

Let Management Development Score for Your Organization

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Success depends on avoiding the pitfalls that plague most programs.

While differing predictions regarding the future abound, most agree that managing in the '80s will require a renewed emphasis on efficiency and cost cutting. With increased pressures for efficiency and the need to get the most out of invested dollars, the need for skilled management becomes greater as managers search for new and improved strategies to motivate individuals and improve managerial decision-making. Although we expect top management to turn to management development as a source of solutions to complex organizational problems, many firms are actually looking to their management development programs as places in which to cut their budgets.

When managers are faced with increased pressures to produce and increased pressures on their time, why is an important source of potential help often eliminated? Why don't organizations look to management development as a source of solutions for organizational problems when times are difficult?

A Solution to Organizational Problems?

In the past, management development has not always brought about desired results. Participating managers often reported that they enjoyed a program and

considered it successful; but as they returned to their departments, little change in behavior or improvement in results actually took place. Thus, the problems facing their departments continued as before. As a result, although many fine programs have been developed based on the latest theory and research, many top managers are becoming skeptical of the promised program benefits. What we find them looking for are programs that actually improve organizational, departmental, or individual performance.

We have identified four potential reasons why many management development programs have failed to deliver expected results: 1) ambiguous goals; 2) incomplete program development and design; 3) inattention to models of behavioral change; and 4) emphasis on the inappropriate unit of analysis.

Ambiguous Goals

One of the reasons why management development programs do not deliver the results top managers might expect is that they were not designed with immediate problem-solving in mind. We have accumulated a list of frequently cited goals of management development programs:

- increased sensitivity and self-awareness
- increased understanding of the human element, generally through enhanced knowledge of the concepts and theories of organizational behavior
- improved decision-making skills
- increased motivation to manage
- change in behavior from one leadership style to another

- acquaintance with "state of the art" techniques of management
- development of technical skills relevant to individual's function within the organization

While these are admirable goals, they fall short of stating what changes or improvements are expected in terms of organizational performance. Implicit in all of these goals is the assumption that individuals will use what they have gained in the program to solve problems and make decisions. In reality, what we desire is increased performance that comes about through improved decision-making and problem-solving.

If we view the problem-solving process in four stages — 1) problem identification; 2) problem diagnosis; 3) solution generation and implementation; and 4) evaluation — we can see how the stated goals should fit into this process. For example, increased self-awareness and sensitivity should make individuals more aware of their biases in identifying and diagnosing problems. Understanding of the human element should make diagnosis of the causes of departmental or individual performance problems easier and more accurate. Increased motivation to manage should increase the manager's motivation to identify, confront, and solve problems, rather than allow them to increase in magnitude. State of the art techniques and new leadership styles should expand the manager's repertoire of potential solutions.

The problem with setting goals is that the connection between these goals and improved problem-solving and performance is left to chance and the ability of the manager to make this connection. In addition, when the problem is centered at the departmental or organizational level and involves a number of managers, it requires simultaneous improvements. Most programs place little focus on helping managers transfer the training to their specific work situations.

Incomplete Program Development and Design

The first and often the most important step in designing a training program should be an assessment of training needs. Hopefully, this needs assessment is more than a sorting through of the assortment of

seminar announcements received by the training director.

David J. Stein has outlined two approaches to needs assessment: 1) the felt-needs training approach, and 2) the prescriptive training needs approach.¹ The felt-needs approach uses a survey to determine what perspective participants would like to see covered in the program. The prescriptive approach starts by identifying performance deficiencies and identifies what training is required to correct each deficiency.

The prescriptive approach may take on a number of forms. One prescriptive method is to use job analysis to identify skills, abilities, and knowledge that participants require to perform adequately. Another method is to do a behavioral analysis that compares current behavioral patterns (e.g., leadership style, conflict resolution style, etc.) with some normative behavioral model. Those areas where the current pattern of behavior differs from the pattern prescribed by the normative model would be keyed as areas for training.

Problem Identification

A final prescriptive method involves identification of organizational, departmental, or individual problems. Problems are identified and an analysis is made to determine the root causes of these problems. Once causes are determined, training is designed to solve the problems by training managers in areas that relate to the identified causes. For example, if a problem of low productivity is identified, and it is determined that employee motivation is the root of the problem, the training would focus on the topic of employee motivation.

Dennis C. Kinlaw and Donna R. Christensen argue that one of the critical factors in gaining the support of both top management and participants is whether or not they believe that the program will improve performance.² We not only agree, but would argue also that if the management development program is to have any effect on organizational, departmental, or individual performance, the needs assessment must be prescriptive and must identify specific areas of performance that are in need of improvement.

Once needs are identified, most train-

ers attempt to develop a list of topics that fit the training needs. The results of this process usually resembles a syllabus from a university management course; that is, the list is topical, moving from session to session, addressing one area at a time. For example, the program may start with motivation and then move on to leadership and communication, with each session being a self-contained module including a discussion of models, theories, tools, and techniques related to the topic.

