Leadership Transition and Growth

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The concepts of leadership and leadership principles have been studied extensively. We know that the application of leadership principles is strongly determined by the personality and style of the individual exercising such leadership, the leader's hierarchical level, and the surrounding environment. Less clarity exists, however, about how to apply and understand leadership under diverse circumstances, and how to transition one's own leadership style during a lifetime of growth and professional progression.

After developing an “action card game” (as a participatory experience) to teach leadership to construction Project Managers (PM), the authors decided to address the leadership transition need with a second set of “action cards.” This second set of cards vividly illustrates the different, as well as highly challenging, demands imposed by a corporate Senior Executive’s perspective and environment.

The Senior Executive Magic Action Cards (SEMAC) game is also played with a deck of 52 cards that describe plausible executive actions. During 12 discussion rounds, each member of a four or five person “Senior Executive” team proposes an action based on his/her personal preference. Team members then vigorously advocate, negotiate, and compromise to reach a decision on the best action that, in their view, addresses internal or external events that have profound impact on the company’s future.

Although leadership awareness, education, and wisdom are programmed into the action cards, events, and procedures, the participants receive the greatest benefit from the insights gained during team discussions where personal experience and knowledge are shared. By playing first the PM and then the Senior Executive game, participants eventually are forced to ask themselves if they are prepared for, and willing to take on, such responsibilities and challenges. Feedback from past participants clearly indicates that the desired learning objectives are achieved.

Keywords construction, executive development, executives, interactive games, leadership

Introduction

While management is mostly preoccupied with establishing order and structure by devising models that reflect current reality and shape a desired future, leadership is concerned with visioning, human motivation, decision-making capabilities, and relationships among very different people whose actions, at the end, determine the
success or failure of an enterprise. Teaching leadership is quite a challenge; a teacher must transmit knowledge in such a way that the acquired knowledge leads to reflection, introspection, self-assessment and, ultimately, to a conscious adoption of personal behaviors that shape the students’ relationships with the people surrounding them. In the past, acquiring leadership skills was a sink or swim experience guided primarily by a person’s observing the few role models he/she had the fortune to encounter, by learning while doing (making non-fatal mistakes) and, if he/she was particularly lucky, by listening to a well meaning mentor or two.

The center of the authors’ research over the past several years has been leadership in the construction industry, with a special emphasis on teaching leadership in academic as well as in practicing professional environments. With the active participation of the industry-academic Leadership Research Advisory Council (LRAC), graduates of Arizona State University’s Del E. Webb School of Construction have addressed a growing number of leadership topics that are specific to the construction industry; fully confirming that the elements and facets of leadership are anchored in basic human relationships. Among the leadership topics researched and recorded during the past three years are:

1. Who’s on Your Molecule? (WOYM) “Introspection” (Badger et al., 2009b)
2. Profiling Leadership and Management Styles of Project Managers (Badger et al., 2009a)
3. Profiling the Leadership of Construction Superintendents (Adams, 2007)
4. New Leadership Model Alignment (Kashiwagi et al., 2008)
5. Wisdom Based Leadership Competencies (Badger et al., 2008)
6. Servant Leadership in Construction (Bonanno et al., 2008)
7. Enhanced Leadership Skills Improve Performance (Badger et al., 2007b)
8. Leadership Skills Truly Make a Difference (Leadership Education and Training) (Badger et al., 2007a)
9. The Magic Deck of Leadership Action Cards for Project Managers (Badger et al., 2009a)
10. Great Leadership Skills and Traits

The more we learn about leadership the more it becomes imperative to transmit these insights to future generations of Project Managers and Construction Company Executives. The research topics listed above provided the foundation for the development of participatory exercises that have been used in classroom and industry seminars to accelerate adult learning and, thus, personal growth. The “Who’s On Your Molecule” (WOYM) diagnostic exercise was developed first, followed by the Project Managers’ Magic Deck of Leadership Action Cards game. Both forced students to be introspective and learn about themselves.

The WOYM evaluation is a catalyst that induces personal improvement through the assessment of a one’s significant relationships—the evaluation measures the quality, and importance, of relationships that are encountered daily. Badger et al. (2009) demonstrate that the WOYM diagnostic exercise invariably leads to introspection. By quizzically identifying, and critically evaluating, a person’s “stakeholders”—the value of the relationship with each one, the quality that has been built into each relationship, and the role individuals or groups play in achieving common goals—that person is motivated to improve his/her own leadership skills. Only when a person recognizes, through self-examination, the results and potential of his/her own actions and behaviors does he/she constructively change and grow.
The PM Magic Deck of Leadership Action Card Game (PM Game) was developed by Badger et al. (2009). Unbeknown to the students, each action card suit represents a different leadership or management style: 1) traditional leadership (hearts ♥), 2) performance based or best value leadership (diamonds ♠), 3) traditional management (spades ♣), and 4) micromanagement (clubs ♦). Teams of four or five “players” agree, after extensive discussion and negotiation, on the 10 action cards that best address the problems of a hypothetical “Project from Hell,” thus creating a team profile. In addition, before and after the game, students are asked to individually select 10 action cards that, in their personal view, will improve the project. The cards selected are plotted on a four quadrant spider graph that illustrates how each student’s preferences have changed as a result of lectures, discussions, and the game experience. During the PM game, instructors observed that teams most often promoted spades (traditional management cards) because traditional management is practiced at the students’ companies and management is derived from the Best Practices promoted by institutes and associations.

The educational value of the PM Action Cards game is derived from: 1) study of the action cards, 2) energetic discussion and negotiation between the players, and 3) the instructor’s (professor’s) discussion and critique. The leadership insights gained while playing the game tend to move the students’ profile away from micromanagement toward a more balanced leadership/management preference. The unavoidable and intense participation helps each individual recognize his or her leadership and management style while reviewing a diversity of project management best practices. This PM action card game has been used in a number of leadership and project management courses. Positive responses revealed that students “playing” the game and working the case studies enhanced their leadership education and improved their knowledge retention.

