

Spotlight



Reynold Byers (in Hawaiian shirt) of the Merage School advises students participating in the 2007 Sandcastle Event at Huntington State Beach in California. The annual simulation teaches students the fundamentals of operations management.

women on the same team as four of his female co-workers.

The team that builds its sandcastles most accurately, quickly, and economically wins a modest trophy and a small amount of money. But the true payoff happens afterward in Byers' next class. After showing a video of the competition, he asks students to reflect on why problems arose and how they could have been avoided. Some teams note that they should have built their moats last to avoid having to jump over them to complete their castle; others realize that cross-training team members in more than one function would have alleviated trouble in case of layoffs, which can be one of Byers' mid-

point surprises.

Most important, says Byers, students realize that managing personalities is paramount. "If two people don't get along well, students may create

operational processes that force them together," he says. "That can bring the whole team to a grinding halt."

The competition takes time and planning, but "the students love it," says Byers. Students may work well together, or they may end up throwing shovels at each other. It depends on how well they manage conflict. "They must run their teams like business groups," Byers says. "I want them to learn that team dynamics and organizational output are inherently linked." ■

To Build the Perfect Castle

Assistant professor Reynold Byers' annual Sandcastle Event turns the beach into b-school.

About seven years ago, Reynold Byers was sitting on the beach, trying to think of a way to illustrate the realities of operations management and organizational behavior to his students. It didn't take long for him to see the answer right in front of him: Turn the beach into his classroom.

Byers, an assistant professor at the Paul Merage School of Business at the University of California in Irvine, spent a year and a half developing his Sandcastle Event before its debut in 2001. The three-hour competition requires first-year MBA students to work in teams of five to build sandcastles to exact specifications. "Sandcastles are complicated and require several people to handle many tasks," says Byers. "The hard part for students is getting their group to work together."

During the event, each team appoints members to fulfill one of four job functions. Hydrologists haul buckets of water from the ocean; excavation engineers dig in the sand; raw materials specialists form the sand; and structural finishers take care of final details.

Teams are provided with prices for equipment—their pails, shovels, and molds—and the costs for job training. Mistakes in planning, assigning jobs, or tracking costs can set a team back early, Byers notes. Teams also are "fined" if members are caught doing a job they've not been appointed to do.

To add real-world tension to the exercise, Byers makes a significant change to the castle-building parameters midway through the project. In 2006, Byers required each team to send one member to another team at the halfway point. He then changed the specifications of their castles to reflect "updated customer specifications," so that they had to rebuild.

Byers usually forms teams at random, although he has experimented with putting groups together by personality or gender. He once ran the competition for a local company whose administrators placed a male employee who disliked working with

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