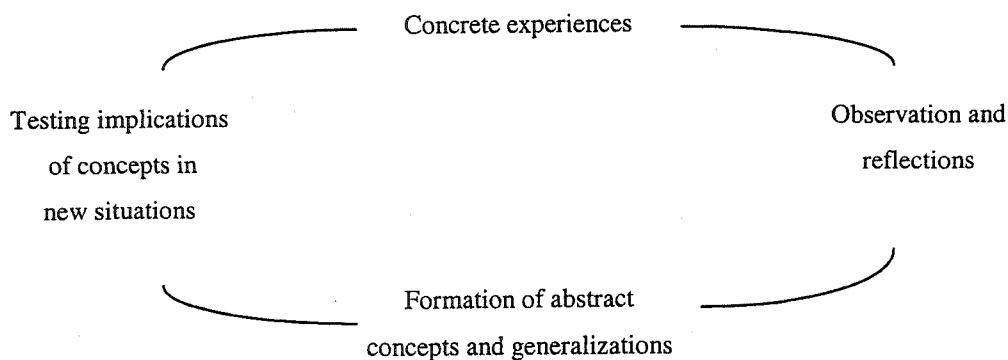


THE PERSONAL APPLICATION ASSIGNMENT (PAA)

A variety of texts and articles over the past few years have argued for the use of an alternative approach to teaching organizational behavior, one that emphasizes experiential learning. This approach "emphasizes an existential, emergent view for learning organizational behavior" (McMullen, 1979), where the role of the instructor is that of learning facilitator, responsible for designing experiences for students to base learning upon, rather than as teacher, responsible for lecturing on theory and concepts. While gaining wide acceptance, this approach has nevertheless created problems in the assessment of students' performance. Significant learnings in this model of teaching occur not only from the development of concepts, but also from the experiences themselves. McMullen (as well as others) has proposed the use of a personal application assignment to help solve the problem of performance assessment. This assignment is based upon the experiential learning model formulated by Kolb (1971). This model is discussed in more detail in the text chapter on learning styles.

Kolb's model argues that learning occurs through a process which might begin with a concrete experience, which leads to reflective observation about the experience. Abstract conceptualization follows in which models, paradigms, strategies, and metaphors are applied to the results of the experience. Active experimentation concludes the cycle as the concepts are then put into practice, thus generating new concrete experience. Figure 1 shows the model more clearly.

Figure 1: Experiential Learning Model (Kolb)



In one sense, persons able to learn using all four modes of the model will be better able to take away learning from the variety of contexts in which they interact. We feel that the Personal Application Assignment is a useful tool for both evaluation of a student's work in courses taught using an experiential approach; and further, that the Personal Application Assignment can serve as a way to help students learn to learn. The PAA is both an evaluation and a teaching technique.

Our past history of teaching using this method has shown that the PAA, in order to be most useful, must include clear guidelines for the student. To that end we have undertaken to set forth the guidelines below to help students to understand the requirements for effective PAAs.

Guidelines on Grading, Topic Selection, and Confidentiality

First of all, we believe that a 20-point grading system simplifies understanding how each component of the paper is graded and weighted. There are five elements to the paper and each normally is weighted equally. These include the four elements in the learning style model and a fifth element that takes into account the introduction, integration, synthesis and general quality of writing in the PAA. The score given in each element depends upon how effectively the student has met all the criteria listed for that section of the paper. For the instructor's part, we believe that instructors need to provide specific feedback as quickly as possible to students on why they were awarded points in each area and, more importantly, what they need to do to improve. To achieve these objectives the same summary sheet that guides the grading is provided to the student as feedback. This sheet is attached at the end of this handout.

The above paragraph referred to the weighting as "normally" being equal for all parts of the paper. In cases where the quality of the student writing is clearly below acceptable standards for college-level courses, this component or the entire paper may be given a significantly lower grade. (Preparing a good quality initial draft to be reviewed by a peer will help eliminate this potential problem. An initial draft is not the same as a first draft

or rough draft. It should be a version the student has already revised one or more times. Students should be responsible for seeking out help with their writing skills if necessary.