It is well known that a person must apply a changing proportion of technical, management, and leadership skills to advance in a professional career; with leadership abilities becoming increasingly dominant along with supervisory responsibilities and influence. The growth and transition in leadership is similar to the military model where a young officer begins by leading a small group of 40 individuals and, if successful, moves up to a group of 200. Then, after additional schooling, he or she is given the opportunity to lead 800. This model continues on to 3,000, 20,000 and more. A corollary point is that in the military, as in the construction industry, a significant part of leadership development happens on the job, with daily practice being interspersed with formal education.

During discussions, the authors raised the question, “How do we illustrate and teach this leadership transition and transformation, which is essential for a successful career in the construction industry?”

With the first two exercises as an anchor, an attempt was made to develop a set of Senior Executive Leadership Action Cards that would give participants the opportunity to experience the vastly different perspectives and exponential growth of stakeholder relationships between a project management position and a senior executive leadership position. The resulting SEMAC game helps senior professionals respond to the question: “Do I have a calling to seek senior executive responsibilities?” Although any simulation has limitations, the participants in a SEMAC game must grapple with their own leadership abilities and resolve to deal constructively with the messy venue of complex, often conflicting, stakeholder agendas at the Senior Executive level. It is not for the faint of heart.
**Development and Evolution**

In creating the SEMAC cards, the authors started with the 52 PM action cards. For a complete list of the 52 PM cards (see Badger et al., 2009). First they identified the basic leadership criteria that apply equally at the senior executive level. Then, they described the differences in focus and perspective between the two positions (shown in Table 1).

It was necessary to clearly assert that events facing a Senior Executive are significantly different than those challenging a PM. Twelve unexpected events that a top executive would, by necessity, have to address were introduced into the game. Also needed was a vocabulary appropriate to the simulated Senior Executive level environment. Consequently, every PM card was reworded (most were recreated), then the cards were discussed and tested.

The basic principle, maintained throughout the development effort, was to assure players’ active, continuous and emotional involvement in confronting plausible executive situations with actions that would have a deciding impact on the success of the corporation. There were similarities to the PM game. In the PM simulation, the action cards alone drive the game and discussion; in the SEMAC game, the combination of challenging events and alternative action options create a more trying but at the same time realistic senior level environment. Additionally, the PM game focuses on a single, large project whereas the executive game focuses on unexpected events that overlay the “project from hell” with a spectrum of challenges that address very different enterprise aspects.

Another principle was established early on: that to really experience the difference and be able to respond to the question “Do I Want to Make the Leap to Senior Leadership?” both games had to be “played,” preferably on the same day. To avoid the negative and limiting connotation inherent in micromanagement as well as recognizing that the traditional symbols of ♥ ♦ ♣ ♠ used and discussed as management and leadership styles in the PM game would bias any selection in the SEMAC game, four new symbols were created: ♠, ♣, ▲, and ♦. The meaning of each symbol is explained later in this article.

After several tests and many teleconference discussions, three further decisions evolved that marked the most fundamental difference to the PM game:

1. The SEMAC game would recognize the “Project from Hell” but not have it as its center—just as such a troubled project would be of concern to a Senior Executive of a corporation but not at the exclusion of other issues demanding executive attention.
2. The four new symbols would not be associated with the management and leadership styles discussed in the PM game but would be associated purely with leadership behaviors, each different but equally valuable, and determined primarily by an individual’s character and experience.
3. The meaning of each of the four leadership behaviors is communicated upfront to the players.

As the authors drilled deeper into the concept of progressive leadership abilities, the notion emerged that leadership at the Senior Executive level could be examined from three points of view: The first is the internal one, looking at the individual—the type of person—regarding knowledge, skills, talents, core values, and personality. The second perspective is the external focus or the ability to interface with people,
build relationships, communicate, and be compatible in the work environment. Finally, the third view concerns the ability and experience to successfully exercise organizational and even industry/community/societal leadership. This concept became the cornerstone to the four leadership behaviors associated with the symbols 🌟, 🕊, ⬆️, and ⬇️.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>PM</th>
<th>Senior executive</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time &amp; Horizon</td>
<td>Project life</td>
<td>Corporation – now &amp; future</td>
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<tr>
<td>Style preference</td>
<td>Management dominant</td>
<td>Leadership dominant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Project execution</td>
<td>Corporate growth, profitability &amp; competitiveness</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Development of next generation</td>
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<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Closed molecule/focused on</td>
<td>Extensive and highly diverse but stable molecule</td>
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<td>project</td>
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<td>Molecule changes as project</td>
<td>Strong outward focus</td>
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<td>Control</td>
<td>On-time – On Budget</td>
<td>Profit – Safety – Image – Ethics – Brand</td>
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<td>Safety – Quality</td>
<td>People development and retention</td>
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<td>Recognition: Reward,</td>
<td>Tough but fair – hiring, promotion, &amp; dismissal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>reprimand or penalty</td>
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<td>Accountability</td>
<td>High – To Corporate CEO</td>
<td>High – to Shareholders, Stakeholders, Community</td>
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<td>To one project owner</td>
<td>To different owners for many projects</td>
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<td>Communications</td>
<td>Limited up</td>
<td>With Project Owners, Shareholders, Stakeholders,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Partners, Government, Society – Culture Creating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Extensively down</td>
<td>Project Performance – Risk – Running financial data</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Safety, schedule, cost &amp;</td>
<td>Customer satisfaction – Image – Behavior (Ethics)</td>
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<td>quality performance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delegation</td>
<td>Moderate – Strong P&amp;R</td>
<td>High &amp; broad by necessity</td>
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<td>tendency</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Contractor accountability</td>
<td>P&amp;R for Legal &amp; Fiscal needs</td>
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P&R: procedures and rules.
An essential development feature of the SEMAC leadership action card game was the continuous and active involvement of experienced senior EPC professionals. Only limited research support was received from graduate students. Without the total involvement of seasoned executive veterans, the right tone and idiosyncrasy prevailing at the Senior Executive level would not have permeated the different action alternatives.

