

## Specification of Changes in Coping with Demanding Situations Strategies in the Context of Management Study

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**Abstract:** The preparation of Management students as well as managers in practice to cope with demanding situations in managerial work is an important predictor of the efficiency of the manager's work. The paper presents the results of the experimental verification of changes in coping with demanding situations by Management students. The concept of the research project was based on experimental verification of incorporation of the subject "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" into the study program Management in the specialization Human Resource Management. The experimental project was conducted on the basis of a comparison of the results of the experimental and the control group, where the experimental group passed the subject and the control group did not have it included in the study curriculum. The experiment was conducted on a sample of 293 Management students by means of the Brief COPE (COPE (b) [1]) methodology. The experimental results confirmed the statistically significant differences between the ante and the post measurement within the experimental group in terms of the following coping factors: Positive reframing, Active coping, Planning, Humor, and Venting. Within the control group, none of these differences were recorded.

**Key words:** *Coping, Demanding situations, Experiment, Management students, COPE (b) methodology*

### INTRODUCTION

One of the dominant factors of education and teaching at universities is the reflection of the practical requirements. In this context and within the Management studies, attention should be paid to coping with demanding situations in managerial work. Situations that we perceive and consider to be demanding are a natural part of life, including the managerial working one. Managers are forced to handle demanding situations regardless of whether they want it or not, in various contexts, and almost every day. Encountering demanding situations, the way they are solved and the residual of these processes can positively or negatively affect both their life and the lives of their co-workers and subordinates in terms of both mental and physical health. Due to the fact that occurrence of demanding situations cannot be significantly affected, attention is greatly paid to the issues of perception, experiencing and effective resolution of these situations, rather than to the issue of preventing the occurrence of such situations. Nevertheless,

attention is also drawn to the states caused by these situations and their solutions. Education, teaching and training of university students of Management and other studies are a natural part of their preparation for practice.

### DEMANDING SITUATIONS

Demanding situations are part of our lives and their occurrence cannot be ruled out. We encounter them in different life contexts and connections, in situations with different actors and with different particular contents. A typical triad of family, school, and work is at the forefront. Attention is, however, also paid to the occurrence of demanding situations in sports, familiar social interactions and various other areas of life. In their definition, essential is also the fact that these situations are distinctly different from the usual situations we encounter. Frankovský [2], therefore, highlights the issue of what determines that the situations are perceived as demanding and how they differ from the "normal, undemanding" ones.

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Emphasizing the importance of subjective perception of the demanding-ness of situations is related to the psychological significance of the situation for an individual. This concept has been emerging since the mid-1970s and is back with the onset of cognitive social psychology and research into social cognition. In the essence of these approaches there is the question of how the situation is identified and constructed at the subjective level [3].

Based on the formulation of this issue it can be stated that not every situation is automatically perceived as demanding [4]. Simultaneously, the actual difficulty of the situation is perceived and interpreted by individuals as a problem, crisis, conflict, complexity, inconvenience, burden, but also as a challenge [5]. Perception of a demanding situation can also be affected by the social and cultural environment in which people live [6].

### **COPING WITH DEMANDING SITUATIONS**

As already mentioned, the process of coping with demanding situations has been a focus of attention since the 1970s, and this area of knowledge is attracting attention even today (e.g. [7], [8], [9] and others). From the position of a person who has encountered a demanding situation and has to deal with it, but also from the point of view of the organization in which the employee or manager works, the decisive factor is the choice of procedure to solve the demanding situation. Research on the ways of how a person behaves and copes with these situations receives more attention than the characteristics, specification, and taxonomy of demanding situations [2].

According to Frankovský and Birknerová [10], coping with demanding situations can be based on the idea of regulating internal or external pressures and tensions that are characterized by the transactions of a person and an environment either as a direct solution to a given situation by a specific intervention in its course, by planning individual activities, or by reducing tension by emotion release (easement, denial, escape, etc.) [11].

In defining the commonly-specified coping strategies, we also encounter the question of how such strategies are an effective predictor of people's behavior in a demanding situation. In the context of this discussion, there also appear certain approaches which define more specific strategies for the behavior of people in demanding situations. Carver, Scheier and Weintraub [12] defined the 14 coping strategies, which were described in detail by Carver [1]. We have worked with this strategy concept in the framework of the presented research.

