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Article

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Origami organizations!

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to provide instructors with a hands-on engaging and experiential class activity designed to teach undergraduate and graduate students about different organizational structures in management courses. Through this exercise, students will be able to self-identify the challenges and strengths of working under contrasting organizational structures.

Design/methodology/approach – Split into two (or four) teams, students construct origami animals based on their team's organizational structure, using both mechanistic and organic structures to create a zoo based on a set of instructions and boundary conditions. Materials required include origami paper, markers, printed instructions, origami animal instructions, and role title cards for each student. The exercise takes approximately 30–45 min, including debriefing discussion. All materials/instructions needed are included with this paper (except origami paper and markers).

Findings – Through this exercise, students internalize the challenges and strengths of working in organizations with contrasting structures. The debrief discussion will help solidify student understanding of what the day to day experience of working in different organizational structures might look like, the pros and cons of different structures, and what type of employees or industries might thrive under different structures.

Research limitations/implications – This paper is being submitted for the “Special Issue Call for Papers: Modern Day Experiential Exercises.”

Practical implications – This activity allows students to draw their own conclusions about organizational structure and to engage in a fruitful discussion about what working at different types of organizations looks like on a day-to-day basis.

Social implications – This activity allows students to strengthen their skills in communication, teamwork, and leadership by having them work in teams to complete a challenging, competitive task.

Originality/value – While teaching organizational structure in management courses has traditionally been limited to traditional forms of instruction such as lecturing and reviewing different organizational charts, this activity gives students a fun competitive in-class activity in which they practice working as a part of contrasting organizational structures to see what type of structure they might thrive in.

Keywords Experiential learning, Teaching, Organizational structure, Management teaching, Management teaching and learning

Paper type Technical paper

Introduction to the exercise

Understanding different organizational structures is a key learning objective for many management courses (i.e. management principles, human resources, organizational behavior, strategic management and more). With many companies moving from traditional



hierarchical and mechanistic to innovative and organic structures, students should understand the differences in structure types, the benefits and challenges depending on the industry, size or age of an organization and how these structures may affect them as employees or future managers.

Students have traditionally been taught organizational structures by reviewing varying organizational charts, learning new vocabulary or analyzing case studies. Although these activities are not necessarily bad, it can be said that “The topic of organizational structure can be a boring subject to teach” (McMahon, 2018). This hands-on, concrete activity (Morris, 2020) makes teaching organizational structure effective, engaging, competitive (there is a winner!) and fun. The exercise allows students to engage in and experience the challenges and strengths of working in a specifically designed organization. Learning organizational structure in this concrete way allows students to gain the necessary skills to apply their learning to actual workplace challenges (Rouse & Stirling, 1992). The activity works best as an in-class rather than an online activity, though if all the students had the supplies they needed to participate at home, an online version may be possible by placing student teams into break-out rooms.

This activity has been deployed by three College of Business professors in multiple management courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In all cases, it has proven to be effective in imparting lessons on teamwork, communication and collaboration as well as in the benefits and challenges of different specific organizational structures. The key learnings have been measured by the class debrief as well as the students’ understanding of follow-up assessments. The students have overwhelmingly positive reviews of the activity as an experiential tool for learning organizational structures in addition to building stronger relationships with their peers. The energy from the students is sustained throughout the debrief, where they consistently come to the desired conclusions about organizational structure without prompts from the instructor.

Instructions for presenting the exercise

Learning goals

- To understand the difference between mechanistic and organic organizational structure.
- To understand the strengths and challenges of different organizational designs.
- To foster teamwork, communication and collaboration skills in students.

Approximate timing for exercise and debrief

- Set-up and instructions: 5 min.
- Execution of activity: 15–20 min.
- Debrief: 10–20 min.

Materials and technology needed

No technology is needed.

Twenty sheets of origami paper (per student).

Three markers (per team).