As the evolving game concepts were tested, it became obvious that “learning” was occurring again in the often quiet, intense group discussions. The students brought the energy and the enthusiasm, and learned the most, while the experienced industry professionals challenged ideas and contributed wisdom “nuggets” discovered over years of active and successful “doing” and struggling with reality. Said another way, the game provided the framework and context for accelerated adult learning by “doing” and applied mentoring. During the second iteration, the research team met with two successful presidents and owners of medium-size construction companies who spent hours playing the game and critiquing each card and event - an experience that led to a third complete revamping of the action cards and game sequence. See Appendix A for a list of SEMAC action cards sorted by suit.

A key insight emerging from this continuous testing of ideas was that when the game is played with graduate students or mid-level executives, an experienced senior mentor must be on each team. During team discussions, the more diverse the participants’ leadership experience, the more valuable “wisdom nuggets” surface, which can be absorbed by the “players” within a realistic and challenging context.

The instructor’s role also kept changing, moving from lecturer to facilitator and from there to knowledge provider, “wisdom nugget” enhancer, and challenger of conventional thinking. Instructors must let the participants talk and challenge each other; but they must provide knowledge when an impasse is reached. They have to resist sharing insights too soon and must let participants discuss and flounder a bit so that they, themselves, arrive at reasonable answers. The instructors’ role is focusing on the game set-up (to assure the proper learning environment) and contributing knowledge that reinforces the students’ own new learning. This reinforcement is often achieved through the instructors’ recognizing and complimenting the struggle that led to new insights and, hopefully, increased wisdom. See Appendix B for a description of the game structure, principles, rules, and practice.

In January, 2009, the first full SEMAC game was conducted at the University of Texas’ McCombs Business School as part of a 3-week Senior Leadership and Management seminar. Twenty up-and-coming executives from the Construction Industry Institutes’ (CII) member companies devoted a full day to “play” both the PM card game and the SEMAC card game—the most demanding and challenging game test imaginable—and to discuss, intensely, their learning and reactions. The instructors, Bill Badger and Stretch Dunn, shared additional information about the SEMAC game process and assisted participants in forming teams. The game experience was educational, insightful, and fun. Exposing the game and its objectives to experienced and practicing construction professionals (both owners and contractors) fully proved the validity of learning expectations. As a means for further SEMAC game maturation, CII furnished the authors quantitative and qualitative feedback from student critiques. See Appendix C for a discussion of the case study for this event.

The game was developed by a versatile leadership research team—led by Peter H. Bopp, retired DuPont Executive and Stretch Dunn, retired USACE and industry leadership consultant—plus a team consisting of Professors Bill Badger and
Avi Wiezel of Arizona State University’s Del E. Webb School of Construction. Invaluable advice was provided by Bud Ahearn, Vice Chairman of CH2M Hill and retired USAFCE. Prototype versions—at different stages—were tested with patient graduate students and LRAC members, the latter providing critique and practical guidance based on their own executive experience.

**Structure and Learning Objectives of SEMAC**

The many iterations and development phases led the development team to define, step by step, increasingly clear-cut objectives. The structure of the game changed as different concepts were tested to meet the evolving objectives.

The game’s most fundamental learning objective is to have participants better appreciate and experience the complex leadership environment faced by Senior Executives in construction corporations. The most salient differences to a Project Management environment include:

1. A dramatic increase in stakeholder trust relationships.
2. The constant struggle to decide between *immediate* need and *long-term* implications of actions and decisions.
3. The pull between *internal* corporate focus and *external* stakeholders and corporate image/reputation.
4. The essential need to have a fair understanding of one’s own and of the corporate team’s dominant leadership profiles.
5. Acceptance that a Senior Executive’s primary concern revolves around the enterprises’ culture (behaviors/core values), vision and strategic roadmap, long-term prosperity, corporate risks, investment priorities, financial performance, and a portfolio of often widely differing projects.
6. Recognition that a Senior Leader’s relationships go way beyond a closed, trusted inner circle, and must embrace key personnel in the enterprises’ family of companies, diverse partnerships and joint ventures, clients, and leaders of the supply chain, as well as political, legal, security, media, marketing, Wall Street, industry, educational and community stakeholders. In addition, these senior leaders answer to a Board of Directors and often serve, themselves, on Boards of other corporations. In short, a Senior Leader’s sphere of influence is wide ranging . . . all based on the art of persuasion and capacity to deal constructively with the messy dimension of sometimes complementary yet often conflicting stakeholder agendas.

The four new suits with the symbols 🌡️, 🌋, ⚡️, and ⬅️ are related to equally valuable leadership behaviors and were designed to be thought provoking without passing judgment as to which is most effective:

**The Restorer 🌡️—Likes a Controlled Environment and Orderly Processes**

- Seeks to restore the balance and continuity disrupted by events.
- Most actions deal with the here and now, are predominantly reactive and based on length of experience.
- Has a good grasp of desired outcomes and ways to get there.
- Has an orientation toward quick decision making, favoring action with predictable results.
• Sees problems as separate issues or amenable to be broken down into manageable parts that have separate solutions.
• Sometimes this leader’s actions are not appropriate for the Senior Executive level; the issues should have been addressed at lower, more direct levels.

The Evaluator ▲—Is Analytical and Likes Processes
• Seeks to identify the best cost/result value on the way to reach clear goals.
• Identifies the Best Value actions based on information that predicts future success, minimizes risk, and increases performance. These actions provide the best outcome, and although they are not necessarily the cheapest ones, they are the ones that lead to an outcome with benefits making up for any added cost.
• Knows that the necessary information (all of it) always exists and only needs to be identified and communicated effectively. The availability of “dominant” information largely eliminates the need to make decisions. Individuals unable to access the necessary information end up using their own expertise to form expectations of future outcomes, which invariably introduces a personal bias. This personal bias is the major obstacle to properly understand reality.

The Tactician ◆—Works through People and Anticipates Reactions of Others
• Is concerned with corporate strategies and their long-term implications; is pragmatic and flexible in their execution.
• Is focused on the tactics and processes to reach a predetermined goal.
• Sees problems as the result of deficient processes and system failures. Looks for links, connections, and interrelations.
• Explains to everybody the reasons and thinking behind a recommended or requested action.
• Knows and sees people as individuals, seeks to identify what each person can do, aligns each individual in the most appropriate position, and then lets that person do the work.
• Has high degree of empathy; is able to sense what others feel and quickly understands their perspective.

