

Action Learning Initiatives

Uditha Liyanage

The Tsunami, which struck Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004, killing nearly 40,000 people and displacing over one million people, was a result of one of the most powerful earthquakes that hit the Asian continent with its epicenter at Aceh, Indonesia. The Postgraduate Institute of Management (PIM) recognized the need to be actively involved in the recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation processes. To achieve this objective, the PIM, led by the Director, Professor Gunapala Nanayakkara, launched the Tsunami Disaster Management program in January 2005.

Management education is often criticized for failing to adequately prepare students to cope with real world managerial problems. For example, MBA curricula have been criticized for producing graduates who do not have the ability to communicate effectively, to set goals, lead teams or think intuitively. The country needs graduates who not only have the ability to analyze and solve organizational problems, but also have the competencies to handle crisis situations and take leadership in multiple situations. PIM's Disaster Management Program engaged MBA/MPA students in recovery and reconstruction processes, giving them an opportunity for action learning, and to take leadership in the recovery and reconstruction processes - a new challenge in Sri Lanka's management education.

Dr. Uditha Liyanage is Head, Academic Affairs and Senior Faculty, Marketing at the Postgraduate Institute of Management (PIM). He is also a leading consultant and developer of managers, and sits on the boards of directors of a number of leading companies

At PIM 164 managers enrolled in the Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs, worked actively during a period of nine months in improving camp conditions, providing temporary shelter, restoring the livelihoods of over 3000 families affected by the Tsunami and helped them through the development projects. Tsunami-damaged communities along the southern and eastern coasts became the action ground of PIM's projects teams. Twelve faculty members were assigned to project teams on the basis of geographical locations, where each faculty member supervised 5-7 camps, and 6-7 development projects.

The project activities provided a rich source of action-learning and development of management skills of postgraduate students. Students had the opportunity to engage in camp management where they were expected to analyze the current situation and organize and manage the camp. In providing livelihood solutions, students had to engage themselves in activities, such as identification of skills of displaced persons, formulation of business propositions, development of project briefs, identification of location of technology / material supplies and overseeing business start-up operations which helped to further develop the competencies of the students.

By developing solutions to real organizational problems, the students improved their reasoning and cognitive learning skills. Finding a solution to such problems involved students in a cycle of tasks that included defining the problem, undertaking research, weighing alternatives and making a presentation of the proposed solution. The development of solutions required students to create links between theory and practice and to justify the logic behind their recommendations. In order to make these links, students needed to ensure that they had a solid understanding of the key management concepts, theories and techniques relevant to their subjects, and to ensure that they had the understanding and knowledge required to develop solutions to particular real-world problems. The process of formulating such recommendations also assisted students to appreciate the value of a logical approach to diagnosis, decision-making and persuading others that their solutions were appropriate. In addition, the whole program encouraged the students to engage in problem-

solving in a collaborative environment, and to present their findings for feedback and evaluation.

A pertinent question to ask is, whether the body of management concepts, models and practices that we have embraced in our educational institutions as well as in business and government are adequate to address the issues that have surfaced after the Tsunami disaster. The action-learning projects that were based on management of camps and reconstruction work, have begun to highlight the need to enrich the traditional classroom teaching by learning-by-doing.

