RATINGS

Simulation

Virtual Leader
Reviewed by Richard Lowell for *Training Media Review*

We seldom think of leadership as having life-threatening consequences, perhaps because we only see the surface and not the hard, volatile core. But every leadership decision a manager makes affects employees' lives, from salary and health care to the possibility of equipment failure or environmental disaster. Imagine the consequences of a new operator stepping into the control room of a nuclear power plant and saying, "Let's see what this baby can do!" Or a new manager belittling his staff or not knowing what to say at a meeting. Experienced managers will admit that every mistake is a learning opportunity, but you don't want burgeoning leaders to bring down the company in the process.

SimuLearn bases its Virtual Leader simulation on two core ideas: the principles of three-to-one leadership and the conviction that meetings are the quintessential forum for leadership interaction in business.

Three-to-one leadership is derived from the works of key learning gurus, leadership think tanks, and philosophers. It's founded on the assumption that leaders use the principles of power, tension, and ideas to mobilize groups of people to productively do the right work. The exercise of power, whether formal or informal, forwards the support of ideas. Ideas are the compass for change. Ideas are necessary for success, for determining strategy or tactics, and for achieving goals. Tension is the level of pressure or stress associated with the interaction of individuals.

Meetings are the stage upon which the principles of three-to-one leadership are implemented. In no other business venue, real time or virtual, must leaders practice their art more intensely than in a meeting. In a meeting, the leader's goal is to achieve productive work from others through communication, while gaining or sharing power, adjusting tension to a productive level based on the participants, and controlling the flow of ideas.

Because simulations present a myriad of information, often in terms that are unfamiliar, some form of practice is required. In a nuclear power plant, instructors will train learners in the use of the simulator first before moving on to specific evolutions.

Virtual Leader is divided into two parts. The first provides an intro-

duction to each of the concepts and then leads the learner through a series of guided practices in using the navigation tools within the simulation and the character and concept controls. These are appropriately called "batting cages," where the user can swing away while concentrating on form. Each batting cage teaches a different technique for use within the program.

Part 2 is the meat of the simulation. In a series of meetings with several characters on different topics, the learner's ability to get the right work done, using the ap-
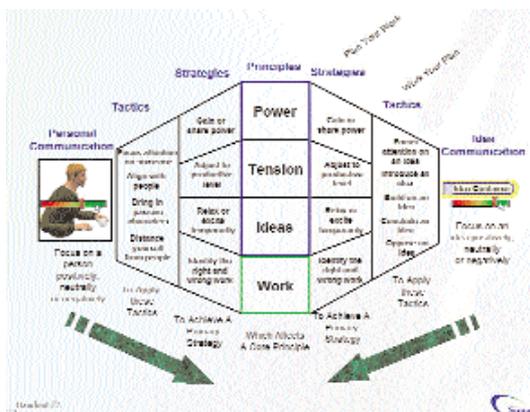

propriate concepts, is tested. A scorecard is presented at the end of the module (see the screenshot above) that not only measures how well the trainee performed using the power, tension, and idea concepts, but also ensures that the most productive mix of ideas is utilized and aligned with these business objectives:

- financial performance
- customer satisfaction
- employee morale.

Performance

Virtual Leader is a stand-alone software package with modest minimum computer requirements: Pentium III, 64 MB RAM, Windows 95/98/2000/ME/XP, soundcard, 3D Graphics card (16 MB), and approximately 400 MB of hard-disk space. SimuLearn provides a full spectrum of kickoff workshops that add to the usefulness of the program. Though they aren't required to maximize the benefit of Virtual Leader, they do con-

tribute to faster assimilation of the concepts in a blended learning environment. Classroom, telephone, or the Web are just three of the media the kickoff workshop can use.

Graphics are crisp, even on an eight-year-old graphics card. Sound is solid with little distortion. Animation is smooth, with no lip-sync delays. Response on a 600-MHz processor is quick. The user is able to interact with all characters in the simulation. Help screens are clear, succinct, and thorough.

The simulation's artificial intelligence platform performed flawlessly. No matter how I emphasized individual participants, each member of the meeting stayed in character. There were no lapses in business precepts, and technically the program performed without a hitch. Don't run any other programs in Windows while using Virtual Leader, however; it makes full use of all resources. The instructions tell you that, but what fun is it to read those?

Perhaps the most compelling characteristic of Virtual Leader is its flexibility and adaptability. Designed and developed by a multinational and multicultural team, SimuLearn, can vary the initial workshop based on corporate demands as well as change any of the values within the simulation to closely match corporate culture—for example, increasing the respect for authority variable in a military application while decreasing it in an IT setting. This multicultural development
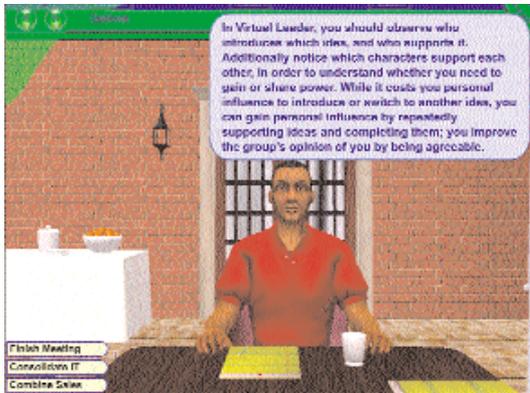
provides a unique look and feel to the program and helps mitigate the one-size-fits-all drawback of off-the-shelf programs.

Virtual Leader can add life to a more traditional curriculum. People who use it identify weaknesses in such areas as group dynamics, situational awareness, and communication and can leverage the existing "flat content" their organizations may already have. But there's nothing flat or static about this program. You must actively challenge yourself to gain strategic insight. Just as a great teacher reaches out to engage students, challenge them, and raise them to

Virtual Leader product rating		
★★★★		Holds user interest
★★★1/2		Production quality
★★★1/2		Ease of navigation
★★★★		Interactivity
★★★★		Value of content
★★★★		Instructional value
★★★★		Value for the money
★★★★		Overall rating

another level of educational competence, Virtual Leader captures your imagination and intellect, daring you to be a better leader.

Recommendation

Virtual Leader is an exquisite program based on sound leadership and management principles. The concepts are thoughtfully laid out and presented. The simulation engine performed without a problem. The price per individual is a steal considering that big-name leadership workshops can run thousands of dollars. The ability to practice and develop skills and knowledge without destroying your company and crushing individual morale is priceless. All organizations serious about leadership development should invest in this simulation. Buy it now.

Course Details

Virtual Leader Business Skills Suite, online, 2003, SimuLearn, 866.847.6660; www.simulearn.net. Purchase: US$499 per person. Quantity discounts and organizational culture calibration available; $49 to $199 per person for academic customers (limited version). Other material: electronic and paper support materials.

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