” of no more than one week on a minor assignment. In the case of bonus points, because some teams were at a disadvantage depending on the condition, the teams that did not win should be given the option of earning the bonus points by writing a brief paper about what they learned from the activity. “Winning” can be decided in several ways: percentage of puzzle completed, level of collaboration, attempts at manipulating the environment (e.g., remove a distracting table cloth), or a combination of these elements.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

In order to understand the effectiveness of the puzzle activity, it was piloted with four samples at different points in time. The groups consisted of multiple sections of two different MBA courses in a private university in the northeastern U.S.: the capstone course (n = 65), and an organizational behavior course (n = 18). For the overall student sample (n = 83), the mean age of the participants was 27.4 years, 29.9% of participants had worked full time, 39.7% had worked part time, and 41.0% was male.

### **Measures**

A brief survey was developed to assess the effectiveness of the activity across several dimensions, including whether the activity illustrated aspects of the visioning process, accomplished its objectives, and was enjoyable. Sample items include “This activity illustrated the importance of aligning the whole organization,” “We had access to all the information we needed to complete this activity,” and “We were engaged in the activity.” The responses were based on a five-point likert-type scale, anchored by “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree.” Performance was measured by the puzzle completion rate.

### **Results**

Table 4 (see Appendix A) presents results in terms of frequencies by condition. It is important to note that, because individuals experienced different conditions and related positive and negative affective states, they would be expected to respond differently to certain items. Specifically, the Control condition encountered the fewest obstacles when completing the activity, Condition 1 experienced a moderate level, and Condition 2 experienced the highest level of obstacles. Results are generally consistent with these experiences. The greatest number of individuals reporting enjoyment of the activity occurred in the Control condition, followed by Condition 1 and Condition 2 respectively. The Control condition also had the greatest number of reports of the activity illustrating the importance of alignment within the organization, followed by Condition 2 and Condition 1.

## **LESSONS LEARNED FROM “PUZZLE VISION”**

“Puzzle Vision” is designed to support several lessons related to organizational visioning. First, having the picture of the completed puzzle provides a concrete example of the desired end state, leading to a smoother group process. All the participants can see what they are working toward and so their efforts are aligned. Their communication is easier and more accurate because they understand the end goal. When groups do not have this resource, participants need to collectively determine the end state. If they do not, then each individual

is working based on their own understanding, resulting in a process that is less efficient and that can cause frustration because participants do not understand *what* they are trying to accomplish. All they know is that they must accomplish it. In other words, having a clear picture of an end state directs activities, reduces misunderstandings and frustration, and leads to greater efficiencies in the process.

Next, manipulating access to the entire set of puzzle pieces provides several learning opportunities. People generally look for the corner and edge pieces when they begin a puzzle and so in this case, having all the pieces allows participants to smoothly engage the process of completing the puzzle. And of course, having all the pieces allows participants to actually meet their objective of completing the puzzle. It is important to note that when students undertake the puzzle activity, there is an assumption that the pieces, or resources, are all available. When the edge pieces are removed from the set, the expectation of having all the necessary resources is unmet, participants are at a loss where to start, and they become somewhat frustrated compared to the other groups. Finally, they have difficulty making progress toward the objective and so are less effective at completing the puzzle.

Based on these conditions, generally the Control group has the highest completion rate and the smoothest process. They have a clear vision and the resources needed to be effective and efficient at completing their objective. These conditions are also favorable toward clear communication, information sharing, and reduced frustration. The Condition 1 group will have a lower completion rate, will not be quite sure of their direction, but will execute the activity rather easily. Still, they are unsure of their direction and whether they are effectively working toward the goal. Furthermore, the lack of unifying vision leads to uncertainty about how to organize activities, and possibly frustration. For example, they cannot assign sections of the puzzle to specific individuals. They will use colors and patterns on individual puzzle pieces in an attempt to organize their actions, although they will be uncertain about the accuracy of their endeavors. The participants in Condition 2 have the greatest struggle. As in Condition 1, they are not sure of their direction and have challenges executing the activity because there is no vision from which to organize. In addition, when they attempt to engage the activity, they find there is no place for them to start. They have many disorganized resources that they cannot initially apply to the problem. They must search for a manner in which to organize the resources that results in progress toward putting the pieces together in a way that fits, whatever the resulting end state.

Several other lessons can be presented through this experiential activity. First, using themed, although distinct puzzles represents being a unique organization in a common industry. If members of the different conditions collaborate they might realize they all have pictures of cats (for example), and thus Conditions 1 and 2 would have additional information they could use to complete the puzzle. While this “follow the leader” strategy might be helpful in the short run, the most successful firms are those that develop their own vision as a means of differentiating themselves (Pearce & David, 1987).

Another lesson embedded in this activity is that of environmental awareness. The activity could be set up where the puzzles are placed on “busy” patterns or distracting colors (e.g. table cloths or gift wrap covering the table), representing environmental noise that adds challenge to completing the puzzle. One author witnessed this; the team actually removed the offending table cloth so it would no longer distract them from seeing the puzzle pieces. Not only is this an illustration of managing information, but it also is a form of “tilting” the environment to work in one’s best interests.

