Paul Elling, COM6303.E1, Exercise 4

1. Who did you interview and what are his or her credentials?

I interviewed my father, Bob Elling, who has been an independent consultant for the past thirteen years in the field of information technology. More specifically, my father has worked in roles of systems development and training for several companies on a contractual basis. Those companies have included Sears, AEP, and Texaco. My father has contributed expertise through programming Oracle or Microsoft Access-based systems and has also trained employees on how to use these systems. Although my father did not attend college, his credentials include twenty years as a Navy veteran, experiences that included the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War. He also worked at United States Special Operations in Tampa, Florida, as well as on an aircraft carrier, the USS Theodore Roosevelt. The majority of his time in the Navy was spent in data processing and programming. This experience was the training that gave my father the background necessary to pursue a second successful career as an independent consultant. In the Navy, my father worked on information systems and also trained coworkers on operating these systems (B. Elling, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

2. How does a consultant establish his credibility?

A consultant can do different things to establish his credibility. Past successful work can help a consultant establish his credibility by creating a track record of accomplishments. As individuals, consultants are presented with opportunities to prove their capabilities to the organizations that employ them. Over time, experience can be built, and the consultant can develop a network of professional contacts that are at least aware of the credibility of the consultant. When I spoke with my father, he discussed the absolute necessity to perform well as a consultant in order to establish credibility (B. Elling, personal communication, April 25, 2010). Although he has an extensive background from being in the Navy, my father acknowledges that he lacks a college degree. Education, training, and certification are additional factors in establishing credibility for a consultant. What has helped my father establish credibility as a consultant is that he earned an Oracle Application Developer certification (B. Elling, personal communication, April 25, 2010). Such technical credentials allow employers to quickly determine whether or not a consultant can bring expertise to the organization. If a consultant advertises his services through social networking, via websites like FaceBook and LinkedIn, he can establish credibility as long as he can back up his advertisements with strong performances.

Although a consultant may perform brilliantly as an individual, oftentimes, the true measure of their capabilities are found in their ability to help others improve their performance. As DeWine (2001) stated, the job of "a consultant is not only to help solve…problems, but to develop the skill in others to solve the problems themselves" (p. 4). Consultants can encourage others to become problem solvers by demonstrating how they go about analyzing different situations. They can provide assistance in the selection of problem-solving techniques. When consultants are successful in getting others to solve problems, respect is earned and credibility is established. The consultants' expertise is spread by word of mouth.

Arguably, a consultant must embrace some of the same skills that communication managers need whether they are internal or external to an organization. One reason to harness the skills of communication managers is that consultants sometimes find themselves in the position of training an organization's employees. To establish credibility in this manner, the consultant should possess excellent communication skills. Doing so will allow them to convey the topics for which they are training employees. Other communication manager skills that a consultant could adopt to help build credibility include being "eclectic", seeing "themselves as facilitators", having "assessment skills", and presenting themselves as "situational experts" (DeWine, 2001, p. 9). Consultants must be willing to adapt their methods of training to the groups with which they find themselves working. Instead of simply lecturing to an audience about various topics, consultants can establish credibility by leading people through the material with sincerity.

3. Explain how a needs assessment is conducted.

A needs assessment is conducted by using data collection techniques to gather information about an issue followed by analysis of the collected data. The reason for having a needs assessment in the first place is if a problem exists that needs to be resolved. The problem is identified, followed by a determination of the requirements. This determination of requirements is really an assessment of the needs to resolve the problem. As an independent consultant in the realm of information technology, my father must analyze the requirements that an organization presents to him prior to actually modifying or building any system (B. Elling, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

First of all, it helps to understand that a problem exists and what it entails rather than jumping ahead and trying to solve it. Sometimes people are eager to solve problems. They may think they understand the problem and proceed without due diligence. When people proceed to solve a problem without a clear understanding of its nature, they can spend time unnecessarily on issues that are minor indications of a much larger problem. Davis explained that by avoiding “pitfalls”, such as “mistaking symptoms for the underlying problem”; “accepting without question the opinions of others”; and “overlooking multivariate causes”, the needs assessment can be granted a more positive start (as cited in DeWine, 2001, pp. 52-53). A full understanding of the nature of the problem can then allow an assessment of the needs to solve that problem.