- Printed instructions – organic structure (one for each student on the team – [Appendix 1](#)).
- Printed instructions – mechanistic structure (one for each student on the team – [Appendix 2](#)).
- Printed name cards with role/title in the mechanistic organization (one for each student on the team – [Appendix 3](#)).
- Printed name cards with role/title in the organic organization (one for each student on the team – [Appendix 4](#)).
- Printed copies of origami animal instructions (three of each animal per team – [Appendix 5](#)).

Preparation for instructors

Advanced preparation

Purchase origami paper (large packs of paper are easily found online).

Collect three markers for each team (this will vary depending on class size – “Note” below).

Print team instructions for organic and mechanistic organizations ([Appendix 1](#) and [2](#)).

Print role/title cards for students on the mechanistic organization team(s) ([Appendix 3](#)).

Print role/title cards for students on the organic organization team(s) ([Appendix 4](#)).

Print origami animal instructions – three of each animal per team (this will vary depending on class size – “Note” below) ([Appendix 6](#)).

(Note: Teams should have an equal number of students per team. Ideal team sizes are between 8 and 15 students per team. In a larger class, you can create more than 1 team for each organizational structure of the same sizes described previously. In a smaller class where teams are less than 15 students each, you should reduce the number of markers from 3 to 2 per team and reduce the origami instructions from 3 to 2 per team. Reducing the supplies for smaller teams maintains the idea of resource scarcity in the challenge.)

Day of activity

Divide the class into equal-size teams (8–15 students per team) and have students sit with their team. You can optionally begin with a brief discussion of the two structures and examples of companies or common industries that use each structure.

Explain the activity and distribute instructions and materials.

Allow 2 min for students to read the instructions and ask questions.

During the activity, walk around to make sure students are following their team’s instructions and keeping time to make sure they stop after the designated 15–20 min.

Once the time for the activity is up, have the students count and score the origami output based on the point system in the instructions. The CEO should report the mechanistic team’s numbers to reflect how executive leadership is responsible for reporting company performance. The organic team can choose who presents its numbers. The instructor may also provide incentives like extra credit points to the team that wins by points and/or the number of origami pieces created to increase competition in the activity. It is fun to have students write the completed counts on the board for all of the class to see as well. After points are totaled, debrief with the suggested questions!

Debriefing

To debrief the activity, the instructor should start by having the students reflect upon their experiences working on their teams. First, ask the organically structured team what went well for them. This leads the students to see for themselves the strengths of working in a flatter, organic organizational structure (more creativity and more autonomy). The instructor should then ask the organically structured team what challenges they faced. This

will lead the students to see the potential difficulties of working in an organic organization (i.e. less organized efforts by employees, no clear roles or leaders to consult for help and little room for promotion).

The instructor should then ask the same questions as the mechanistic team. This will lead the mechanistic team to discover the strengths of working in a mechanistic organization (i.e. a more clearly defined structure, clarity of roles and tasks and room for promotion). Students will also typically realize the importance of effective leaders with strong communication skills in the success of a mechanistic organization (Jabarzadeh et al., 2019; Kirkhaug, 2010). Students from this team should also be asked to discuss the weaknesses of this type of organization [red tape, bureaucracy, time spent waiting for direction, etc. (Henderson & Hunter, 2015)]. The instructor can have a slide designed with the pros and cons of each type of organizational structure to discuss after the students have their own discussion to ensure all lessons are imparted.

The major takeaway from the debrief of this activity is understanding the trade-offs of designing an organization in different ways (see *italics* debrief questions below). However, the activity can also be used to make other topics from the class more tangible to students as well (Barnes & Smith, 2013). For example, instructors can also use the debrief to have the students reflect on the activity through different lenses they learned in the course (i.e. through a resource-based view) or use course-based analyses (i.e. SWOT analysis) to analyze their experience during the activity. We have included some sample debrief questions below, but this activity lends itself to many different avenues for discussion of organizational topics!