### **EXPERIMENT**

The importance of effective coping with demanding situations by managers was the reason for concentrating attention on this issue already within the undergraduate preparation of Management students. In this context, the most effective form of learning is by means of experiential learning, which is possible in connection to a specific content. Creation of this education form was based on the knowledge that education should be aimed at the knowledge transfer, socialization, as well as on solving demanding situations in management. Acquisition of knowledge and appropriate social habits was also possible thanks to the inclusion of non-traditional, innovative teaching methods (e.g. role-playing). Social learning of students has thus contributed to the analysis of their own behavior in demanding situations, as well as the behavior of the group as a whole.

Within the experiment, the program of the seminars of "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" included interactive techniques, role plays, model situation solutions, as well as self-reflection through self-assessment questionnaires and feedback. One of the methods used in the experimental group was simulation games. A simulation game is most frequently defined as a technique that provides an artificially created environment that copies selected characteristics of real situations, allowing students to track the consequences of their decisions and respond to them [13]. In the area of managerial education, an effective approach to the experiment has proved to be the experiential learning, which is effective when managed and controlled by the learning individual. It is essential when it is also based on their practical experience and has a specific meaning and sense for them.

The seminar program was divided into three basic parts. The introduction was followed by the implementation of some of the interactive techniques with subsequent analysis, discussion and final connection with the theoretical knowledge, which formed the content of the subject, as well as their use in the managerial practice.

Experiential learning, which develops creativity, has caused a positive feedback from the students. The future managers were actively engaged in the individual activities and discussions. Our effort was not only to enrich their knowledge, but also to develop their managerial skills with the emphasis on coping with burden. The competences thus acquired enable them to apply the gained knowledge in practical life.

The experimental project was conducted on the basis of comparison of the results from the experimental and the control group, while in the experimental group, the students attended the subject of "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management", where the form of experiential learning was applied.

## METHODOLOGY

The research sample consisted of 293 respondents, who were all students of the Faculty of Management of University of Prešov in Prešov, Slovakia, aged from 18 to 25 years ( $M = 19.73$  years,  $SD = 1.260$  years). Of these, 110 were male (37.5%) and 183 were female (62.5%). The experimental group consisted of 150 students majoring in Human Resource Management (51.2%) who participated in the seminars of the subject "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" during the academic year. The control group consisted of 143 Business and Marketing students (48.8%), who did not have the subject listed in the study curriculum.

Input and output measurements were performed within the experiment. The COPE (b) questionnaire was distributed to the experimental and control groups at the beginning of the academic year, as well as after the application of experiential learning by means of the mentioned subject within the experimental group at the end of the semester.

### Brief COPE questionnaire [1]

The coping strategies questionnaire Brief COPE or COPE (b) detects how people cope with demanding and stressful situations. It consists of 28 items evaluated on a 4-point response frequency scale of behavior occurrence (1 = I haven't been doing this at all; 4 = I've been doing this a lot). The questionnaire items form 14 subscales, each represented by two items and labeled as: Religion, Substance use, Active coping, Planning, Positive reframing, Acceptance, Humor, Use of emotional support, Use of instrumental support, Self-distraction, Denial, Venting, Behavioral disengagement, and Self-blame. A higher score represents a higher degree of agreement with the use of the given coping strategy.

## RESULTS

The aim of the research was to experimentally verify the effectiveness of application of the subject "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" as well as the specific method of conducting seminars.

This effect was detected on the basis of a comparison of the ante and the post measurement of the results of the experimental and the control group in the context of the five indicators of the COPE (b) methodology: Active Coping (focusing efforts to do something about it; taking action to improve the situation); Positive reframing (effort to see the problem in another, more positive light; finding something good in what is happening); Planning (trying to clarify your strategy, the solution procedure, what to do; a thoughtful reflection on what steps you need to take); Humor (joking about the undesired situation; making fun of this situation). In the Venting strategy, the respondents scored lower in the output (talking about removing negative feelings; revealing the negative feelings).

Within the experiment, the input measurements (Table 1) at the beginning of the academic year and the output measurements (Table 2) at the end after applying the experiential form of education were implemented in both the experimental and the control group.