A needs assessment can proceed from problem identification to data collection and analysis. Data collection methods include sampling, questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Each method carries the purpose of gathering data about a problem or problems. Observations involve taking notes about a situation or event “from a fixed location” or “by walking around” and may include interaction “with the person (or persons) being observed” (DeWine, 2001, pp. 62-63). Questionnaires and interviews can be provided to individuals for their specific input, from which data can be gleaned. Sampling can be used to select a group of individuals for consideration of a problem. However data is collected, it is gathered in an organized manner to assist in needs assessment. The process leads to analysis of the results.

With data having been collected, the needs assessment can be continued in the analysis stage, where the data are examined to determine specific needs created by an organizational problem. Sometimes, data can make needs seem obvious, but in other instances, the data must be processed either manually or with the help of computer applications. Doing so can add essential meaning to assumptions and hypotheses. Data analysis can also uncover needs that were not identified beforehand. For instance, a consultant may have identified particular problems to investigate, but upon interviewing employees who deal directly with customers, the consultant may have realized that additional problems persist.

4. How do you do a naturalistic communication assessment in an organization?

A naturalistic communication assessment within an organization is done through different activities. Activities include studying components of an organization, from its employees to its organizational charts to its facilities. Assessing an organization through naturalistic communication might include requesting a tour of the company from the "public relations department" or conducting research about "the financial standing of the company" (Eisenberg, Goodall, Trethewey, 2010, p. 320). Observations of employees provide a natural way to gauge interpersonal relationships between coworkers. Assessing naturalistic communication in an organization can also include more interactive means of gathering information. For instance, employees could be interviewed to gain an understanding of how power is managed by leaders (Eisenberg et al, 2010, para. 321). In addition, it helps to ask questions about any recent mergers or office relocations. Gaining inside information about the organization's culture can aid any naturalistic communication assessment. These assessments are as much about building an organization's profile based on information gathered about the various aspects of the organization from an internal perspective. Additional elements to assess in a naturalistic manner include "everyday communication", "uses of technology", and the ways "core values" impact the organization (Eisenberg et al, 2010. p. 322). A naturalistic communication assessment of an organization is built over time through conscientious study of its many aspects.

5. Explain the advantages and the disadvantages of the different training techniques.

Each training technique can have advantages as well as disadvantage that render it useful or not in any given setting. It is sometimes up to the trainer leading each session who decides which training method to employ unless he or she is leading training courses that have already been designed. The advantages and disadvantages of different training techniques can be strong indicators as to whether or not participants have gotten what they needed out of the sessions. Sometimes those advantages and disadvantages can be undiscovered until training actually commences.

A very common training technique is lecturing, which people are familiar with from their days spent in school. Lecturing carries the advantage of allowing an instructor to pass along information to many people simultaneously. In addition, lectures are “low cost”, “familiar”, and allow instructors of training sessions to “conserve time” (DeWine, 2001, p. 86). Many people associate lecturing with teaching or training, which can be an advantage or a disadvantage. Lecturing does have obvious drawbacks that limit its effectiveness in the realm of training individuals. By nature, lecturing is “one-way”, and allows the learner to become “a passive listener” (DeWine, 2001, p. 86). In this way, training lacks interactive features that keep individuals engaged in the process. These disadvantages disconnect the lecturer from the learner at times. In doing so, lecturers may leave people behind during presentations due to “differences among trainees’ abilities, interests, backgrounds, and personalities” (DeWine, 2001, p. 86). It is certainly helpful for the organization to facilitate effective training sessions that will allow employees to transfer what they have learned to their daily work.

Visual aids can provide trainers with distinct ways to enhance training sessions, but they can also carry unintended consequences. A picture or a video can leave a lasting imprint on people. Thus they make great additions to training sessions if they are utilized appropriately. If visual aids distract people from the actual training, then they become a disadvantage to trainees. Visual aids are commonplace with computerized training sessions, as they enhance training sessions in ways that cannot be accomplished through lectures. Likewise, video can prove a useful training technique. The disadvantage with all of these technologically advanced training techniques is that they can distract individuals. A good rule of thumb for determining whether or not visual aids, video, and computer-based training are advantages or disadvantages is if they become “noticeable”, which is an indication that “they are in appropriate” (DeWine, 2001, p. 92). These advanced training techniques are also not advantageous if the audience is unprepared for the technology. If the trainees are familiar with the techniques employed by trainers, then they are more likely to focus on the tasks at hand.

