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Sinking in Sandy Dunes: A Case Study to Address HR Staffing and Seasonal Workers

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Abstract

One of the challenges for organizations operating in a predominant resort tourism industry is the seasonal nature of operations that can create staffing challenges and employee retention for sustainability. In this paper, we examine the challenges of a restaurant in the Grand Strand region of South Carolina experiencing some of the people management challenges inherent in the resort tourism industry. We present an instructor-developed case study of a restaurant for use as a pedagogical tool applicable in a variety of learning and training environments. The case highlights a fictional organization, Sandy Dunes, and is designed to engage learners in critical thinking and problem-solving for use in human resource management courses or principles of management courses, as it addresses people management issues associated with recruitment, selection, compensation, training, and performance expectations. Additionally, the case can also be used in organizational training sessions to address staffing and employee retention efforts. The instructional plan is presented over three class sessions but can be modified to fit any course schedule or modality. We provide a model for organizational analysis and problem-solving to address organizational issues. We also provide supplemental resources for instructors to facilitate class discussion and solutions.

Background

The Grand Strand Region of coastal South Carolina is best characterized as resort tourism for its sandy beaches, golf courses, resorts, entertainment and restaurants. The region consists of Myrtle Beach, which is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, as well other coastal towns cascading around 60 miles of sandy beaches. With a population of 325,000 and 19 million visitors annually, Myrtle Beach and the Grand Strand region is home to more than 3000 hotels and 2000 restaurants (www.visitmyrtlebeach.com). The success of the hotels, restaurants, and entertainment venues is heavily dependent on seasonal workers that are both locals and others that migrate to the area for the peak seasons of operations. The peak season for Grand Strand region of South Carolina ranges from February through October. Firms that operate based on the peak season have the continual challenge of retaining workers from season to season as well as attract new workers to address retention issues. The nature of work that is heavily dependent on seasonal demand requires firms to have a staffing strategy that can sustain business operations both during peak and non-peak seasons as well as attracting/retaining workers for the next season. To address the challenges of staffing seasonal workers in a resort tourism industry, we present a case study in this paper that centers on a restaurant in the Grand Strand region of South Carolina that has experienced issues with staffing and retention that has now impacted revenue and customer perceptions. A case study is an example of experiential learning that allows students to become immersed in the organization and take an active role in managing the organizational issues. After a review of experiential learning practices below, we will introduce

the case study followed by an instructional plan that can be used in a variety of management courses and organizational training environments.

Experiential Learning Strategies

Recent research has highlighted the value of experiential exercises to enhance student learning outcomes (Samaras, Adkins, & White, 2022; Tan, 2019). Experiential learning is a growing area of interest for instructional design as faculty seek to enhance student learning and overall readiness for life beyond college. Kolb (1984) defined experiential learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (D. A. Kolb, 1984, p. 38). Experiential learning exercises provide an opportunity for hands-on learning experiences that link classroom learning with real-world applications. Case studies are widely used in management education as an experiential learning tool because they allow “hands-on” practice to reinforce learning in the context of an organization. The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) has provided some key principles for experiential learning that include:

1. Carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis
2. Experiences that require the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for results, and
3. Actively engage the learning by posing questions investigating, and experimenting (www.aee.org/what-is-ee)

Critical thinking is considered one of the most important elements in academic learning contexts. Critical thinking skills are frequently facilitated through experiential learning activities that allow learners to engage as an active participant in managerial contexts to gather and use information to make informed decisions. Case studies are commonly used in management courses as an experiential learning tool to engage students in critical thinking as an aspect of managerial decision-making. We draw on the principles set forth by the Association for Experiential Education and utilize an instructor-developed case study to facilitate learning and engagement in management decisions. Experiential learning exercises are widely used in management curricula ranging from content-specific areas such as strategic management (Mitchell, 2004) to skill-specific activities such as teamwork (Marasi, 2019). Prior research has demonstrated that experiential learning activities that allow for “hands-on” practice enhances student learning outcomes (Marasi, 2019; Mitchell, 2004; Samaras et al., 2022; Tan, 2019). In this paper, we introduce a case study as an experiential learning exercise for use in human resource management courses and general management courses. As human resource management is continually viewed as a strategic partner within organizations, it is important for students to begin applying their managerial skills in people management for use in organizational settings. Case studies allow students to gain a better understanding of organizations and the various roles given that sufficient internal information is shared to engage in critical thinking and problem-solving. The case presented in this paper centers around an organization, Sandy Dunes, that is experiencing people management issues and students will be engaged to address the organizational issues from a managerial perspective.