Here lies one of the major problems with management development and, for that matter, management education in general. Topics are taught from a "forward theory building" perspective. This perspective presents models of motivation and leadership that show the relationship between independent variables such as job design, rewards systems, and leadership style, and dependent variables such as employee performance, satisfaction, and attachment. Our purpose is not to quarrel with the accuracy of the models, but to point out that managers have a difficult time using these models to do what they do most of the time: solve problems.

Problems lie in the dependent variables. A manager may have to deal with low productivity, poor product quality, or high turnover. To deal with these types of problems, managers need to take a "reverse theory building" perspective. For example, let's assume that a manager is faced with the problem that his or her department is continually late in meeting deadlines. Is this problem the result of low motivation, poor leadership, organizational structure inadequacies, poor communication, or a combination of all of these? The point is that forward theory does not directly address this issue, nor help the manager to diagnose the causes of a problem.

In addition, when topics are taught sequentially, it becomes difficult to see the interrelationships among processes. Reverse theory starts with dependent variables and examines the potential causes of problems in these areas, providing guidelines for determining where the roots of the problems lie.

We start by assuming that improvement in performance requires some type of behavioral change on the part of managers, whether it be in leadership style,

decision-making approach, or problem-solving style. If behavioral change is desired, the ability of management development programs to facilitate this change must be examined. Does management development clearly address the three stages of the behavioral change process; that is, 1) developing the motivation to change; 2) providing a model for change; and 3) reinforcing the change?

What motivates a manager to actively participate in a management development program? Kinlaw and Christensen argue that participant support and motivation is a function of whether the participants believe that the program will help to improve performance and that it is worth their time. Participants must be interested in improving some dimension of unit performance and believe that their behavior is at least in part contributing to the current performance level. Thus, managers must believe that some change in their behavior is necessary for desired performance improvement to take place. Many programs fail to consider this step.

Needs assessments that do not identify and focus on areas of low performance often leave managers with the belief that the program material is for others, or it is nice to know if a problem should ever arise. The first step in a successful management development program is to develop the motivation to change. This can often be accomplished by focusing on problems that participating managers identify with and feel a need to solve.