Choosing a good topic is essential. Select an experience that relates to the assigned course topics. It should be an experience that you would like to understand better, (e.g., there was something about it that you do not totally understand, that intrigues you, that made you realize that you lacked certain managerial skills, or that was problematical or significant for you.) When students are excited about learning more about the incident, their papers are lively and interesting. The topic must be meaty enough to take it through the entire learning cycle. The incident does not have to be work related; an incident in any setting (sports, school, family, church, etc.) that relates to the course topics is acceptable.

You should select a recent experience (not something that happened back in high school). The more recent the experience, the more likely it is that you could take actions that could improve your current interactions with a supervisor, group member, roommate, or other person with whom you have an ongoing relationship. You also may select an experience which is not ongoing if this is more salient to you.

Two additional issues should be considered in choosing your topic. The first is confidentiality. Students sometime wish to write on a topic that is of a personal nature. They may be willing for the instructor to read their paper but not want this to be read by other students in the class. This is a reasonable request and confidentiality will be honored. Students who want their paper to be confidential should inform the instructor ahead of time and should write "confidential" at the top of the paper.

There is one exception to the confidentiality rule. If a student describes conduct related to the University where significant University rules or State/Federal laws have been violated by other students or University staff, the instructor reserves the right to bring this issue to the attention of the appropriate administrator to ensure that the situation is remedied.

Elements of the PAA

1. Concrete Experience

In this part of the paper, students briefly describe what happens in the experience. A simple description of the events which occurred is not sufficient. The feelings experienced by the student as well as his or her thoughts and perceptions during the experience are relevant to this discussion.

Another way of looking at the concrete experience would be to recognize that it possesses an objective and a subjective component. The objective part presents the facts of the experience, like a newspaper account, without an attempt to analyze the content. The subjective part is the "here-and-now" personal experience of the event. This experience is composed of feelings, perceptions and thoughts.

Helpful hints: (1) It often helps students to replay the experience in their mind. After reviewing the experience, students should write a report of what they saw, heard, felt, thought, and heard and saw others doing. (2) Students should avoid presenting the detailed mechanics of the experience unless these are critical to the remainder of the paper. This section of the paper should be no longer than 1.5 pages long. (3) Students should avoid reporting the feelings and thoughts experienced after the experience being described. This retrospection is more appropriate in the reflective observation section.

Example:

We all sat at the table together. Not a sound came from any of us. Finally, after what felt like an hour to me, I simply had to say something. "Why are all of you taking this course?" I asked. One person, a small foreign looking man said, "I needed this course to complete my MBA." Others laughed. Another person, a nicely dressed woman, said, "I'd like to get an easy 'A.'" I thought to myself: What a bummer! I didn't want to be in a group with people who didn't take the subject matter seriously. When the meeting ended, my perceptions of the group had somehow changed. Maybe this was a good group to be in after all. Some of the members had similar interests to mine, and most of them were nice people that I could see getting along with. I felt somehow hopeful that this semester wouldn't be so bad after all.

2. Reflective Observation

The student should ask him/herself: What did I observe in the experience and what possible meanings could these observations have? The key task here is to gather as

many observations as possible by observing the experience from different points of view. The main skill to work on is perspective taking or what some people call "reframing." Try to look at this experience and describe it from different perspectives. For example, how did other participants view the situation and what did it mean to them? What would a neutral ("objective") observer have seen and heard? If some time has passed since the experience, do you now see the situation differently? Look beneath the surface and try to explain why the people involved behaved the way they did. Reflect on these observations to discover the personal meaning that the situation had for you.

Helpful hints: (1) If possible, discuss the experience with others who were involved to gain their views and clarify your perceptions. (2) "Unhook" yourself from the experience and meditate about it in a relaxed atmosphere. Mull over your observations until their personal meaning comes clear to you. Try to figure out why people, and you in particular, behaved as they did. What can you learn about yourself, looking back on the experience? If you write about a conflict or interaction, be sure to analyze both sides and put yourself in the shoes of the other people involved.

Examples:

In thinking back on the meeting, I began to see how the group might have taken my comments. My comments were, after all, somewhat aggressive. Some might even call them belligerent. Had I said these things before this class, or at work, I must confess that I would have surprised even myself.

But it seemed there was more going on here than met my eye at the time. Sarah and Bob at first didn't seem to be the kind of people to combine forces on this job, so why was I arguing against them this time? Then it dawned on me: Their departments were about to be combined into the same division! Why hadn't I remembered that during the meeting?