The Strategist ★—Thinks in the Big Picture, but is Result Focused
• Is an inspirational and visionary leader. Has a clear goal in mind and a strategy broad enough to guide the group to its achievement.
• Has a strong orientation toward continuously analyzing results and adapting the actions taken to achieve the common goal in spite of changing outside events.
• Is not bound by traditional ways of thinking, rules, constraints, and bureaucracy.
• Has a high level of intellectual curiosity and a willingness to engage innovative ideas.

During the game, the compounding and confounding unexpected events challenging Senior Executives motivated the participants to recognize and think introspectively about:

1. The fundamental difference between Senior Corporate Executive responsibilities and those of a Project Manager;
2. The need of a Senior Executive leader to guide the interaction of strong individuals and teams to reach decisions for strategic action under time and event stresses; and
3. The much larger number and variety of relationships imposed by a Senior Executive’s time horizon and realm of responsibilities.

After much discussion and testing, the research team decided on 12 events that offered interesting challenges and reflected today’s fast moving construction industry world:

The alternative actions described in the cards allow participants to address these events.

An important and increasingly valued aspect of the game is having all session participants share their wisdoms and gained insights at the end of the game. Although the action cards are the same at every table, the discussions and decisions vary considerably. Sharing the selected actions, motivations and intended results between tables adds new perspectives, substantially enriches learning, and solidifies a participant’s introspection conclusions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Senior executive events</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Round</strong></td>
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All these underlying principles, objectives and insights are shared by the instructors when discussing leadership research results. In most cases, teams will recognize their own preferences and traits at the end of the game, and will articulate them during the sharing of wisdoms gained and the discussion of what was learned.

**Preliminary Findings**

During the development phase and the repeated “playing” of a redesigned game, much was learned about teaching leadership as a participatory experience. Grouping these insights in common leadership and management elements illuminate the basis for SEMAC’s rules and processes:

- **Decision-Making** was observed primarily in five different styles with the first two dominating:

  1. **Participatory.** The team listened to alternatives, analyzed implications and reached its decision by majority vote.
  2. **Proactive.** The team searched for a decision, considered options, weighed the implications and possible consequences and collectively took responsibility for the outcome.
  3. **Long-Range Oriented.** The decisions concentrated on the long range consequences (Big Picture) even at the expense of short-term pain.
  4. **Balanced.** The team displayed a balance between an analytical and a “feeler” orientation in reaching decisions.
  5. **Thinking.** The team was analytical, precise, and logical; processed a lot of information, asked pertinent questions and largely ignored the emotional or feeling aspects.

- **Team Building** is a side benefit obtained by the participants playing the SEMAC game. It is indispensable for each team to quickly develop and adopt specific principles that will guide their group discussions. Each team member must figure out the other team members’ management or leadership style by looking for patterns, asking questions, and then adapting his/her own behavior. Participants soon perceive their team’s natural style in reaching a decision regarding actions to be taken, which, once established, becomes the team’s “mantra.” As the game progresses, participants begin to realize the difficulty inherent in selecting between apparently similar options; they increasingly strive to think through the short-term and strategic implications, balance risks and opportunities, and explore possible unintended consequences. While team members usually exhibit a desire to reach a consensus, quite often the CEO has to make the ultimate call due mostly to time constraints. Half-way through the rounds some teams begin to search first for the big picture and only then select a matching action card or write the team’s own proposed action—a “Smart Card.”

- **Style and Behavior** displayed by the teams can be described as:

  1. Seeking relevant information and listening well.
  2. Displaying candor and openness.
  3. Being visionary and looking for the big picture.
  4. Making sure communications are honest and open.

Communication, in particular **listening**, ranks very high on the list of important leadership traits in much of published literature. When game participants were asked
how difficult it is for them to really listen—effectively listen—to other team members, their reflective answers were revealing in their extremes:

1. Not at all, everyone contributes great ideas.
2. Relatively easy; all participants listen to each other’s input and show great respect for each other’s options, choices, and explanations.
3. It is challenging to understand different styles and viewpoints and not “talk over.”
4. At times it is very hard—when some individuals look for the big picture while others focus on details.

**Creativity** was also evaluated. The team’s assignment to prepare “Smart Cards” when members believe that none of the action cards provide an appropriate response was inserted into the game to obtain constructive feedback, which would allow continuous improvement of the action cards. There has been less use of “Smart Cards” than expected. It appears to be difficult for the teams to be creative under the stress of unexpected events and time constraints. The few “Smart Cards” that were collected primarily used a combination of actions extracted from the original action cards; arguing that the combination provided a more complete response.

**Learning and Wisdom Gained**

Participants have gleaned quite a bit of wisdom from playing the game. Asking them to articulate their new insights, note them on their score card, and share them with the whole room is an effective way to internalize the learning and induce eventual behavioral changes. Here are typical examples, collected from different games and grouped in the same four categories, which clearly indicate that the game achieves the intended learning objectives, is educational, and addresses leadership at the executive level:

**Decision-Making**

1. Because group discussions were excellent, the team arrived at the best decisions.
2. It is unlikely that any one interpretation is correct, consequently requiring the collaborative effort of others.
3. Insights gained from a collaborative effort show that the first option is not always the best option.
4. In the discussion process, senior leaders all have good input, but the decision comes down to one person.
5. It is very helpful to have a senior individual in the group; different perspectives are invaluable.
6. Judgment is needed to accept compromise at times or hold firm in support of one’s core values.
7. Start with the end in mind (big picture), then look for possible solutions.
8. It is necessary to think forward several steps and consider potential outcomes.
9. Ensure continuing focus on key success factors and don’t lose sight of key stakeholders.
10. Balance must be maintained between handling immediate incidents and keeping one’s eye on the ball for the continuing business/operation.
11. Quite often it is necessary to avoid only reacting and instead consciously analyze and think!
12. The concept of imagining unanticipated consequences and unexpected consequences is important to understand; team members need to think through an action before making a decision.