Sample debrief questions

- *What strengths did you see in working in a mechanistically structured team? What challenges?*
- *What strengths did you see in working in an organically structured team? What challenges?*
- *What types of jobs or industries might benefit from each organizational structure? Why?*
- *What boundaries or resource limitations did your organization face, and how did these affect your outcomes?*
- *What trends or patterns developed with your group? What surprised you the most?*
- *Which motivation theories would explain the outcomes?*
- *What strategies were developed to complete this challenge successfully?*
- *From a management perspective, what worked well and what did not?*
- *What frustrations did you experience during the activity? How could your team best alleviate these frustrations if given the chance to complete the exercise again?*
- *What type of organization do you feel was more effective in the activity?*
- *What challenges did the CEO face?*
- *How did leadership on the mechanistic team play a role? What extra challenges did leaders face?*
- *What did you learn about communication, leadership and/or motivation? Explain with an example of what went well and what did not.*

Optional additions to this activity

Add one level of management to the organic organization by “promoting” someone who is very productive during the activity – their role then changes from an engineer to a “manager” – they are no longer an origami maker – this shows the students how organic organizations can become more mechanistic and change structure when they grow and produce more!

Promote an engineer on the mechanistic team who is very productive to a “top management team member role.” This option is a wonderful way to have students experience what happens in organizations when the most productive “doers” become “leaders” – see “Additional debrief questions for these alternatives to the base activity” below.

Have the leaders of the teams report their “financials” at the end (number of origami animals and points scored).

Half-way through the activity, say the market for “birds” has changed and increased the points awarded for this animal.

Select one student from each team and have them switch teams mid-way to reflect the process of resigning from one organization and starting anew at another organization.

Add more origami animal options or more rules to make the activity longer and more complex.

Additional debrief questions for these alternatives to the base activity.

If you use the “promotion” options above, you can ask the leaders: how did your role change when you were promoted to leadership? How are companies affected when their best “doers” become leaders? Do the best “doers” make the best leaders?

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Appendix 1. Instructions for students (organic organizational structure teams)

Organic organization instructions

- Your project at work today is to engineer an origami zoo!
- Your team will get 1 point for every dog *or* cat built at the end of 20 min.
- You will receive 2 points for every bird built at the end of 20 min.
- You will receive 10 bonus points if you have built *at least three of each different animal*.
- You will receive 12 bonus points if *every* animal also gets designs drawn on it (use the markers).
- You only have nine origami folding instruction sheets because *resources in a firm are limited*.
- Everyone on your team is an engineer, and no one reports to anyone else. You all have the same job title and power. As a team, you have 20 min to build your origami zoo. Who builds the animals. . . how they build the animals. . . how you divide the work. . . is all up to your team!

Appendix 2. Instructions for students (mechanistic organizational structure teams)

Mechanistic organization instructions

- Your project at work today is to engineer an origami zoo!
- Your team will get 1 point for every dog *or* cat built at the end of 20 min.
- You will receive 2 points for every bird built at the end of 20 min.
- You will receive 10 bonus points if you have *built at least three of each different animal*.
- You will receive 12 bonus points if *every* animal also gets designs drawn on it (use the markers).
- You only have nine origami folding instruction sheets because *resources in a firm are limited*.

Rules

- The CEO runs the organization. The CEO will decide how you will execute this project.
- The CEO *only speaks* to the top management team members. The CEO can walk around viewing the team's efforts and can advise changes in the strategy throughout the whole 15 to 20 min, but only to the top management team.
- The CEO will pass this strategy down to the top management team members. The CEO can chat with the top management team at any time if he or she wants to change the strategy.
- The top management team members will discuss the strategy quickly and make any changes they see fit. The top management team members only speak to the CEO and the vice president of engineering. They will pass the strategy down to the vice president of engineering and can talk to the vice president of engineering anytime throughout the 15 to 20 min if adjustments are needed.
- The vice president of engineering will pass the plan down to the team of engineers who will be responsible for making the origami animals! The vice president of engineering can help his or her engineers with their animals if needed.