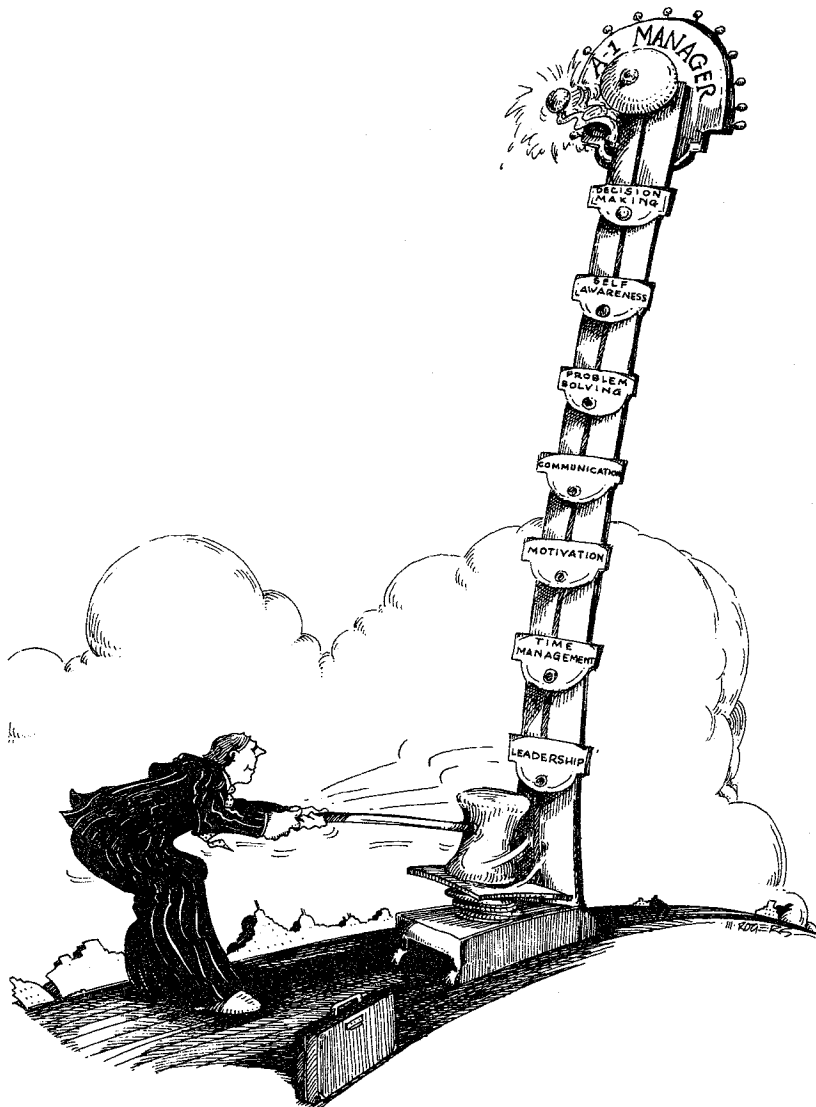
Models and Reinforcement

The participant must become familiar with new behaviors, techniques, or styles of management and see the link between these new approaches and improved performance. More importantly, the manager must know in what situations the new approach will and will not be successful. This requires not only knowledge of the new approach, but the ability to diagnose the causes of problems in order to determine the appropriateness of potential solutions. By focusing on problem areas rather than topics, the goal of developing diagnostic skills is better served.

Once new behaviors or a change in style or even structural change is implemented, there must be some type of feedback that informs the participant that

performance is improving or the problems identified are being eliminated. Few management development programs provide this structured feedback. Some of the behavioral modeling programs are notable exceptions.³

John H. Zenger and Kenneth Hargis made a strong case for more effort in the evaluation of management training.⁴ Not



only would this evaluation provide useful information to program designers and training directors, but it could also be used to provide structured feedback to participants on the effectiveness of new behaviors.

Stanley D. Truskie contends that when training is evaluated, the evaluation focuses on reaction or level of learning, rather than behavioral change or organizational results.⁵ It is difficult to provide

the structured feedback that participants need when there is no careful assessment of the program results. This can be accomplished when future performance is compared to needs assessment data. In summary, for behavioral change to take place, three conditions must be met:

1) Managers must desire improvements in performance and believe that a change in their behavior is necessary to bring about improvements.

2) The program must provide a basis for diagnosing problems and an array of strategies for improvement.

3) Feedback that performance is improving is necessary for continued improvement.

The Root of the Problem

Many organizational problems are rooted in a number of processes and positions within the organization. Programs aimed at the individual level may not lead to improved performance simply because participants returning to their work roles cannot implement changes independently. They often meet resistance from those who were not part of the program or have not participated in the diagnosis that led to a proposed change.

We are becoming increasingly aware that team or group performance is more than the combined individual efforts of its members. Management development should involve not only improvement of individual skills, but development of the group as an effective problem-solving unit. It has become important for groups to practice problem-solving as an integral part of the management development program.

Overcoming Traditional Roadblocks

In order to overcome some of the problems inherent in traditionally designed management development programs, we borrowed concepts from team building and action research and developed a process of management development that is centered around recurring organizational problems in the client organization. This process includes three steps: needs assessment, program development, and evaluation.

The first step of the needs assessment is to develop a set of performance pressures for the focal work unit. Generally, an

analysis of the external and internal claimants on the unit is necessary to perform this step. In general, ask what dimensions of organizational performance are important for the continued success of this focal unit. Once performance pressures — which are generally some combination of quality, cost, service, and time variables — are identified, an attempt is made to determine dimensions where improvement is needed. Areas where the unit is not meeting claimant expectations are identified as problems.

Thus, if an organization competes largely on service, and it becomes clear that service standards and customer expectations are not being met, this is identified as one of the problems that will be focused on in the program. While some needs-assessment approaches will continue to diagnose the causes of the service problem to identify training topics, we stop the needs assessment at the problem identification stage, leaving the diagnosis for the participants in the program.

From Syllabus to Module

The program syllabus should simply become a series of modules designed around identified problems. Each module may last for three or four sessions, during which we explore the processes that underlie the problem. We often cover many parts of traditional management development topics in one module, as we examine the motivation and structural roots of the problem.

The major benefits of this part of the process is that managers see the link between outcomes and processes and are exposed to behavioral models in a reverse theory manner. We believe this process aids in the development of diagnostic skills. In addition to diagnosing the problem, potential intervention strategies are discussed. Management techniques are examined with respect to their usefulness in addressing the focal problem. Before the module is concluded, specific plans for action are developed, along with timetables, goals, and individual assignments.

Evaluating the Benefits

The evaluation performs two functions. The first is to assess how effective the program was in delivering results. The second is to provide reinforcement to par-

ticipants. Effectiveness is measured by conducting another assessment of work unit performance and comparing the results of this assessment with those obtained in the needs assessment. As with the action research process, this second assessment provides the basis to continued change and development.

We have identified three major benefits of this process over traditional processes. First, the performance oriented needs-assessment provides a motivation to change. We have often found a low motivation to change when current behavior is compared to some ideal managerial behavior when there is no indication of performance problems. The performance problems provide the basis for a clear set of program goals.

Second, many of the problems of transference of training issues are eliminated because participants are not forced to make the connection between the acquired knowledge and the problem-solving process on their own. Finally, evaluation is designed to provide feedback and reinforcement of any changes implemented. □

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