Many thoughts raced through my head. Was the cause of last night's "high" that we won the game? Was it the first time we had worked together as a group? Maybe the fact that member X wasn't there that night helped! But I still had a nagging hunch that my involvement, downplayed as it was from previous meetings, helped.

3. Abstract Conceptualization

By relating assigned readings and lectures to what you experienced, you are demonstrating your ability to understand conceptually abstract material through your experiences. This process will help you refine your model of people and organizations.

While some assigned readings and lectures will have varying degrees of relevance to your experience, it is important that you make several references and not limit your conceptualizing to just one source. Use at least two major concepts or theories from the course readings and cite them correctly, such as (Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2001: 31).

By reviewing the assigned reading material, you should be able to identify several specific concepts or theories that relate to your experience. First, briefly define the concept or theory as you would for someone who was not familiar with it. What issue or problem does the theory examine? What variables are used to analyze the problem and how does the theory explain the link between causal variables and outcomes. What suggestions does the theory give as to effective management practices? Second, in a separate paragraph, apply the concept thoroughly to your experience. The tie-in should include the specific details of how the theory relates to and provides insight into your experience. Try to develop diagnostic questions based on the theory that help you to analyze your situation. Does the theory explain what causes certain behaviors or outcomes and were these causes present in your situation? Does the theory distinguish between effective and ineffective practices that help you to understand your situation? Does the experience support or refute parts of the theory? You are encouraged to suggest modifications to a theory to make it fit your particular situation better.

Helpful hints: (1) It is sometimes useful to identify theoretical concepts that interest you first and then search out and elaborate on a personal experience that relates to these concepts. (2) An alternative approach is to select an experience you wish to understand better and then select concepts that apply to your experience.

The example below shows how one concept was defined and applied in a student PAA.

Example:

There are several organizational behavior concepts that help me understand this experience. One is the Thomas-Kilman theory of conflict (Osland, p. 284-285) which is based upon two axes, either the concern for one's own interests or the concern for the interests of the other party. The five styles reflect a low or high position on these two axes and are labeled competition, compromise, avoidance, accommodation, and collaboration.

In the incident I described, my coach began with a collaborative style, high concern for both his own interests and the interests of the other party. He tried to work out a solution that would satisfy both of us but I neither saw nor heard his point of view. I just wanted to get my own way and practice in the same way I had on my previous team. I see now that the conflict style I used was the competitive style, high concern for my own interests and low concern for the interests of the other party. Looking back, this is the style I have used most often throughout my life; I usually got away with it before because I was such a good athlete. However, my experience with the coach supports the textbook's description (p. 285) of the losses that may result from using this style. I lost everything when I was kicked off the team and I certainly alienated the coach and the other players and discouraged them from wanting to work with me.

4. Active Experimentation

This section of the paper should begin by summarizing what you learned about yourself as a result of writing the paper. What new personal insights and practical lessons did you learn about how to more effectively deal with these types of experiences. Make sure to focus on what you learned about yourself, rather than what you learned about someone else, general situations such as group behavior, or processes such as negotiation. This should be presented in a separate paragraph and not buried within your discussion of an action step.

Next you should present four action steps that you will take to make you more effective in the future in these situations. (Future actions must be based on the experience reported in the Concrete Experience.) These actions can be stated in the form of guidelines as to how you would act differently or resolutions as to steps you could take to develop or practice particular skills. You should elaborate in detail how you see your action ideas being carried out. A given step might include several related activities to complete it. Sometimes students have a tendency to list an action step and then shift to explaining why they would take the action without sufficiently explaining the actual behavior they would modify. For example, the statement "I would strive to communicate better because people feel I don't listen very well" does not tell a reader very much about what you would do to communicate better. Saying that "I will strive to communicate better by using active listening techniques where I will paraphrase the other's viewpoint

before presenting my own opinion” is a better indication of how you will carry out this action step.

There should be a clear link between your action steps and the concepts presented in the abstract conceptualization section. If the theories you selected provide recommendations for improving management practices, you are encouraged to incorporate these ideas in formulating your action steps. Don't just repeat tips from the text. Try to include at least one action resolution that is based upon new knowledge that you have gained about yourself. If you were to re-live your experience, what would you do differently? What would you do to improve the situation?