**Team Building**

1. A team approach yields better outcomes than any individual’s perspective.
2. Leadership requires good team members, nobody has all the answers.
3. Collaboration is good and other insights are required; the first solution is rarely the best.
4. Group knowledge and experience combined into a team effort outperforms individual effort.
5. As an executive, one may be tempted to surround oneself with individuals of similar experience/background to ease the decision-making process; however, even though it is more challenging for a diverse group to reach a conclusion, a better decision is the outcome.
6. Only a team will take members from a project focus to an executive focus.

**Leadership Style and Behavior**

1. A senior executive must always display poise and confidence versus overreacting to a situation.
2. A leader can reframe any “problem” into an opportunity and be guided by his or her personal and corporate core values.
3. Leaders need to be open to new ideas.
4. Senior leaders have to work on day-to-day issues as well as address long-term issues to ensure that the day-to-day issues don’t come up again.
5. Interpretation of both the events and the cards is unique to each individual.
6. Directing a discussion to ensure it remains constructive is a valuable leadership skill.

**The Importance of Listening**

1. Listening was essential; each team member thought he or she had a good action card until hearing from others.
2. Listening carefully to another’s viewpoint is critical in really understanding different insights.
3. When everyone is listening and contributing, good solutions are achieved and the experience is better.
4. Be an active listener by keeping an open mind to the opinions of other team members.
5. Listening is important—it is needed to exchange options; each team member benefits from the experience of others.
6. Critical to the CEO was listening, considering the ideas of others, being inclusive, looking externally and internally, and considering each action.

This feedback/wisdom list practically covers the leadership traits needed by executives and reinforces the abilities participants must develop to become effective Senior Executives or leaders of influence and consequence. In another study, Badger et al. (2007) identified the following leadership topics: Teamwork, Empowerment, Delegation, Diversity, Servant Leadership, Stewardship, Personal Growth, Foresight,
Openness, Healing, and Giving Feedback. These leadership competencies are reassuringly aligned with the wisdoms articulated by the game participants.

The importance of reflection and feedback at the end of the game exists in the game being totally participant driven and unstructured. All other data collected during the game is determined by the individual’s format and team scorecards.

Feedback about the Game as a Learning Experience

As in all teaching and learning endeavors, the question of the effectiveness of the processes used to transfer knowledge and create motivations is of great interest. Participants are always asked to openly and honestly share their reactions to these games. The following participant comments are reassuring and indicate that the learning objectives are being achieved:

- Interesting game; makes you look at responses needed from different levels.
- Good simulation. Limited by the idea (or perception) that there is only a single chain of actions that can be engaged.
- At first, I felt limited by the cards, but then we began to discuss the big picture first before even looking at the cards. Very helpful.
- Felt good to be involved in the “big picture” decision-making.
- Excellent to build interaction, no way to sit back; it required focus and attention. A great process to learn by.
- Enjoyed the opportunity to think and respond/act at the senior leadership level.
- It was very useful for introspection to my own decision-making tendencies.
- Great educational game. Gained a greater insight into the role of the senior executive.
- It was great working with multiple, talented decision makers.
- The distinction between “PM” tendencies and senior leadership decision-making became obvious.
- Interesting—provoked thought and team building; required persuasive communication skills.
- I worked on being an active listener and could see how my efforts to do this expanded my mind regarding possible strategies in response to events.
- I enjoyed working through each problem with each person providing input—often arriving at one, agreed upon solution.

Conclusions

- The games keep the students’ full attention and engage them in thinking, learning and interacting.
- It is extremely effective when instructors lecture less and teams work in an interactive environment.
- The most learning takes place during peer discussions—when team members decide which action card to select; addressing why the card is selected and the potential, unanticipated consequences.
- Stating a position, having it challenged, having to defend it, and reaching a decision (based on whatever style the CEO imposes) is a powerful learning process.
- The more experienced (capable) a participant, the greater the opportunity for peers to share meaningful insights. Significant insights surface when seasoned
professionals actively engage in thinking, formulating, discussing, and justifying their creative efforts.

- Playing the PM game before playing the SEMAC game enriches both activities. Participants are led to “elevate” their thinking and recognize the more complex and diverse environment of a Senior Leader. When played “back-to-back,” these games provide an excellent framework for attendees to stay engaged, learn from peers, and, most important, retain and internalize new knowledge.

- The SEMAC game provides an efficient way to show participants the difference between PM level leadership and Executive leadership.

- The wisdoms learned and shared clearly indicate that the game achieves the desired learning objectives, is educational, and is a useful, inexpensive simulation for addressing executive level leadership.

The authors trust that the games, as well as the exchange of thoughts, will help participants to introspectively consider if making the senior leadership leap is their calling.

References


Appendix A—The Executive Action Cards

THE RESTORER—Seeks to restore the balance disrupted by events

2 Travel ASAP to the site to assess issues, identify root causes and implement on the spot actions that address them. Establish report-back methods for follow-up meetings.

3 Determine next quarter’s minimum financial needs, establish priorities, propose restrictions to further reduce needed bank loan. Reaffirm the principle of individual accountability with minimum supervision.

4 Senior Project Sponsor leads an on-site Root Cause Analysis with the project team to jointly discover the issues that underlie this incident. Ask the team to propose solutions, through consensus decide on actions, then implement.

5 Jointly with client issue public statement to counterbalance any repercussion from the PFH Project. Celebrate the success and recognize contributions. Proceed with the execution plan. Meet with local authorities and other stakeholders to establish relationships and create trust.

6 Discuss financial and potential political implications at a special Corporate Leadership Team meeting. If no established security plan is available, create a three person “Emergency Response Team” with powers to take immediate action.

7 Hold reporter off until a more complete picture is available. Prepare documentation that, given the political and media exposure, anticipates the problems. Controlled message traffic may be required.

8 Offer opportunities to transfer to the new venture area. Provide basic skill training in chemical engineering principles, pipe design, safety, instrumentation and environmental protection.

9 Proceed with project as client demands but state, and document, your position and objections clearly. Let owner know that he/she assumes sole responsibility and liability for the stated Environmental Protection (EP) deficiencies.