Finally, lessons of leadership can be considered. Leaders are responsible for developing the organizational vision. Without vision the organization is without a rudder. Furthermore, leadership must clearly communicate the vision and ascertain the resources required for managers to effectively act on the vision. “Puzzle Vision” can incorporate these

lessons in two ways. First, the instructor can assign a “team leader” and provide instructions to the team leaders, who would then be responsible for communicating the instructions to the team. The Control condition would experience little challenge and so the leader would appear fairly competent; in Conditions 1 and 2, the leaders may appear less competent because they will not have information or resources the team needs, and they will not realize it until it is discovered by the team. Another interesting situation came to light while piloting the activity. In one session, participants in Conditions 1 and 2 thought instructor error was responsible for the missing supplies. As a result, they took the activity less seriously and used little effort toward their task. This illustrates employees’ behaviors when vision clarity and belief in leadership are low.

In summary, organizational vision is an abstract concept that is difficult to teach. This experiential learning activity is designed to allow students to experience the importance of vision and related resources, and the often neglected effects these concerns can have on employees. This activity provides a memorable, fun, competitive, and effective means of student learning.

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**APPENDIX A: TABLES**

Table 1. Summary of Learning Styles\*

Learning Style & Career Preference	Learning Cycle Preference	Individual Characteristics/Abilities
Diverging Careers in the arts	Concrete Experience Reflective Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Understand experience from many perspectives</li> <li>- Generates ideas</li> <li>- People person</li> <li>- Broad cultural interests</li> <li>- Imaginative</li> <li>- Feeling-oriented</li> <li>- Information gatherers</li> <li>- Learning preferences: group work, open-minded, receive personal feedback</li> </ul>
Assimilating Careers in information science and science	Abstract Conceptualization Reflective Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inductive reasoning/understanding information</li> <li>- Theory builders</li> <li>- Synthesizer of information into logical organization</li> <li>- Gather/analyze information</li> <li>- Learning preferences: readings/lectures, explore analytical models, time for thinking</li> </ul>
Converging Careers in technology and as specialists	Abstract Conceptualization Active Experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Problem solvers</li> <li>- Decision makers</li> <li>- Practically apply ideas</li> <li>- Quantitative analyzers</li> <li>- Learning preferences: experiment with new ideas, simulations, laboratory assignments, practical applications</li> </ul>
Accommodating Careers in marketing, sales, business	Concrete Experience Active Experimentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Good at execution</li> <li>- Involvement in new experiences</li> <li>- Trial and error (“gut”) approach to problem solving</li> <li>- Adept at managing change</li> <li>- Learning preferences: collaboration, goal-oriented, field work, test different approaches</li> </ul>

\*From Kolb and Kolb (2009) based on the Learning Style Inventory (Kolb, 1971, 1985, 1999)

Table 2. “Puzzle Vision” Analogies.

“Puzzle Vision”		Vision and its Execution
Themed puzzle (e.g., cats, cities, etc.)	→	Industry of the firm
Picture of completed puzzle	→	Firm vision per se; desired end state
Puzzle pieces	→	Firm resources; alignment of resources with vision
Design of table top/tablecloth	→	Firm external environment; alignment of vision with environment; ability to influence market
Missing picture of completed puzzle	→	Environmental uncertainty; poor communication; information seeking
Missing puzzle pieces	→	Missing resources; poor forecasting; information seeking; assumption resources are available
Other groups	→	Potential competitors or collaborators; information seeking

Table 3. Manipulations in the Puzzle Activity

	Control	Condition 1	Condition 2
Picture of completed puzzle	Not Missing	Missing	Missing
Edge pieces of puzzle	Not Missing	Not Missing	Missing

Table 4. Percentages of Students who Agreed/Strongly Agreed with Statement.

Item	%	%	%
	Control	Condition 1	Condition 2
This activity...provided new perspectives	73	77	86
Illustrated the importance of alignment	90	84	86
Illustrated vision opportunities and weaknesses	77	74	86
Illustrated the importance of information gathering	67	84	77
Was highly related to its objectives	87	84	90
Was enjoyable	100	90	64

## **APPENDIX B: PUZZLE ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS**

Puzzle Vision©

Directions

A game designed to test your business skills!

Please read and follow these directions carefully!

1. This is a team exercise. A maximum of 3 teams will participate. You were assigned to a team and provided a puzzle on a random basis.
2. Your team will be given 30 minutes from the time I start the exercise to complete as much of the puzzle assigned to your group as possible.
3. You may arrange your work space anyway you wish.
4. You are free to collaborate, talk amongst yourselves, and see what others are doing. There is only one strict requirement: You may not mix and match or combine puzzles or pieces between puzzles.
5. At the end of the 30 minutes, each member of the team that has the most pieces assembled will receive a prize.
6. Have fun and good luck!

