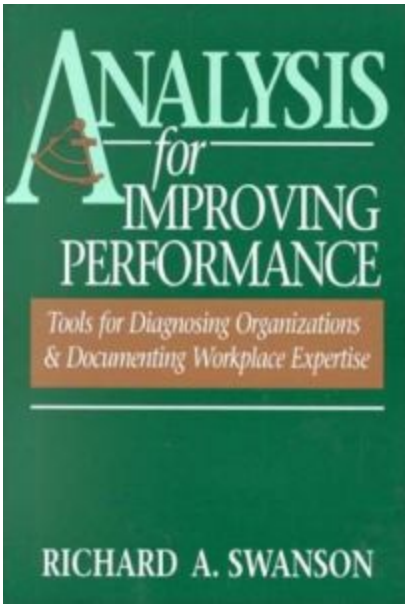

Book Analysis for Improving Performance

Tools for Diagnosing Organizations & Documenting Workplace Expertise

Richard A. Swanson
Berrett-Koehler, 1996

Recommendation

Hats off to author Richard A. Swanson for writing clearly, interestingly and compellingly on the subject of creating effective programs to improve workplace performance. He champions approaching this task with up-front analysis based on systems theory. Since he criticizes ordinary management for not understanding this problem and for not knowing the methods that can be used to resolve it, *BooksInShort* recommends this book not only to Human Resources professionals, but also to managers and executives in all industries. If you want employee performance to improve, upgrade your understanding of how to make it so.

Take-Aways

- Up-front analysis is critical to the success of any performance improvement effort.
- Up-front analysis is rarely done properly.
- The standard performance improvement model has five phases: analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation.
- When creating a program, use the all-inclusive systems theory.
- Execution of the analysis phase determines whether performance improvement succeeds.
- Analyses should be performed in a standardized meaningful manner.
- One person’s analysis is intense investigation, while another’s is a shallow glance.
- Preliminary analysis must diagnose performance and document expertise.
- Performance improvement efforts only work when you specify a variable, a goal and the expertise the goal requires.
- Every organization has an environment with particular paths for incoming information, internal processing and outgoing information.

Summary

Performance Improvement

The success of any performance improvement effort depends on a critical - but often neglected - up-front analysis, which itself depends on having the proper tools. Program developers and managers must:

- Assess an organization's real business needs and the status of its supporting systems;
- Analyze necessary worker skills, knowledge and attitudes;
- Specify performance requirements and evaluation standards;
- Produce a viable, comprehensive performance improvement design.

> "Performance improvement professionals often find themselves in awkward positions. They face many conflicting demands on their services. Everyone seems to have an opinion about the organization's development priorities."

This up-front analysis is, in essence, a diagnosis. As in medicine, you can't determine proper treatment to achieve employee improvement if you don't have a proper diagnosis. Yet, companies and organizations worldwide try to do just that every day.

Organizational efforts at performance improvement have included human resource development, quality improvement programs, reengineering and performance technology. These programs are used to identify an organization's major business processes and how they connect to basic inputs and outputs. The goal is to add value. Unfortunately, organizations often don't bother looking at these processes and their connections. Instead, performance improvement efforts simply become independent activities "taking place apart from the core organizational inputs and outputs and having no direct connection to business performance measures."

> "It is discouraging to discover how rarely managers know about sound performance improvement practices, and yet they strongly attempt to control new efforts and processes."

No matter which approach is used, the standard performance improvement model includes five phases: analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation. The way you carry out the analysis phase determines whether your performance improvement efforts actually support major business processes or simply devolve into a series of activities that ultimately have little if any effect on the business.

> "In the performance improvements field, professionals place too much emphasis on creating new tools, methods and techniques and not enough on the importance of integrating their use with the nature of the systems they are trying to improve."

Although everyone agrees that an up-front analysis is essential, the problem is that such analyses usually are not performed according to some standardized, meaningful method. One person's idea of analysis is intense investigation, while another person's is a shallow, simple routine glance. Research and experience show that the analysis phase - with organizational diagnosis and expertise documentation at its core - is the most critical part of the performance improvement process. Without it, the rest is essentially meaningless. Yet, this phase is also the most poorly understood and poorly managed.

Diagnosis and Documentation

Many performance programs are driven by compliance concerns, not by concerns about performance. Organizations allow a trainer to deliver programs without regard to their effectiveness. This activity-based view of analysis - a series of program activities thrown together without any true analysis of what the needs are and which programs will meet them - usually consists of superficial opinion surveys that result in program popularity ratings, crude job descriptions and inaccurate task inventories. So if that is what you've seen so far, you're not alone. To make a performance improvement effort valuable to your organization, you must emphasize the preliminary analysis phase in two major areas, both involving tools that are easy to learn and highly effective:

1. Diagnosis of performance - This analyzes the performance variables, including mission and goals, processes, motivation, capacity and expertise - at the organizational, process, and individual performance levels.
2. Documentation of expertise - This requires analysis of the work expertise employees need to achieve optimal work performance. This analysis includes job description, task inventories and task analysis: procedural, systems and knowledge work tasks.