Appendix 3. Name cards for student roles in mechanistic organization

We recommend making fold-over name cards for students that they can set on the desk where they are working so other people can see their role clearly during the activity.

Mechanistic team(s):

- One student gets a name card that says “CEO.”
- Three students get a name card that says “TOP MANAGEMENT TEAM MEMBER.”
- One student gets a name card that says “VICE PRESIDENT OF ENGINEERING.”

The remaining students on this team get a name card that says “ENGINEER.”

*Optional addition: one extra name card that says “TOP MANAGEMENT TEAM MEMBER” to promote one engineer to during the activity.

Appendix 4. Name cards for student roles in organic organization

We recommend making fold-over name cards for students that they can set on the desk where they are working so other people can see their role clearly during the activity.

Organic team(s):

All students on this team get a name card that says “ENGINEER.”

*Optional addition: one name card that says “MANAGER” to promote one engineer to during the activity.

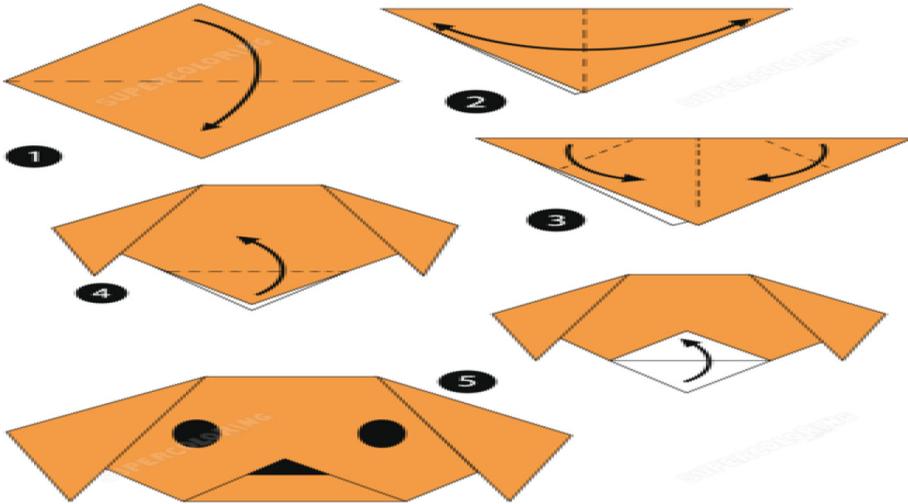
Appendix 5. Origami animal instructions – full printable instruction links

CAT: www.supercoloring.com/paper-crafts/how-to-make-an-origami-cat-face-step-by-step-instructions

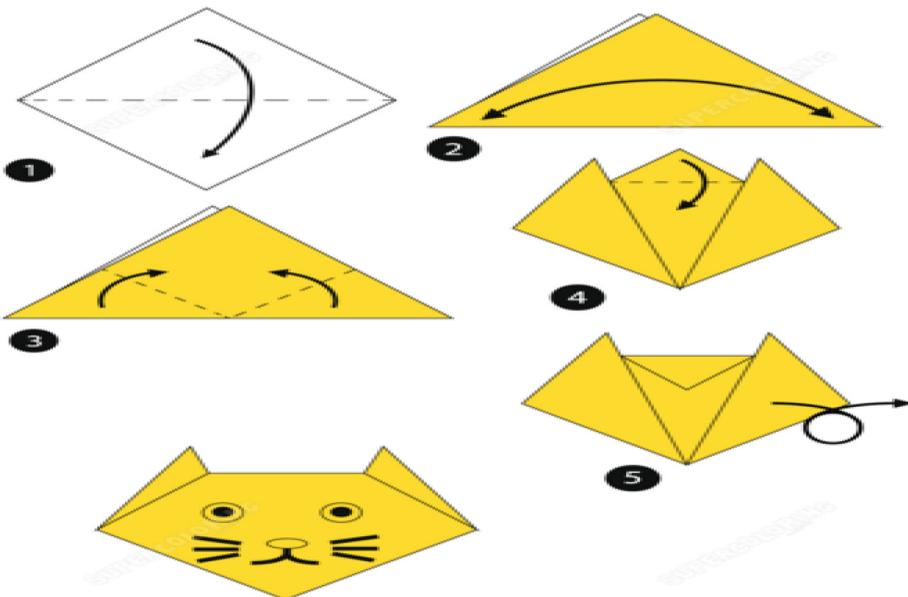
DOG: www.supercoloring.com/paper-crafts/origami-step-by-step-instructions-of-a-dog-face