In past student PAA's it is often difficult to sort out where one action step ends and another begins. Please provide a separate paragraph for each action step and number or otherwise demarcate the separate action steps. For example, “First, I would My second action step would be” This will help the reader differentiate between action steps and will ensure that you provide four distinct action steps as part of your plan. Explain why you would take these action steps. Why would the selected behaviors be likely to improve the situation?

Helpful hints: (1) Project a future experience in which you envision the implementation of your ideas and then elaborate on that experience as a way of demonstrating how your actions will be carried out. (2) Where does this situation exist in your life (home, work, school)? Do you need a support system to make it happen? How will you obtain the cooperation of others to jointly improve the situation? (3) Try to imagine the final results of your experimentation. What will it be like if you accomplish what you want to do?

Example:

I learned from this experience that staying motivated at work is primarily my own responsibility. I cannot always count on my boss to be skilled at motivating others, so I cannot let this influence my job performance and become an obstacle to my career goals. I learned the hard way that people should have a good understanding of what motivates them both intrinsically and extrinsically.

How then can I best utilize and improve my achievement motivation? First, I must arrange for some accomplishment feedback. This will be done by designing or perceiving tasks so that I succeed bit-by-

bit, gaining a reward each time and thus strengthening my desire to achieve more.

Second, I should look to "models of achievement." If people around me succeed, it will further stimulate me. I will ask them how they go about setting realistic goals for themselves and observe how they get feedback from others regarding their performance.

Third, I should modify my self-image to include my desire for personal challenges and responsibilities and my requirement of continual feedback. (As a first step, I imagine myself as a person who requires or must have success, responsibility, challenge and variety.) I will seek out situations that are more likely to provide these challenges in the future.

Fourth, I must learn to control my reveries. Just beyond the borderline of awareness, many of us are constantly talking to ourselves. While it is fun to fantasize, I will try to make sure my aspirations are realistic given my current skills and time available to accomplish my various goals. I will spend time prioritizing my goals to ensure that I don't try to do too much or too little. When I catch myself day-dreaming, I will try to switch gears and do something more productive that will advance my career, like coming up with suggestions to make my unit more successful.

Finally, although I would never admit so, I agree that salary is a potential "dissatisfier" for me. Therefore, I must insist on what I perceive as a "fair return" for my performance. I will discuss my salary expectations with my supervisor to ensure I know what is expected and also to ensure that my boss knows my expectations. Wish me luck!

Here is another example of a good action step, written by a student who wanted to stop being a passive follower and become more of a leader.

"I am going to take a more active role in team meetings. I will volunteer to be the team facilitator in at least one meeting during this semester. In all other meetings, I am going to make at least two process interventions to help the team function more effectively. To prepare myself, I am going to carefully observe other students who are excellent leaders, and I will read two articles on team leadership. I will also design an evaluation form on my team participation and ask my team to use it to evaluate me after the meeting I facilitate. Based on their feedback, I will continue working on possible weak areas during the rest of this course."

5. Integration and Writing

The well-written PAA has a focal issue and a story line with themes that are carried throughout each of the four sections. The idea of synergy applies here: "The

whole is greater than the sum of the parts." If integration is present, then the reader can attend to the content without distraction; if integration is absent, barriers prevent the reader from gaining a full appreciation of the content. Are the major themes that you have identified integrated throughout your paper? Make sure that the reflective observation takes into account the viewpoint of all the key people cited in the concrete experience. Do the concepts cited in abstract conceptualization fit well with these observations? Is there a clear link between the concepts or theories that you cite and the subsequent action steps that you formulate? Citing the theories is not just meant to be an academic exercise—it should help guide the analysis of the situation and the planning of practical steps for improving future situations.

Other barriers that prevent the reader from fully appreciating the paper's content are spelling and grammatical errors, as well as the overall appearance of the final document. Since good writing skills are so important in the business world, there should be no errors in your paper. Use the spell check (and grammar check) on your computer before you hand it in. Sometimes reading a paper aloud will indicate where sections of a paper may need revision to simplify awkward or unclear sentences.