10 Execute “shuttle diplomacy” to nurture trusting relationships. Keep tabs on both companies’ progress toward cultural integration. Recognize individuals making a special effort in understanding each other’s culture.

J Address in writing each concern expressed by Board members and stockholders. Support decisions with five-year growth data projections and opportunities opened by current direction.

Q Request deferment of a few retirements until the company’s long-term succession plan can absorb the unexpected change.

K Pre-empt rumors and misunderstandings by reviewing the project conditions and the key actions taken with stakeholders, authorities, and a few professional members.

A Meet with the client’s executives and authorities to assure them that concerns are being addressed and are under tight control.
THE EVALUATOR—Seeks to identify the best cost/result value to reach clear goals

2 Every Senior Leader shares what he/she knows about the project and states his/her trust/distrust in the “PFH Project” team. Discuss and agree on the support the Senior Project Sponsor will provide.

3 Until a clearer picture emerges, apply for bank loan. Openly recognize the financial challenge the corporation will face over the next quarter and call for everybody’s support. Request ethical behavior, honesty and good team relationships from everybody.

4 Request a full investigation of this incident. Ascertain that affected members are properly compensated and cared for. Broadly restate the corporate core values. Share findings Corporate wide.

5 Strengthen relationships by introducing key team members to the client’s top executives. Implement the agreed-on personnel reassignment plan. Discuss the resulting personnel shifts with clients.

6 Discuss options and offers the company is willing to make. Designate one Senior Leader to travel to site to be able to respond rapidly to changing conditions and make commensurate offers.

7 Assign a Senior Leader as single spokesperson. With the potential for political and media attention to the Corporation’s problems, reinforce the confidentiality of communications and project data. Establish secure channels.

8 Schedule a series of video conferences to review the larger corporate vision, goals, and growth with employees. Link the corporate and individual opportunities to the need for self-driven personal growth and development.

9 Insist on your position. Ask Corporate leaders from different levels to meet with client counterparts to explain rationale of added Environmental Protection investment. Base all discussions on sound science instead of national laws.

10 Ask leaders at different levels to establish a quality relationship with their counterparts. Break down barriers and learn about each other’s culture by engaging key people from both companies in joint short tasks; accomplishment will create powerful cultural bridges.

J As a Leadership Team, analyze concerns expressed by Board members and stockholders. Evaluate pros and cons of continuing the current course. Communicate the resulting decision.

Q Evaluate internal replacement options. If no candidate is found internally, begin external recruiting process with careful analysis of possible impact. Increase reward opportunities for high performers in order to surface long-term possibilities.

K Don’t rush to a premature judgment. Provide Senior Leader a copy of project status reports and correspondence of past four months. Ask PM to come to HQ and schedule comprehensive review meeting two days later.

A Revisit the analysis of internal and external, present and future, risks of all projects, and develop detailed plans to address those risks. Institute a periodic risk report for Senior Leadership.
THE TACTICIAN—Focuses on the tactics and processes to reach a predetermined goal

2 Check the Corporate body for knowledge and lessons learned from past experience. Ask individuals that implemented successful responses in the past to step in once more.

3 Develop six- and 12-month earnings and cash flow projections. Get a loan to bridge the period with negative cash flow. Appeal the IRS ruling submitting additional supporting documentation.

4 Outsource. Hire a consultant that specializes in this field to bring in new perspectives. Charge the consultant with reviewing all internal procedures, and develop a process to implement agreed-on innovations corporate wide.

5 Create alignment. The Senior Project Sponsor visits the site and participates in the kick-off event. Share vision and expectations, and review roles (chain of command) and accountability. Get people to believe in themselves by asking them to set their own challenging goals.

6 After discussion with US authorities, summon client’s representative to jointly meet with reputable reporters. Proactively provide project status and inform reporters about actions taken.

7 Set up a formal press conference inviting other reporters. Describe, in an honest and straightforward way, the issues and actions being taken. Make projections about recovery without assigning blame.

8 Hire a PM experienced in Chemical Plant Construction. Assign upcoming, young engineers as understudies. Institute brief, weekly project performance reviews to assess progress and address new issues early and collectively.

9 Insist that the Environmental Protection investment is needed. Offer to finance 50 percent in exchange for a determined fraction of the client’s future income from this project.

10 Add to the corporate team an advisor familiar with the local culture. Cross-transfer one or two experienced managers for one to two years. Frequently bring personnel from new subsidiary to headquarters to foster trust and teamwork.

J Recognize inadequate communications as the key problem. Develop and share a comprehensive Business plan based on current direction. Ask Board to indicate additional information needs.

Q Identify new candidates by reassessing high performers’ talents, strengths and weaknesses. Realign jobs and responsibilities that match employees’ skill levels and provide multiple development and progression paths.

K Ask the Corporate legal team to assess legal implications, responsibilities and the potential for legal recourse/demands against non-performing entities.

A Seek the counsel of your internal circle of trusted role models and independent advisors. Ask for their frank critique of contemplated actions. Accept and explore new ideas based on different experiences.
THE STRATEGIST—Concerned with corporate strategies and their long-term implications, being pragmatic and flexible in their execution

2 Each Senior Leader takes responsibility for one or more previously defined internal and external task needed to protect the corporate integrity and image. Set a periodic reporting schedule.

3 Revisit financial projections of all large, active projects. Accelerate paperwork to maximize client’s payments for work done. Investigate financing options in anticipation of concerns Wall Street analysts and other external stakeholders may have.

4 Create a “Discovery Team” chaired by a Senior Executive with PMs as members. Charge the team with researching the root causes of all recorded incidents and develop new concepts and processes to give this aspect the high profile it needs today.

5 Re-evaluate external risks and develop a response plan for all major projects. Be realistic and broad in identifying controllable and uncontrollable risks. Look for patterns, priorities and unexpected consequences. Get input from diverse and unconventional sources.

6 Establish a strategic crisis team to respond to unexpected events that cannot be handled at lower levels. Besides two Senior Leaders, include members from Legal, Engineering, HR and Security.