Table 1: Coping strategies of COPE (b) in the experimental group

Coping strategies		M	t	p
Self-distraction	input	2.6349	1.003	.318
	output	2.7581		
Active coping	input	2.3889	3.780	<b>.000</b>
	output	<b>2.8065</b>		
Denial	input	1.8492	.516	.607
	output	1.7903		
Substance use	input	1.3016	.032	.974
	output	1.2984		
Use of emotional support	input	2.7063	.034	.973
	output	2.7016		
Use of instrumental support	input	2.5556	.125	.901
	output	2.5726		
Behavioral disengagement	input	1.7778	.286	.775
	output	1.8065		
Venting	input	<b>2.8095</b>	7.155	<b>.000</b>
	output	2.1048		
Positive reframing	input	2.6032	3.683	<b>.000</b>
	output	<b>2.9839</b>		
Planning	input	2.7143	2.333	<b>.021</b>
	output	<b>2.9597</b>		
Humor	input	2.0714	4.394	<b>.000</b>
	output	<b>2.6290</b>		
Acceptance	input	2.5556	.131	.896
	output	2.5403		
Religion	input	1.7460	.800	.425
	output	1.8790		
Self-blame	input	2.4444	.466	.642
	output	2.5000		

Table 2: Coping strategies of COPE (b) in the control group

Coping strategies		M	t	p
Self-distraction	input	2.3955	1.699	.092
	output	2.5962		
Active coping	input	2.7015	1.250	.214
	output	2.5577		
Denial	input	1.8971	1.105	.271
	output	1.7692		
Substance use	input	1.4104	1.075	.285
	output	1.2885		
Use of emotional support	input	2.7279	1.430	.155
	output	2.5288		
Use of instrumental support	input	2.4925	.276	.783
	output	2.4519		
Behavioral disengagement	input	1.8162	1.737	.085
	output	2.0000		
Venting	input	2.2721	.097	.923
	output	2.2596		
Positive reframing	input	2.8824	1.405	.163
	output	2.7212		
Planning	input	2.9030	1.344	.181
	output	2.7500		
Humor	input	2.4118	.217	.828
	output	2.3750		
Acceptance	input	2.6838	1.241	.217
	output	2.5481		
Religion	input	1.9478	.862	.390
	output	1.7981		
Self-blame	input	2.4706	1.563	.121
	output	2.2692		

As already mentioned, the experimental group was made up of students of the Faculty of Management with a focus of study on human resources, who participated in the experiential lessons of "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" during the academic year. The control group consisted of students with a focus of study on business and marketing, who did not have the subject included in their study plan. At the experiment output we recorded a statistically significant difference in five coping strategies of the COPE (b) methodology, but only within the experimental group. In four management strategies, i.e. Active coping, Positive reframing, Planning, and Humor (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4), the students of the experimental group scored higher. In the Venting strategy, the respondents scored lower at the output (Figure 5).

Figure 1: Comparison of the experimental and the control group in the coping strategy Active coping

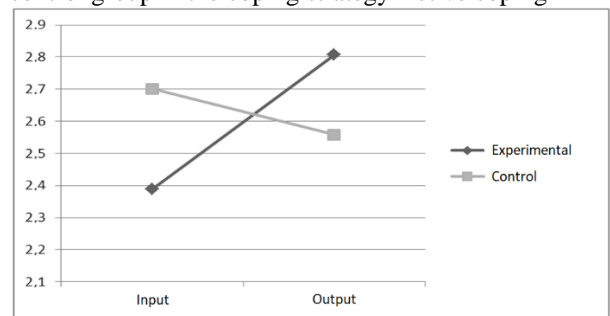


Figure 2: Comparison of the experimental and the control group in the coping strategy Positive reframing

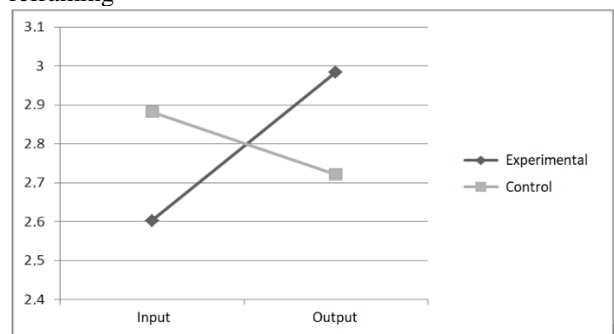


Figure 3: Comparison of the experimental and the control group in the coping strategy Planning