Use Information to Set a Standard

Careful analysis will give you the critical information you need to define, frame and guide effective performance improvement. To make an improvement program radically better, ask these three basic questions when you begin planning the program:

1. Will individuals perform better on the job after the intervention?
2. Will the process perform better after the intervention?
3. Will the organization perform better after the intervention?

> "Wanting others to do things the right way and wanting them to get it right the first time is a perspective on work held by most work-performance analysts. They should expect no less of themselves."

It sounds obvious, but most organizations don't even ask if their performance improvement interventions meet these criteria. Yet you can only improve performance through an orderly process starting with:

1. Specifying an important performance goal.
2. Specifying the underlying performance variables.
3. Documenting the workplace expertise that this performance goal requires.

The Four Single-Dimension Views

Systems thinking is the perception that organizations are complex, open systems. Unfortunately, most managers and executives are blind to this fact of nature (the whole world is naturally and inherently just a bunch of complex, open systems) and prefer to isolate their views into single dimensions. The four most common single-dimension views are:

1. The power-oriented view - The organization views powerful leaders as the sole instruments for change, so employees set satisfying managers as their primary goal. Everyone serves "at the beck and call of powerful... leaders and decision makers."
2. The economic view - Insiders see the organizations solely as an instrument for increasing shareholder wealth. Managers believe that their jobs are simply to ensure high returns. Any intervention that can aid employees in meeting that goal is seen as performance improvement. Employee evaluations center on high returns alone.
3. The mechanistic view - The organization is seen as a machine. The goal is to get the most quantity and quality possible by using a smoothly running, maximally efficient organizational process. Managers believe that their jobs are to ensure the efficiency of organizational processes, and that this should be the sole goal of employee performance improvement programs.
4. The humanistic view - Organizations are social entities where a high quality of work life guarantees high worker morale, which will logically lead to high performance, high quality and high output from workers.

> "Knowledge work has become the most critical work in today's economy."

All performance improvement programs and interventions share these goals. Yet, single-dimension organizational views - whether applied singly or in combination - don't provide an adequate foundation for organizational problem solving and performance improvement. Those with these limited views tend to restrict themselves to a narrow set of problem situations and an equally narrow set of myopic solutions. Those in charge of planning and implementing performance improvement programs and solutions, and those who have the single-dimension view, will limit what they see or do as they work with managers and others on organizational change and performance improvement:

- The power-oriented analyst focuses on political strategies, on pleasing top managers.
- The economically oriented analyst focuses on strategies for optimized financial return.
- The mechanistically oriented analyst focuses on getting more output per process.
- The humanistically oriented analyst focuses on creating harmony in the workplace and on making work life more pleasant.

The Inclusive View

Instead of four single-dimension views of organizational life, you should advocate the inclusive systems view. Many organizational development and performance improvement specialists already have accepted this view of organizations as complex, open systems.

Systems-oriented analysts believe in designing and creating performance programs in which all the parts, or subsystems, work together to achieve the whole organization's purpose. These analysts work with managers to apply systems principles to the organization's problems. This systems approach uses many different tools to intervene at three levels: organizational mission, processes and job performance. Systems thinkers never focus on just one area. The systems thinker "achieves strategic benefits by applying systems solutions to systems problems," focusing on:

- Defining the organization broadly enough to include the root causes of performance issues.
- Identifying the primary source of power that can take advantage of a performance opportunity.
- The systems thinker leaves nothing out, concurrently embracing power-based, economic, mechanistic and humanistic contributions to the performance problems.

The Core of Systems Thinking

In 1968, Ludwig von Bertalanffy first applied systems theory to the field of biology. This approach has spread to influence many other fields. Systems theorists believe:

- All configurations of things in the world should be viewed as wholes, rather than being taken apart and examined piece by piece.
- In systems such as the human mind, the human body or the human organization, all the parts affect each other in complicated ways that are not obvious.
- Studying a part individually can disrupt systems interactions so severely that it makes the isolated part look and act very differently from its normal pattern in its normal context.
- For these reasons, study the whole system whenever you study any part of it.

> "Too many people in the consulting and performance improvement business want to hold onto their secrets of success and, therefore, restrict participation in their realm of activity."

All complex systems have certain things in common:

- Systems are assemblies of parts or elements connected in an organized way.
- Focusing on a single element and blaming it for systems failure is counter-productive, since all the elements in a system interact.
- Systems can be identified by their purpose.
- Being in a system - or being taken out of it - affects the behavior of its elements. When you remove them, they stop doing what they are meant to do in the system.
- Systems do work - They exist to carry out a process of transforming inputs into outputs.
- Systems have foundries - You can set lines of demarcation that determine which elements of a system are included or excluded.
- Complex systems are open systems - They are permeable, so forces in their environments affect what goes on within the systems.
- Open systems affect their environments by exchanging energy, materials and/or data with the environment.

> "Never conduct a performance diagnosis by yourself."

Every organization has an environment with inputs, processes and outputs. Systems thinking "demands that analysts understand the powerful influences" that the driving forces in the environment have on the organization as a system.

About the Author

Richard A. Swanson is a professor and director of the Human Resource Development Research Center at the University of Minnesota, and founding editor of *Human Resource Development Quarterly*.