This case can be used in multiple ways and across different courses in a management curriculum. The case has primarily been used in introductory HR courses to apply concepts related to staffing and performance management. This case can also be used in other undergraduate management courses such as Principles of Management, Organization Behavior, or Strategic Management. In these courses, it is best used after students have been instructed in an overview of effective organizations where they have an understanding of the four functions of Planning, Organizing, Leading, and Controlling and could be used to reinforce learning for any of the key functions. The instructional plan is outlined to be delivered in two to three 75-minute class sessions, but it could also be used in a series of 50-minute class sessions. The case has been used in both face-to-face classes and asynchronous distance learning courses and is appropriate for use of classes of any size. We present the case below, which is a synopsis of the organization being examined followed by an instructional plan to be administered over three 75-minute class sessions but can alternatively be presented as a half-day training workshop.

The Case: Sandy Dunes¹

Sandy Dunes is one of the more than 2000 restaurants located in the Grand Strand region of South Carolina in a thriving resort tourism area with three peak seasons (e.g., spring, summer, and fall) accounting for the largest economic boom for the area. The region has a local population that quadruples in size during peak seasons. The restaurant is popular among locals and tourists, and it generates sufficient revenue during the peak seasons to support operations and allow for the restaurant to close during the off-peak winter season. The restaurant is family-owned and has been in operation for more than 35 years. While they have no formal mission statement, the restaurant desires to provide high quality service and food that creates a memorable experience for customers. The menu consists of American fare with menu options including burgers, chicken, seafood, salads, kids' meals, and a variety of desert and drink options. According to Sandy Dunes, they focus on serving families and the gratuity is automatically included in the bill regardless of the number of members in the party being served.

The restaurant has two locations and is marketed as a family-friendly restaurant but caters to all clientele. Both restaurant locations are open 8 months out of the year (closed November – February) and they focus on hiring seasonal workers each year. The restaurant managers and kitchen personnel are maintained as employees throughout the year, but the wait staff/hostesses are hired each new season. While the company is a privately-owned family business, they have hired a General Manager to manage all aspects of operations (e.g., staffing, vendors, menu options, financials, and marketing). Approximately 25 full-time employees are maintained as full-time employees throughout the year, including two restaurant managers, kitchen personnel, and staff to support operations. An additional 40-50 wait staff/hostesses are hired as seasonal workers at each location.

Sandy Dunes has been relatively profitable but revenues have been declining for the past three years. The General Manager was hired this year to address the issues facing Sandy Dunes

¹ Name changed to preserve anonymity.

and increase overall profitability. The General Manager has conducted some preliminary research from Yelp and Google reviews and has found that customer comments about the establishment are less than flattering. While the comments support that they have successfully created a family atmosphere and that menu options are affordable, they are less forgiving when it comes to the quality of service. In the online reviews, customers have commented that members of the wait staff are not friendly (e.g., smiling or conversational) nor do they respond on regular basis by checking on customers for drink refills in a timely manner or offer additional menu items to be ordered (e.g., desserts). The General Manager has reviewed the hiring and training practices of the staff and found that staff are primarily hired based on the accessibility of a labor pool that will work for minimum wage and staff generally do not return for the next season. As a result, the restaurant is constantly hiring new staff each year but with very limited time for training. The General Manager has also learned that the training of staff primarily consists of learning the menu, processing orders, and closing out the checks when customers have completed their dining experience. The General Manager is now seeking your expertise in terms of the best way to address the issues facing his restaurant. Students will be instructed to assist the organization in its staffing challenges to improve their overall effectiveness.