7 Be openly proactive. Prepare factual statements and issue them to appropriate news centers. Invite one reporter to visit his/her choice of two active sites in the U.S. Make it clear that the press has rapid access to a corporate spokesperson.

8 Make the move into new areas a part of the corporate vision. Place the new opportunity within a comprehensive corporate growth plan. Realign investment priorities. Assess new external stakeholders.

9 Discuss your corporate values with the client and express your conviction that the added Environmental Protection (EP) investment is good for international business. Offer to withdraw if EP is compromised.

10 Identify and discuss broadly, in both companies, the benefits and problems of integrating two distinct cultures. Expect mutual tolerance for differences (religious, priorities, etc.) but insist on a single set of corporate values and working practices.

J Visit Board members in order to listen to and understand their concerns. Review with them the rationale and risks of the current direction and recent decisions covering options and alternatives.

Q Review the company’s active succession plan. Accelerate opportunities to test the performance of possible successors under diverse conditions.

K The Senior Project Sponsor reviews all available project documents, talks to the PM and reports back to the Leadership Team within two days with recommended corrective actions.

A Discuss the corporate problems and issues at a Senior Leadership meeting and determine if they reveal system, process or people development deficiencies. Use the “PFH Project” as the trigger for a complete investigation, possible restructuring, or changes in the strategic road-map.
Appendix B—The Game: Structure, Principles, Rules and Practice

The SEMAC game has five key components:

1. A deck of 52 Action Cards divided into four behavioral suits (The Restorer ☽, The Evaluator ⚫, The Tactician ⚖, and The Strategist ⚞);
2. Twelve unexpected Events introduced by the instructor via PowerPoint at different stages during play (the PowerPoint presentation includes an introduction, a practice round and game instructions);
3. A “Keeping Track” scorecard to record team decisions with their rationale and their potential unintended consequences;
4. An individual scorecard to anonymously record each participant’s view of his/her team’s decision-making process, style and behaviors, wording of the “smart cards” (if used), and his/her personal learning “nuggets” and reactions to playing the game;
5. A “Project from Hell” Scenario (amplified from the PM Game to highlight the corporate perspective).

Teams playing the SEMAC game—in roles of Senior Executives—consist of a maximum of six people: 1) the CEO, 2) three or four other corporate Senior Executives, and 3) a trusted Mentor. After introducing the corporation’s background, the instructor distributes two decks of cards to each table: Each team member receives only certain pre-arranged cards from the first deck, while the mentor has access to the complete second deck. A scribe is selected to complete the team scorecard after each round. The instructor then reviews the game rules using the PowerPoint presentation. The differences in the card suits and types are explained; i.e., some cards are specifically tailored to an upcoming event, others may be used for multiple events, and the “Smart Cards” are used when the team decides on an action of its own design.

Round 1 (Practice Round)

The instructor now runs a practice round to familiarize players with the game protocol and surface as many “player” questions as possible. The practice round focuses exclusively—for one time only—on the “Project from Hell” familiar to players from the previous PM Action Card game. The first event is used to illustrate the game’s rules and principles and states: It is 8:00 a.m., the client’s chairman has called the CEO with concerns about his big project—the “Project from Hell.” The CEO has called all Senior Executives to meet in his/her office to decide what actions to take.

The game begins with each team member reviewing his/her individual hand of action cards, thinking about the implications, and discussing the various individual proposed corporate actions. When no agreement is obvious, the CEO decides on an action using whatever style he/she desires (e.g., participatory, autocratic, etc.). Once the decision is made, the scribe records the “Why” and the possible “Unintended Consequences.”

In the practice round only, other implications are formally addressed such as:

1. The end-result envisioned
2. The speed of achieving results
3. The change intended by the action
4. The other stakeholders
The game would take too long to play if every one of these dimensions were systematically considered in every round. By doing a more thorough treatment of other considerations in the practice round, the proper mindset is established and an appreciation of the complexity of each decision illustrated. In a round-robin fashion, the “CEO” now reveals to the whole room his/her selected action card, describes the process used, and states why the selected action will address the “Project from Hell’s” compounded troubles.

To promote understanding of the SEMAC game, the instructor describes how the PM and SEMAC games are the “same” and where they “differ.” In the PM game, participants develop the events that will turn the project around. In the SEMAC game, the events are imposed and designed to lead the teams over a wide assortment of circumstances faced by the enterprise that are not connected to a single project. Most of the participants will have experience at the PM level, but can rarely look back at much corporate level exposure.

**Rounds 2–12**

Sequentially, the instructor introduces events that may happen in the life of a corporation. Each player in turn advocates, within his/her team, an action card from his/her hand to address the issues raised by the event presented. The team discusses the various, plausible actions given in the team members’ proposed cards to determine, from each member’s individual point of view, which one is the most appropriate response from a corporate point of view. If no consensus emerges, the CEO makes the final decision based on whatever style he/she chooses to exercise. After a predetermined time—usually 12 minutes at the beginning but progressively less as the game advances, the instructor introduces a different, unexpected event that compounds the original situation and may or may not have a direct impact on the “Project from Hell.” Every one of the twelve sequential events, however, has decisive implications for the health and future of the corporation.

**Some Practical Game Playing Experience**

- The optimum number of tables is between four and six (20 to 30 players). With a larger number of players, the game slows down significantly as the instructor needs to address more questions and support a larger number of discussions. More than six tables are almost impossible to control, even with two instructors.
- Taking the participants step-by-step through the game in a regimented practice round is extremely important. Professional adult students are conscientious and want to do it right the first time. Players need to concentrate on the events and action cards, not on the rules of the game. Making the practice round slow and deliberate enables subsequent rounds to go smoothly without distractions as to how the game is played. Once participants are in their comfort zone, each succeeding round may be conducted in less time. However, the instructors usually have to close down discussion and move to the next round. A round varies between 12 minutes (practice round) to as little as eight minutes for later rounds.
- The decision time decreases with each round due to improved teamwork and a better understanding of each person’s contribution. Team members increasingly share ideas, allow for creativity, think in terms of organizational impacts in addition to project impact, and struggle with maintaining consistency with their
own core values. In facilitating and controlling the time between rounds, the instructors have to allow time for participants to consider appropriate responses, evaluate, and decide among alternatives.