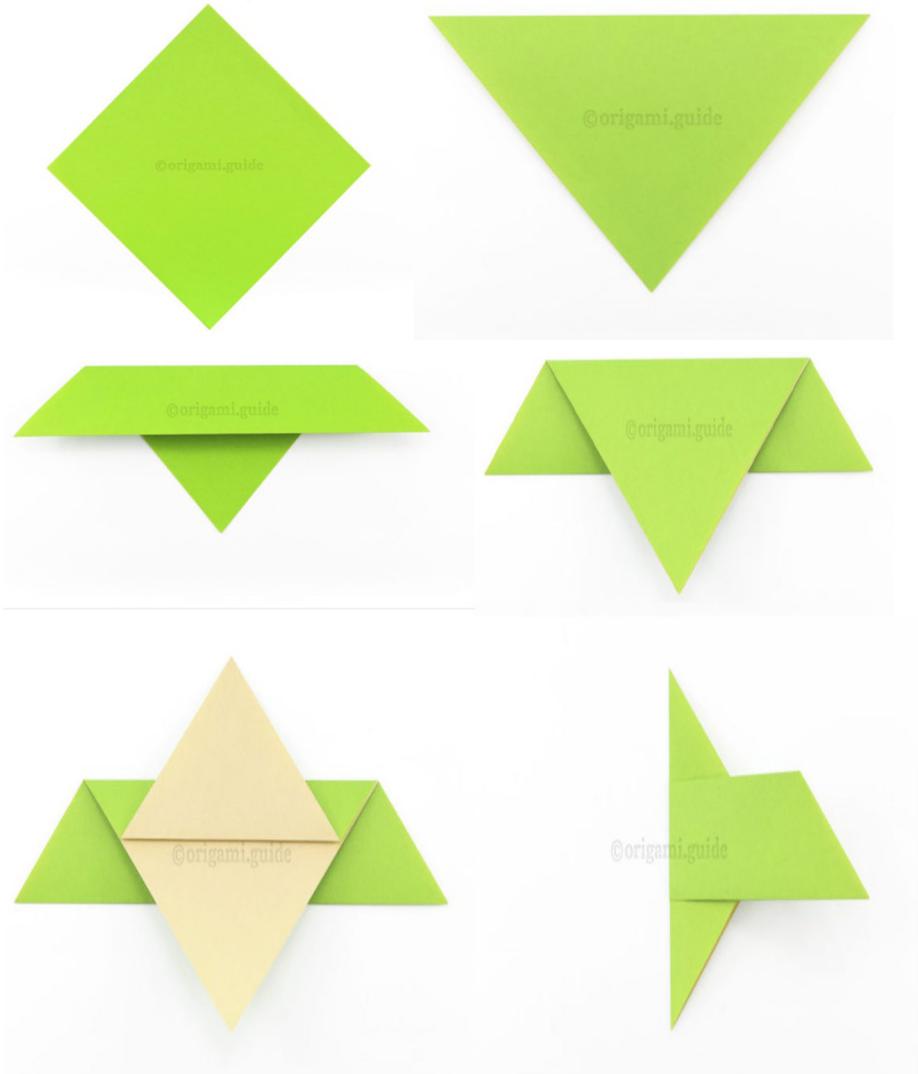
BIRD: <https://origami.guide/origami-animals/origami-birds/easy-origami-bird/1>