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this exercise, students should be able to:

- Evaluate the staffing strategy for seasonal workers at Sandy Dunes
- Describe compensation practices relative to the food services industry
- Describe performance issues related to customer service
- Develop retention strategies for seasonal employees to return each year

Instructional plan

This case can be used in several ways including as a flipped classroom in which students read the case and complete an initial exercise (e.g., Discussion Forum) prior to class to facilitate class discussions. Alternatively, the case is a short, one-page synopsis that can be provided as a class handout to allow students to read in-class and prepare for class discussion simultaneously. For both face-to-face and distance learning contexts, students can complete an initial exercise (can be in-class or online) to assess their ability to identify issues with the Sandy Dunes restaurant. The instructional plan is designed to be administered over three class sessions which are detailed below. The instructional plan presented is modeled for 75-minute face-to-face class sessions, but it can be modified for shorter or longer class sessions. Alternatively, the case can be used as a half-day exercise in any organizational training environment. The case was developed to address common challenges associated with seasonal workers that require specific strategies for staffing, compensation, and employee retention. To provide students with the content knowledge to address the issues facing Sandy Dunes, it is important to outline the courses and appropriate timing of this case.

Introductory Management courses. The focus is primarily on the overall strategy for a small, family-owned business. The instruction can include having students conduct a SWOT analysis of the restaurant, research best practices for the food services industry, and operational

strategies. The case can be addressed in light of the four functions of management (e.g., planning, organizing, leading, and controlling) and is best presented with the organizing or with the *leading function* (e.g., “motivate, coordinate, and energize individuals and groups to work together to achieve organizational goals”; Jones & George, 2021).

Human Resources (HR) courses. The focus is primarily on people-management because they are the front-line of direct contact with the customer, thus, your recommendations should address managing the workforce in a way that maximizes productivity and ultimately profitability. Instructors can address hiring strategy, performance expectations, compensation, and retention strategies. The case is best presented in HR courses after discussions of staffing, compensation, and employee retention.

In both courses (e.g., Introductory Management and Human Resources), it would be helpful to review the responsibilities of managers in organizational settings so that the focus of this case is on the action needed by managers. Managers are responsible for defining work tasks for employees that include specific performance expectations, behaviors, and providing feedback for continuous improvement. It is also important to instruct students to address the issues being as objective as possible without making judgments or characterizations about the employees (e.g., lazy, unmotivated, rude, disrespectful, etc.). Employees will do what is directed of them, thus, if there are issues associated with the work that is not based on competency, it is a managerial issue.

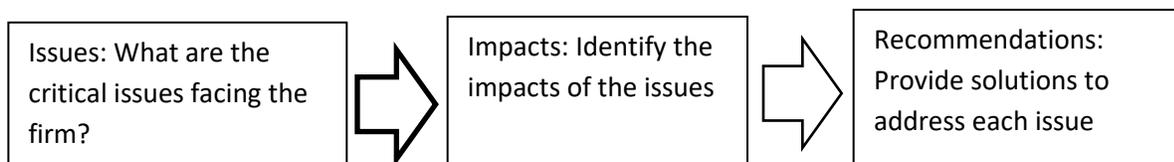
The instructional plan presented in this paper is conducted in three course sessions and we provide instructional tools in the Appendices to support the three course sessions. The first session is the introduction of the case and a review of best practices in organizations for people management (e.g., leading function) and facilitates class discussion for students to generate responses (Appendix A). In this session, it is also helpful to review the stages of problem-solving and we provide an instructional resource to facilitate this review with students (Appendix B). The second session is the analysis of the case with the specific issues within Sandy Dunes being addressed. This session requires the most time as it also prepares students to write a professional memo demonstrating their ability to define the organizational issues and propose solutions (Appendix C). The final session is a debrief that occurs after students have submitted their work and facilitates class discussion to allow students to share their different approaches and perspectives in addressing the case study (Appendix D). We provide a more detailed description of each of the three sessions in the steps outlined below.

