

Merger Crisis Role-Play: Organizational Behavior in Action

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Abstract. To advance professionally, students must be prepared to navigate dynamic and contentious organizational environments by articulating their varied views, protecting their personal and professional intentions, anticipating challenges, and then fostering consensus. This paper addresses a high-stakes, multi-round immersive role-play simulation of a company merger in an undergraduate Organizational Behavior course. Grounded in the core pillars of experiential learning, adaptive leadership, and organizational sensemaking, this classroom exercise places students in a pre-set, realistic post-merger leadership team facing immediate business challenges. Compared to traditional case studies, this method requires students to demonstrate real-time organizational behavior competencies, providing a powerful platform for negotiation skills and group dynamics. This simulation successfully bridges the knowing-doing gap, preparing students not just for academic success but for the complex and pragmatic realities of professional leadership.

Keywords: immersive role-play, simulation exercise, experiential learning, organizational behavior.

I. Background of the Learning Exercise

The traditional Organizational Behavior (OB) curriculum often relies heavily on theoretical models and retrospective case analysis (Zhang *et al.*, 2025). While these methods are crucial for building foundational knowledge, they usually fail to equip undergraduate management students with the presence, resilience, and real-time decision-making skills required in a complex professional environment (Agarwal, 2025; Triviño *et al.*, 2025). Successful careers demand adaptive leadership skills, including anticipating issues, making sound propositions, and building consensus. Consequently, employers often express frustration about a persistent skills gap that requires them to provide extensive on-the-job training in the very communication and soft skills that graduates should possess (Arvanitis *et al.*, 2022).

As instructors, our core mandate is to deliver essential technical knowledge while building practical leadership capacity to apply it effectively (Hoffmann, 2022). In response to the growing demand for career-ready graduates, pedagogical innovations must focus on simulating a high-pressure organizational setting (Triviño, 2025).

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Attending organizational meetings and discussions is a primary activity in any professional environment. However, students are not prepared to join high-stakes, decision-making meetings because they are not exposed to these activities. To address this gap, the approach detailed in this learning exercise is grounded in immersive role-play, in which participants are given nuanced, conflicting, and varying objectives and must navigate complexity without immediate, clear answers (Bjärstorp and Ragnerstam, 2023). This method aligns with contemporary calls for experiential learning that moves beyond passive instruction toward participative, high-fidelity practice (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The simulation's design goal is not merely to illustrate conflict theory but to encourage students to engage in conflict identification and resolution, and to actively manage the dynamic pressures inherent in organizational leadership (Seiter and Dunn, 2010; Mercer *et al.*, 2021).

In the following sections, this paper will first establish its theoretical foundation grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, Adaptive Leadership, and Weick's Theory of Organizational Sensemaking. This will be followed by comprehensive guidelines that provide step-by-step details for implementing the exercise. It will conclude with practical tips and discussion.

II. Theoretical Foundation

A. Experiential Learning

Management education is undergoing a transformation characterized by the adoption of diverse learning exercises, ranging from technologically enhanced simulations to gamified experiences (Samaras *et al.*, 2021). The increasing diversity and innovation in these learning exercises reflect a broader shift toward active, student-centric learning that aims to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application (Hamzah *et al.*, 2024).

The *Merger Crisis Role-Play* is primarily based on Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. It dictates that learning occurs through a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb and Kolb, 2005). The simulation is a concrete experience designed to generate a real and complex process of students' consensus, making abstract concepts tangible.

The components of role-playing in experiential learning are refined by structuring simulations as immersive "as if" scenarios that bridge theory and practice (Matsuo and Nagata, 2020). By incorporating reflective analysis and unlearning processes, Kolb's original learning cycle is extended to support a deeper learning and adaptive expertise (Heard-Laureote *et al.*, 2019). Role-playing simulations also offer the most significant potential for developing complex skills (Shanks and Zhang, 2023; Triviño, 2025). Current best practices