- Up-front time and advice must be provided for the teams to go through the four phases of team building.
- Rapport gained between participants prior to the game is very valuable. Having the instructors introduced the evening before, then having them share breakfast with the participants the next morning will pre-establish a professional relationship that will be comfortable and challenging. Unfamiliar instructors following a “drop in and conduct a class” format will have more difficulty maintaining a high level of participant involvement over the course of a full day.
- Introducing jokes and humor helps make the learning fun.
- To be effective and credible, instructors presenting this material benefit from having had senior executive experience. They serve as knowledge providers, facilitators, challengers of conventional thinking, judges and mentors in promoting the learning process.
- An effective and fun approach at the end of a game is for one instructor to play an ENR reporter, and with a hand-held recorder ask each participant for comments. It helps students practice the art of thinking in coherent, succinct “sound bites.”

Appendix C—Case Study of the CII Game at the University of Texas

The first full SEMAC game, conducted at the University of Texas in January, 2009, provided a wealth of information, both on the effectiveness of the game as a teaching and learning tool and in gaining new insights about, and acceptance of, the subject itself: leadership. When 20 active and experienced construction professionals intensively engage in thinking, formulating, discussing, and justifying proposed actions to address complex industry challenges, it is inevitable that new insights are gained and unsuspected wisdom emerges. The research team knew that all the participants were well educated, experienced in EPC and brought significant knowledge to the session; therefore, the participants were eager to capture this knowledge. Data was collected about the CEO’s decision-making style, the teams’ response styles and behaviors; the extent of active listening, and wisdom/insights acquired. To evaluate the game itself, the research team recorded everyone’s personal reflections about the experience. In training sessions, significant knowledge that enriches the seminar often is generated in discussions, but this knowledge is lost once the session is over. To prevent this, and really anchor any new learning, the instructors prepared a written feedback document that was sent to each participant a week after the 3-week seminar.

As part of the 1-day exercise, participants played the PM game in the morning and then the SEMAC game in the afternoon. The correlation among management and leadership profiles revealed by both games proved to be highly consistent.

The authors have never had a group score as high in the traditional management style. There was little movement of individual preferences in the entry and exit assessments (see Table 3). Evidently, just playing the PM Game did not move these active professional participants toward more leadership type actions. In this seminar at the University of Texas, the participants were all from large, well established CII member companies with solid and well structured management cultures and high awareness of the CII best practices. This probably lead to a high percentage of
spades or traditional management cards, which is understandable when recalling that the spade “action cards” were derived from CII and PMI research. In prior seminars—1- and 2-day leadership seminars—when there was greater participant diversity, students became more aware of leadership principles during the PM game and moved away from management toward leadership.

Calculated another way, using the Movement Factor, the CII participants moved 0.6 toward leadership. The Movement Factor compares the entry and exit assessments with each participant getting a point when he/she selects one less black club card and selects one more red card.

There was no data to relate the PM suits to the SEMAC suits. In designing the SEMAC cards, the authors purposely avoided any correlation between the suits to avoid introducing an unintended bias. However, selection data did reveal decided preferences that can be related to management and leadership styles.

The team profiles revealed by SEMAC showed equal percentage of cards selected in the three suits of Strategist, Restorer, and Tactician with a much lower percentage for the Evaluator cards. The participants seemed to be less inclined to do the detail problem evaluations. This may have been driven by the lack of time allocated, but it also may be inexperience in creative thinking at this level.

Some general observations and conclusions can be derived from the above data:

- The Yum Team selected two (2) dominant suits, the strategist and tactician cards. The team was greatly influenced by the traditional management action cards in the PM game.

**Table 3.** Game card selection preferences

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Suites</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Teams (%)</th>
<th>Individuals In (%)</th>
<th>Individuals Out (%)</th>
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<td>Spades ♠</td>
<td>Traditional Management</td>
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<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearts ♥</td>
<td>Traditional Leadership</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs ♣</td>
<td>Micromanagement</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamonds ♦</td>
<td>Best Value Process</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 4. Team card selections during PM Game

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suites</th>
<th>Team</th>
<th>YUM</th>
<th>FIRE</th>
<th>H 4</th>
<th>ACES</th>
<th>KIWI</th>
<th>REGEN</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♥</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>♣</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♠</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

♥ Traditional Leadership Action Cards.
♦ Best Value Action Cards.
♣ Micromanagement Action Cards.
♠ Traditional Management Action Cards.
The Firehouse 4 Team selected one (1) dominant suit—that of strategist. Team members were not consistent in the PM game as they selected two micromanagement and seven traditional management action cards, yet in the SEMAC game, they all worked on identifying the big picture.

The Aces Team selected restorer cards as its one (1) dominant suit. This is consistent with preferring the more traditional leadership action cards in the PM game at a higher preference rate than all the other teams added together.

The Kiwi Team selected two (2) dominant suits, the restorer and evaluator cards. Members of the Kiwis team aligned themselves in the PM game by selecting four diamond action cards representing best value process.

The Regen Team selected three (3) dominate suits, the restorer, the strategist, and tactician. The Regen’s PM card selections showed an equally broad and encompassing affinity for traditional management and best value action cards.

During the SEMAC game at the University of Texas in Austin, it quickly became apparent that the instructors needed to save time due to pre-established schedule constraints; 150 minutes were allocated for playing the game when realistically ≥180 minutes were needed. To accelerate the game, only one of the five teams “reported out” its card selection, sharing the “why” and the possible “unanticipated consequences” that members identified. The PowerPoint™ slides that spelled out
the meaning of the four SEMAC game suits were not presented. Instead, large hard
copies of these slides were distributed. In rounds 10 and 12, the instructors made up
time by eliminating the team discussion and instituting a 2-minute, open-class discus-
sion. The use of an egg timer and bell helped. The verbal, round-robin collection of
wisdom statements at the end was suppressed. The wisdom statements were received
in written form. In addition, voting for the best “Smart Card” was eliminated.