Case studies are training techniques that possess distinct advantages and disadvantages depending on the setting of the training or learning. In an educational setting, case studies provide specific examples of real-life events from which students can learn. An incredible advantage that case studies provide training sessions is to encourage trainees to focus on “discovery, problem solving, and collaboration” (DeWine, 2001, p. 96). By isolating a real-world event, students can develop skills that may prove effective later in their academic careers or in their jobs. The real disadvantage in using case studies is that they tend to be “complex” and time-consuming (DeWine, 2001, p. 98). Training sessions, that have time constraints, may not benefit from the in-depth nature of case studies.

Depending on the size of the training group, small group activities can be advantageous or they can put the group at a disadvantage. Splitting a larger group up into smaller groups allows individuals in the groups the opportunity to work together to solve training problems. This feature of small group activities is clearly not as available to the larger group. Another advantage is that, in a small group setting, individuals become familiar with each other and develop a comfort level in discussion problems that they might not experience otherwise. As DeWine (2001) stated, "A small group fosters interpersonal relationships among the group members" (p. 104). Small group activities carry another advantage of showing trainees how to reach collaboration on issues. Of course, as Janis noted, reaching collaboration can also become a disadvantage if the small group engages in "groupthink", meaning "a group becomes so dependent on its own information that members do not allow outside information, especially if it is contrary to their thinking" (as cited in DeWine, 2001, p. 104). If doing so prevents good ideas from surfacing, then small group activities actually put training sessions at a disadvantage.

Another training technique, structured experiences, also has advantages and disadvantages that can be experienced during sessions. The obvious advantage allotted by structured experiences is that they are interactive, meaning participants can act out particular instances in order to learn. Structured experiences can be especially advantageous when trainees have prior knowledge that can serve "as a foundation for learning" (DeWine, 2001, p. 105). A lack of knowledge can mean the usage of structured experiences is a disadvantage for training sessions. Structured experiences are repeatedly proven a disadvantage, because trainers inexperienced with them see them as "the activity of choice" (DeWine, 2001, p. 105). Thus structured experiences are meant to augment existing knowledge.

Additional training techniques that have advantages and disadvantages include role playing, simulations, and outdoor games. These techniques involve either acting out situations or learning through “physical activities that are usually held outside” (DeWine, 2001, p. 112). The obvious advantage of role playing, simulations, and outdoor games is that they get individuals to interact and participate in training sessions instead of settling in as passive listeners. The learning experience is improved when individuals are engaged in activities. Certain individuals, however, would rather refrain from actively participating in group activities. If they are forced against their will to participate, then the training session can be a negative memory and experience.

6. How do you evaluate whether or not the training and the consultation were effective?

Training and consultation can be evaluated for effectiveness through different models and methods that may require objectivity or subjectivity. First, it helps to understand the aspects of the training and consultation that should be evaluated. According to the ASTD, evaluators should determine what “questions” to ask; how to “measure” the answers; the “objectives”; indication of any possible “improvement” between expectations and results; the “data sources” and “methods for generating data”; as well as acceptable “methods” to evaluate “results of the training” (as cited in DeWine, 2001, p. 388). Evaluating the effectiveness of training and consultation is very much an investigative process. It’s a matter of asking questions, finding answers, and analyzing the answers to create a framework that shows how effective or ineffective the training and consultation were. Methods to evaluate consultation and training might include “attitude surveys”, “paper-and-pencil tests”, “simulation and on-site observation”, and “productivity reports”, among other methods (DeWine, 2001, p. 391).

These methods generally involve collecting data and measurements to use in the assessment of how effective training and consultation was. When the evaluation is focused more on a consultation rather than training, certain questions need to be asked that revolve around various elements. According to Lippitt and Lippitt, those elements include the consultant's ability to work with others, the consultant's requisite technical skills, positive relations, and the consultant's recognition of areas for improvement (as cited in DeWine, 2001, pp. 404-406). My father's indicated to me that his main method of determining whether or not his consulting work was effective is whether or not the employer hires him again in the future or at least provides a solid reference (B. Elling, personal communication, April 25, 2010).

References

DeWine, S. (2001). *The Consultant's craft: Improving organizational communication*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Eisenberg, E.M., Goodall, H.L., & Trethewey, A. (2010). *Organizational communication: Balancing creativity and constraint*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.