Session I: Overview and initial case discussion

Materials needed:

1. Sandy Dunes case as a handout
2. Handout/PowerPoint review of best organizational practices (Appendix A)
3. Handout/PowerPoint review of problem-solving stages (Appendix B)
4. Initial exercises/Discussion forum questions (Appendix C)

Lecture/discussion should consist of two parts: (1) review of best practices in organizations for people management and (2) initial issues identification from the case. The lecture/discussion should include a brief discussion (approximately 15 minutes) on what constitutes effective practices in organizations from course materials and it can be a free-form discussion from students in class or online. It should also include a review of problem-solving stages and any model can be used (approximately 10 minutes). We employed a modified version of the problem-solving process common in management textbooks that is outlined below. This outline will model the class delivery plan for the case analysis to engage students in critical thinking about the issues, impacts of the issues on the firm, and provide recommendations to address each of the issues. As shown below, the three stages proposed for the case analysis is intended to be presented in a sequential order. The problem-solving process would be the focus of instruction in the first two sessions of class delivery.



The second activity in class should engage students in the case discussion by instructing them to identify the issues after reading the case (approximately 30-40 minutes). This activity can be accomplished prior to class with a Discussion Forum or allow in-class time to complete. The discussion should allow students to discuss what they know from the case facts and the issues that they have observed. This first session establishes the foundation for the case analysis and allows students to review what they have learned in management and/or HR courses that provide the knowledge base to engage in the analysis.

Options for initial discussion: (1) Online discussion forum for the initial issues identification to engage critical thinking skills, or (2) In-class handout for the initial issues identification.

Instructions to students:

This assignment is a case study of an organization dealing with people management issues. It is important to understand that people management issues can impact all aspects of the organization and they must be managed. All organizations must manage processes and policies that allow them to be effective (e.g., accomplishing their mission and overall goals) and efficient (e.g., use of organizational resources in that support its mission, while minimize costs/losses). Organizations may not have well-formed HR practices, yet still need to manage their human capital in a way that supports the organization as well as the needs of employees. In this case, Sandy Dunes is dealing with some specific challenges that has negatively impacted the business.

The General Manager of Sandy Dunes is seeking your managerial expertise in terms of the best way to address the issues facing the restaurant. You are being asked to consult with this restaurant to find the best way to address the organizational concerns using problem-solving

methods from management/HR courses. This assignment requires that you integrate what you have learned and demonstrate your ability to apply it in workplace situations.

A simplified problem-solving approach is a three-step model used to facilitate analysis of the organization and an outline for presenting results in written form.

1. **Issues:** What are the critical issues facing the business/firm? You may opt to categorize them into Product/Service, People, Process, or Profitability for clarity and organizing the analysis.
2. **Impacts:** Discuss the impact (positive or negative) of those issues on the organization (e.g., customer service, morale, turnover, productivity, etc.).
3. **Recommendations:** Provide specific recommendations to address each issue based on established best practices that have been extracted from your readings, course notes, and lessons learned from other organizations.

Session II: Case analysis and formulating recommendations

Materials needed:

1. Sandy Dunes case as a handout
2. In-class case discussion – can be individual or small group
3. Assignment instructions to include submission format (e.g., memo or report)

For this session, instructors can facilitate breakout sessions to continue the analysis to include two final elements of the problem-solving process: (1) discuss the impacts of the issues on the business and (2) provide solutions/recommendations to address each issue. This discussion should include extracting content knowledge from course material (e.g., recruitment, selection, training, compensation, and retention). It is important to provide the context of the case study for learners to include general and specific learning objectives. We propose the following as a guide to share with students to connect their learning of management content with the case study exercise.