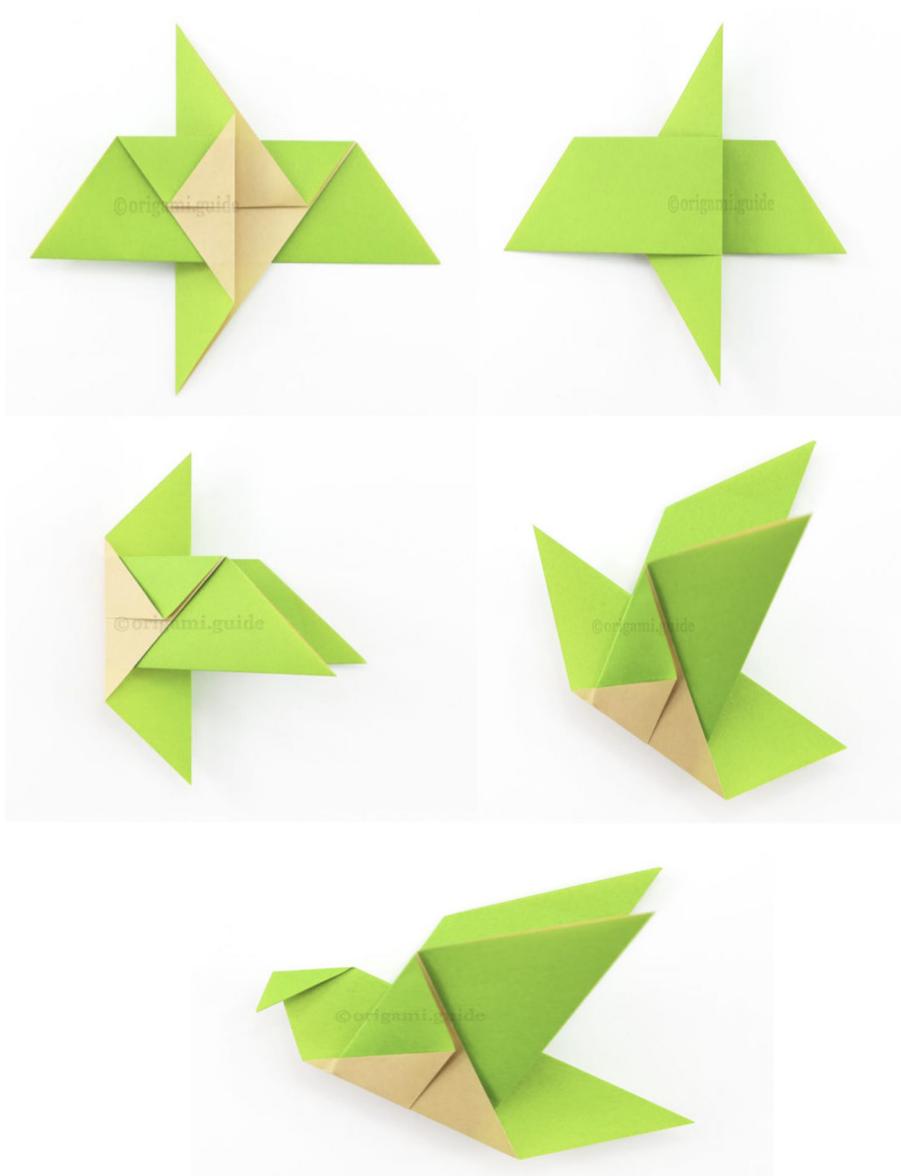
Appendix 6. Origami animal instructions (image version)
DOG:



CAT:







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