Helpful hints:

- (1) Troyka's *Handbook for Writers* is a good refresher on writing skills.
- (2) Students should keep in mind the following points:
 - (a) Decide what one or two main points you wish to convey in each paragraph. The lead sentence in the paragraph should alert the reader to these points. Start a new paragraph to convey new main points. Paragraphs should be of moderate length. Not a page long!
 - (b) Keep sentences short. Avoid complex modifying phrases that distract from the main idea.
 - (c) Label each section: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, etc. Don't place a heading at the bottom of the page with no following text.
 - (d) Transitions are important (between sentences, paragraphs, and sections) and make the paper flow.
 - (e) The four sections should be equally well-developed and fairly similar in length.
 - (f) **The paper should not exceed 5 pages in length.**
 - (g) Number the pages to help you and the reader make sure that no pages are missing.
 - (h) Use 1" margins and double space. Use a font size of 11 or 12.
 - (i) It is not necessary to put the paper in a folder or plastic sleeve. Simply staple the pages together.

APPENDIX I
PAA OUTLINE - GETTING STARTED

What is the plot of your paper? _____

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE	REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION	ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION	ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

PERSONAL APPLICATION ASSIGNMENT GRADING SHEET

Please bear these grading criteria in mind as you are writing your paper.

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE — 4 Points

- _____ Does the paper contain a clear, objective description of facts in your personal experience? (2 points)
- _____ Does it contain a subjective description of feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that occurred during (not after) the experience? (2 points)
- _____ Does this section provide enough information so the reader will understand the rest of the paper, but not too much irrelevant detail? For an individual PAA, this section should not exceed 1–1.5 pages. (Delete 1 point)

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION — 4 Points

- _____ Did you look at the experience from the different points of view of all the major actors? (2 points)
- _____ Did you make an attempt to figure out why the people involved, and you in particular, behaved as they did? (1 point)
- _____ Did the different perspectives and behavioral analyses add significant meaning to the situation? (1 point)

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION — 4 Points

- _____ Did you briefly define and explain at least two different concepts or theories from the assigned readings that relate to your experience, and did you reference them properly? (2 points)
- _____ Did you thoroughly apply the concepts/theories to your experience? (2 points)

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION — 4 Points

- _____ Did you summarize the practical lessons you derived from analyzing your experience? (1 point)
- _____ Did you describe thoroughly at least four action steps you will take in the future so you can be more effective? (2 points)
- _____ Did you identify and include at least one action step that is based on what you have learned about yourself as a result of this analysis? (1 point)

INTEGRATION AND WRITING — 4 Points

- _____ Does the PAA have major themes that are woven throughout each section of the paper?
 - Are the sections well-integrated and fairly equally developed? (1 point)
- _____ Is the paper clear and well-written (few awkward phrases, etc.)? (1 point)
- _____ Is the paper free of spelling and grammar errors? (2 points) (minus 0.1 per error)
- _____ TOTAL

SAMPLE PAA

Concrete Experience

I worked for one year in the marketing group in the Chicago office of a large public accounting firm. The internal service departments were organized into profit centers and operated like little fiefdoms. We worked very closely with the graphics department. We provided the majority of their work but that did not mean the two departments got along well. In fact, we spent more time battling each other than collaborating. A constant bone of contention for both groups was missed deadlines. Most of the time, a marketing person was the contact with the client, usually a partner in the firm. We set up a production schedule, to which the client would agree, and made every effort to stick to it. But 99 times out of 100, something would happen on the partner's end that would cause a delay. However, the original deadline was never modified to take these setbacks into account because we were not allowed to tell the partners their requests were unreasonable. This put terrific pressure on both departments, but graphics personnel continually accused us of purposely holding onto information or dragging our feet in order to make their jobs more difficult.

It was very frustrating for me to get my projects completed. From the very beginning, I felt they thought I was an incompetent jerk who was just trying to make their job more difficult. It wasn't long before I adopted the perception of the rest of my department—graphics was a bunch of uncooperative whiners. I never expected to get good service from them and I didn't. I dreaded going into their office with changes and kept my communications with them to a minimum. Occasionally, I'd have a confrontation with an artist, which would escalate into an argument with two or three other graphics people. Then I was angry for the rest of the day. I had no idea how to remedy the situation and I was under such pressure to get my work done that I had no time to repair the relationships, even if I had known how to do it.

Reflective Observation

Looking back, I think that if I had not been so caught up in the intergroup fighting, I would have recognized that the graphics personnel were under as much pressure as I was. At the time it always seemed like "once again graphics was being uncooperative." But I never stopped to ask myself why they were being so hostile to me and I never put myself in their shoes. One of the things this taught me was that I can be somewhat self-centered and ignore the problems of others when they are a barrier to getting my work done. When graphics stereotyped me, I let myself be influenced by my co-workers rather than making the effort to develop a positive relationship with graphics and get beyond the stereotypes. I felt like one of the gang when we all shared our horror stories about the latest thing graphics had done.