General management learning objectives:

- Evaluate an organization for efficiency and effectiveness
 - Assessing mission, vision, values, goals, and strategy
- Discuss the importance of problem-solving that influence organizational effectiveness
- Describe the ways in which the problem-solving method can be applied to attain organizational effectiveness

HR learning objectives:

- Evaluate the staffing strategy for seasonal workers at Sandy Dunes
- Describe compensation practices relative to the food services industry
- Describe performance issues related to customer service
- Develop retention strategies for seasonal employees to return each year

As part of this session, Instructors may also provide a recap of the case in terms of issues identified to ensure consensus and allows students to affirm their analysis. We provide a synopsis of the assessment of Sandy Dunes in Table 1.

Table 1. Sandy Dunes' Strengths and Issues

Sandy Dunes' Strengths and Issues	
Positives of Sandy Dunes	Issues/Concerns for Sandy Dunes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operating for 35+ years • Quality food that appeals to a variety of customer • Family-friendly atmosphere • Peak season operations in spring, summer, and fall • Profitable for many years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clearly defined mission/vision/values/goals to direct the work of the restaurant • Unclear/unstated performance expectations of staff • Negative customer comments on quality of service on Yelp and Google reviews • Automatic gratuity does not incent quality service/staff • Hiring not focused on company goals but availability in the labor force • High turnover • Limited/no training on customer service

As shown in Table 1, students should be able to identify the positive attributes of Sandy Dunes that becomes a source of competitive advantage that the General Manager can leverage in many ways, both internal and external to the restaurant. The highlighted strengths and issues are also useful for discussion within the organization for use in training sessions and meetings to improve overall effectiveness.

At the conclusion Session II, students should be given at least one week to complete the analysis of Sandy Dunes and submit their written evaluation. The final evaluation can be written as a report or memo. The memo format is provided with the following instructions to students: The memo serves as an *internal communication* that reflects the issues you have been identified along with recommendations. Generally, the essential elements of the Memo after an opening paragraph includes: (1) state the problems/issues as you see them, (2) describe the impact of those issues in the workplace, and (3) introduce proposed solutions with justification/explanation for the recommended course of action.

Session III: Case Debrief

The final course session is a debrief session where the issues, impacts, and recommendations are discussed as a class. This session allows students to become informed of the different ways in which others addressed the challenges facing Sandy Dunes. The instructor can debrief the expected responses of students. For instructional support, we present a synopsis of the proposed solutions in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, we highlight the four key issues and how they impact the business. Each issue has a corresponding recommendation intended to resolve the issues facing Sandy Dunes and improve profitability and customer service experiences. Additional debrief information is also contained in Appendix D.

Table 2. Case Debrief of Sandy Dunes

Issues	Impacts on Business	Recommendations for Improvement
Quality of service – customer interactions with staff	Declining revenue, negative perception of reputation, potential loss of future customers	Company needs to define what they do and what they expect – mission, vision, values, and culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish quality standard • Measure success – customer ratings
Limited training on customer service behaviors	Employees have no stated performance expectations for customer service	Define performance standards and train employees accordingly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can use ONET data to capture customer service tasks (www.online.onetcenter.org)
High turnover rate	No continuity of employees or business practices	Address the issues driving turnover by seeking input from employees, specifically seasonal workers and wages
No formalized hiring strategy	Hiring workers willing to work for minimum wage but no focus on effort/expected quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refocus hiring to define ideal employee and engagement • Hiring – use employee referral to address turnover

Conclusion

The case study of Sandy Dunes and associated instructional plan has been designed to aid Instructors in experiential learning that allows students to engage in critical thinking exercises to enhance their learning. Experiential learning activities such as case studies allow students to examine aspects of an organizational setting as a way of preparing them for the issues they are likely to face in the workplace and thus serves a useful for workforce readiness. The use of this case study in various courses over the years have resulted in engaging class discussion and enhanced learning of important concepts in HR and general management. Student engagement is facilitated by the relatively short nature of the case, but also by the familiarity many students have with either working in or frequenting restaurants with similar issues. Taken with the benefits of using cases for experiential learning, this familiar context makes Sandy Dunes a valuable tool for educators teaching HR and other management courses.