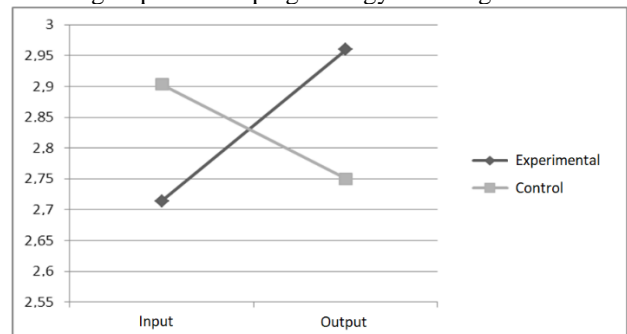
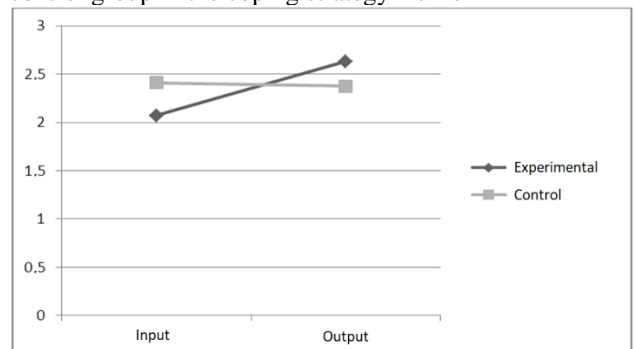


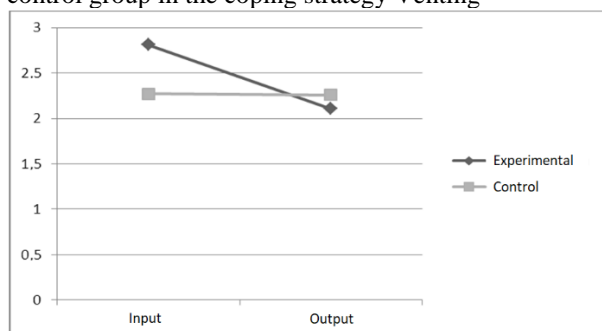
Figure 4: Comparison of the experimental and the control group in the coping strategy Humor



Having completed the given subject, students of the experimental group pay more attention to active coping with stress and a demanding situation, while

they want to take action and their efforts to make a difference. They also perceive problems more positively, and they look for something good even in a demanding situation in order to implement it in their lives. They try more to clarify what to do in an undesirable situation, looking for appropriate strategies and practices, and thinking about what steps should be taken in the given situation. They can perceive the demanding situation as less stressful, joke in the situation and make fun of it.

Figure 5: Comparison of the experimental and the control group in the coping strategy Venting



In accordance with the mentioned results, the experimental group students had lower score in the Venting strategy at the experiment output (Figure 5). It means that they express their negative feelings resulting from demanding situations less frequently and less explicitly.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

An effective work of managers is not only related to meeting the needs of the managers themselves, but also to the needs of their employees, subordinates, the needs of the organization in which they operate, but also the needs and expectations of the whole organization. They are managers who manage specific processes as well as give strategic visions for the future to ensure the development and progress of the whole organization [10]. Focusing attention on coping with demanding situations and stress in management is logical from the point of view of the above context.

The presented results support, from a theoretical and methodological perspective, the multidimensional understanding of the construct of coping (e.g. [5], [7], [12], [14], [15], and others) and, at the same time, they also point to the possibilities of a situational approach to exploring this issue (e.g. [12], [16], [17], and others).

Based on the content of the "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" seminars, it is clear that the changes in the coping

strategies were only registered in terms of some of the factors of this process.

Preparation of the Management students, but also of managers in practice to cope with demanding situations in managerial work is an important predictor of managerial work efficiency. As part of the experiment, the subject of "Coping with demanding situations in human resource management" was taught experientially by means of games. According to [18], managerial simulation games can be regarded as an appropriate tool for human capital development as well as corporate management research. Human resource development takes place on several levels and builds on an own practical experience. A game brings a feeling of relaxation and free decision-making, without pressure and sanctions [19]. It is followed by a creative game in which imagination and fantasy are manifested. Knowledge and developed intuition transform into originality and unusualness.

Based on the conducted experiment we can conclude that learning through games and role plays enables education and training to become more effective, refreshed, and more attractive. Contrary to the traditional methods (lecture and seminar with discussion used in the control group), the students felt relaxed and developed creativity, and the ability to apply new strategies of behavior in demanding situations.

Situational activities are beneficial for students because making the right decisions is a very challenging problem of everyday life. Playing a role serves to develop moral attitudes, helps students to cope with stress, express their personal opinions, remove prejudices, and so on. The result is an increase of a healthy self-confidence, a sense of recognition, the ability to concentrate and to master control over their own emotions.

The presented findings can be fully applied to the preparation and training of managers who are already active in practice. In this respect, experimental verification of the presented approach may represent a possible focus of further research projects.

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