For their part, graphics was probably struggling to keep up with their work and deadlines. Just when they thought they had things under control, we would appear with

new changes and requests. Perhaps a lot of their resentment stemmed from feeling that, because of us, they could not control their own workflow. We didn't want to lose the partners' business by asking for extended deadlines since they could have hired an outside firm, but graphics had no investment in our service to the partners. Instead, they were worried about satisfying their own clients. And our last-minute changes got in the way of serving their other clients.

There was another person in a different department who was very positive about the graphics department. At the time I remember thinking, "Oh, he must not deal with them on a regular basis like I do or they wouldn't be so cooperative with him." It never occurred to me that this person was doing something different than I was and, as a result, had a better relationship with the graphics personnel. And it certainly never occurred to me to ask him what he did to have such a great rapport with the group.

Since other people and groups managed to have good relations with graphics, we could hardly be justified in thinking that they were totally in the wrong. But both groups had stereotyped the other and were unwilling to change their opinions. Even though both our managers knew about the problem, they did not intervene, perhaps because the work always got done somehow. These managers were more focused upon tasks than people, so they never worried about the personal cost of the conflict, and probably did not know how to resolve the problem.

Abstract Conceptualization

Conflict, defined as "a form of interaction among parties that differ in interests, perceptions, and preferences" (reader, p. 305) is the concept that best helps me understand my experience. Our two departments had different interests in serving our customers and different perceptions about each other and our work demands.

The situation between marketing and graphics was an example of when too much conflict occurs. The following passage could have been written about us. "The combination of negative stereotypes, distrust, internal militance, and aggressive action creates a vicious cycle: 'defensive' aggression by one group validates suspicion and 'defensive' counter-aggression by the other, and the conflict escalates (Deutsch, 1973) unless it is counteracted by external factors" (reader, p. 307). Graphics never believed that we weren't holding back information or dragging our feet on purpose. And we never trusted them to do our work well without giving us a hard time. We both complained bitterly about each other and never lost an opportunity to slander the "enemy" to others in the organization, which is a form of aggression. Brown (reader, p. 306) states that managers must intervene when conflict reaches a dysfunctional level but our managers never did. They probably did not want to "rock the boat" as long as things were getting done. But it makes me wonder how much more effective we could have been, had we been able to work through our differences. Someone should have helped the two groups diagnose the conflict and its underlying causes (competing for the scarce resource of time,

struggling with uncontrollable last-minute demands and iron deadlines, and allegiance to our department rather than the company as a whole).

Another concept that applies to this incident is perception, the process by which we read meaning into stimuli (workbook, p. 204). Marketing and graphics personnel constructed barriers to communication between each group by using the techniques of selective exposure, selective attention, distrusted source and erroneous translation. We saw, heard, and paid attention to what we wanted to, not necessarily the behaviors that may have been actually occurring. Our stereotypes were consistently reinforced by the perceptions we chose to respond to.

Active Experimentation

If I were in situation like this again, I would first try to do a better job of managing myself. I would remember that it takes two sides to make a conflict and I need to be as objective as possible and not go along with the group in criticizing "them" so that I feel more a part of the group. Second, had I made the effort, I might have been able to establish at least one positive relationship with someone in graphics. I should have asked my positive colleague how he managed to develop such a good relationship with them. I suspect his advice would have been to spend more time with them, treat them with greater respect, refrain from blaming them when things go wrong, and be more empathetic.

Third, I would talk to my manager or supervisor about the problem. By making my feelings known and telling him or her that I wanted to do my part in conflict management maybe he or she would be more willing to take action. If not, at least I tried. Ultimately, my negative actions only made my job more difficult. I now realize that was not a very smart or effective way to conduct myself.

Finally, I will have a better chance of avoiding conflict if I refrain from distancing myself from difficult people. I will work harder at building and maintaining relationships in situations like this, even though my natural inclination is to "write them off."

The positive thing about having negative experiences is that hopefully I learn from them. I do not have control over other people but if I act appropriately, I will have a much better chance of getting the cooperation I desire. This experience taught me about the dangers of going along with the group. I know that the next time I am in this situation I will behave differently.