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Appendix A Review of “Practices of Effective Organizations”

*To capture these elements and engage students, construct these lists using the Think-Pair-Share method or a Discussion Forum

Below are responses Instructors can provide as “answers” to students.

Characteristics of Effective Organizations:

- Well-defined mission statement
- Well-defined vision statement (optional)
- Well-defined goals
- Well-defined strategy (ways in which they plan to accomplish mission and goals)
- Well-defined corporate value statement
- Organizational structure appropriate for the organization
- Company policies and procedures (standard operating procedures)
- Performance standards
- Professional ethics/professional conduct standards
- Defined business model to include inputs-processes-outputs
- Clearly defined outputs (e.g., product or service) linked to the mission statement
- Clearly defined jobs/roles
- Talent management practices – hiring, training, evaluation, compensation, and retention

Effective People Management Strategies:

- Clearly defined performance standards/expectations
- Realistic goals
- Honest and accurate performance feedback (ideally continuous)
- Work environment supports employee performance (e.g., resources, timelines, technology, etc.)
- Employee feedback mechanisms
- Incentives (can be non-monetary) that reward or generate appropriate effort
- Motivation strategies
- Training to address competency needs
- Development to address future needs
- Coaching/Mentoring to support performance management needs
- Discipline policies to address behavior in the workplace
- Effective management/leadership of employees

Appendix B

Six-step problem-solving method to be used for analysis

There are a variety of problem-solving methods presented in management textbooks and the one used below is comparable and readily available at <http://www.free-management-ebooks.com/news/six-step-problem-solving-model/>

- Step 1: Define the problem/issue occurring within the organization (include the impact on areas within the organization)
- Step 2: Determine the root cause(s) of the problem
- Step 3: Develop alternative solutions (based on readings, research, and class discussion)
- Step 4: Select a solution (specific recommendation to address the problem/issue)
- Step 5: Implement the solution (for case analysis, identify a timeline/priority for action)
- Step 6: Evaluate the outcome (limitation of case analyses but we will know the outcome)

Appendix C

Discussion Forum for introducing the case

Instructions: As you read through the case of Sandy Dunes, identify what you see as the **critical issues** facing the business. Be specific to identify the issue and evidence presented that supports your decision. This assignment is the initial identification of issues, thus, do not worry about making recommendations at this stage in the evaluation of the business.

NOTE: You are not making "evaluative judgments" but directly what you observe and/or the impact of a particular issue or behavior. When all students have participated in the Discussion Forum, provide a recap and provide feedback as you prepare for the full case analysis on Sandy Dunes.

Sample response to get students started: Failing to provide thorough customer service such as "checking on customers" and "refilling drinks"

Anticipated Responses: You can expect that students may not be readily able to classify what they observed/read about in the case and articulating them as organizational issues.

Recap/Feedback: The purpose of the discussion forum assignment is to have students begin the process of identifying issues. In many instances, this process will require them to move beyond observations (e.g. failing to check on customers) to issues (e.g., failure to define performance standards or hiring based on availability rather than qualifications).

Once students have identified the issues, we suggest having a debrief session with the class to provide feedback and confirm that students have clearly identified the issue.

Appendix D

Final debrief and summary for solutions to address staffing and retention

In Table 2, the proposed solutions to the issues facing Sandy Dunes are presented. The information contained in this appendix is intended to provide a more detailed outline for HR courses and the strategies that can be implemented. This is an additional tool for Instructors' use as a resource for the case study.

1. Develop performance standards and specific, measurable behaviors for the customer service.
2. Incorporate an evaluation system for continuity to include customer feedback as well as direct observation. Many restaurants accomplish through surveys attached to receipts or a more proactive response is to have the customer feedback instantly on-site.
3. Provide on-going training for skill building and motivation (e.g., round-up meetings, competitions for customer service quality, recognition, and coaching/mentoring).
4. Provide pay differentials based on merit/performance, seniority, and/or retention bonuses.
5. Celebrate successes! Reinforce employees engaged in positive customer service.