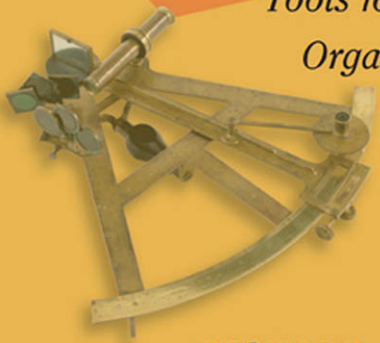
Second Edition, Revised and Expanded

Analysis for Improving Performance

Tools for Diagnosing Organizations and Documenting Workplace Expertise



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by Richard A. Swanson
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Contents

Preface xiii

PART ONE Analysis: The Key to Improving Performance 1

1. Linking Improvement Programs to Important Organizational Goals 3
2. Theoretical Foundation of Performance Improvement 11
3. Case Study of Analysis for Performance Improvement 37

PART TWO Diagnosing Organizational Performance 47

4. Concepts for Diagnosing Performance 49
5. The Performance Diagnosis Process 57
6. Constructing a Performance Improvement Proposal 79
7. Documenting and Improving Work Processes 93
8. Data Collection Methods 107

PART THREE Documenting Workplace Expertise 123

9. The Nature of Workplace Expertise 125
10. Documenting Job Descriptions 135
11. Developing Task Inventories 143
12. Documenting Process-Referenced Tasks 155
13. Detailing Procedural Tasks 163
14. Detailing System Tasks 187
15. Detailing Knowledge Tasks 217

PART FOUR Managing Analysis Work to Improve Performance 257

16. Organizing and Prioritizing Analysis Work for Maximum Performance Impact 259
17. From Analysis to Performance Improvement 269

Appendix 277

References 295

Index 305

About the Author 317

Preface

The fundamental premise of *Analysis for Improving Performance* is that systematic and thorough organizational performance diagnosis and documentation of workplace expertise provide the true basis for improving performance at the organizational, process, team, and worker levels. This is a book about mastering performance improvement and the work, not mastering the worker.

Organizational efforts at improving performance—such as organization development, training, quality improvement, reengineering, human resource development, and performance technology—are exhibited in various ways. One way clearly recognizes the organization's core processes and their connectedness to basic inputs and outputs for adding value. Another more prevalent approach to improving performance, is a pattern of independent activities taking place apart from the core organizational inputs and outputs and having no direct connection to organizational performance measures.

Regardless of the specific approach used, standard performance improvement models include four to six phases, from analysis to evaluation. One standard version is analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. It is how the *analysis phase* is carried out, however, that determines whether performance improvement efforts support *core organizational processes* or are simply a series of *activities* taking place within the organization. Even though analysis practices are diverse, a fairly universal analysis vocabulary has developed. Almost everyone claims that the up-front analysis phase is important, even though professional practices leave much to be desired. Thus, the easy talk about analysis—at both the diagnosis of performance and documentation of expertise levels—can mean intense investigation from one perspective or a fairly simple and routine activity from another.

My position, backed by research and experience, is that the analysis phase, and its requirements of organizational diagnosis and expertise

documentation, is the most critical phase of the performance improvement process. It is also the phase that is most poorly executed.

The activity-oriented view of many, if not most, performance improvement interventions is driven by "feel-good" or "compliance" concerns rather than a concern about improving performance. Program delivery in these cases—not performance outcomes—is the focus. The activity-oriented view, with its emphasis on delivery, discounts the importance of the analysis phase. It relegates analysis to superficial opinion surveys, resulting in choosing interventions based on popularity ratings and reliance on crude job descriptions and task analyses. Little, if anything, in the way of substantive performance diagnosis, process specification, and expertise documentation is pursued.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

Analysis for Improving Performance works on the assumption that performance improvement efforts, if they are going to add value to the organization, require an emphasis on the analysis phase—the content of this book. To meet these ends, I present practical tools in two major arenas: (1) diagnosis of performance and (2) documentation of expertise. *Diagnosis of performance* analyzes the performance variables (mission/goals, processes, motivation, capacity, and expertise) at the organizational, process, and individual performance levels. *Documentation of expertise* requires analysis of the work expertise needed to achieve optimal work performance. This analysis involves the components of job description, task inventories, and the detailed analysis of varying tasks: procedural, systems, and knowledge work tasks. Again, the fundamental premise of this book is that rigorous workplace diagnosis and documentation provide the true basis for improving performance. This is not a book about organizational strategy focusing on alternative future states of the organization. Yet, I know of several instances where organizations using the analysis tools in this book came to understand that their performance improvement issues demanded that they stop and reconsider their futures, from going out of business to modifying the fundamental purpose of the businesses.

At first glance, these tools may appear to be complex. In reality, they are easily learned and highly effective. In most instances I provide both *process* and *thinking* models to explain each tool. The process

models describe the steps and flow of the processes and the thinking models present the dimensions that need to be considered. They are tools that can be learned to some degree by anybody savvy enough to hold a job in an organization. The opportunity to engage analysis work teams of stakeholders can pay off in gaining time and commitment. The output of careful analysis is the critical information that accurately defines, frames, and guides effective performance improvement interventions.

THE SEXTANT AS THE ICON FOR *ANALYSIS FOR IMPROVING PERFORMANCE*

Navigating boats in open seas overwhelms and distorts the senses, much like the analysis challenge facing professionals wanting to improve performance in organizations.

Without accurate reference points, ships and sailors are easily lost. The sextant was a navigational instrument invented in the nineteenth century. It measured the altitudes of celestial bodies to determine precise latitude and longitude positioning. The sextant provided position and direction.

The analysis for performance tools in this book provide position and direction that allows the performance improvement professional to analyze, navigate, and improve complex organizations. The sextant thus was selected as an icon for the critical up-front analysis theory, methods, and tools presented in this book.

The cover image depicts an eighteenth-century brass sextant by the English School (© Private collection/The Bridgeman Art Library).

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A number of people and organizations have provided support for the research, development, and writing that led to this book. In the beginning, important research funds were made available by the Manville Corporation, with the full support of Gary R. Sisson and Gil Cullen, former executives of that firm. Additional organizations have provided support over the years, including 3M, CIGNA, Citicorp, Kellogg Company, Onan Corporation, Scoville Press, Xcel Energy, the University of Minnesota, and The University of Texas at Tyler.

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Richard A. Swanson
Lakeside, Ohio

1

Linking Improvement Programs to Important Organizational Goals

When Managers Decide to Follow Up
There Is No Safe Haven for Performance Improvement Leaders
Four Performance Questions about Outputs
Analysis Work Is Important
Long-Term Success
Conclusion

As the role of performance improvement in organizations increasingly takes on strategic proportions through human resource development, quality improvement, process improvement, reengineering, knowledge management, technology, and take-charge management, organizational leaders are being held more accountable in this area. Their organizations spend millions of dollars each year on development efforts aimed at their systems, employees, and customers. But while much is to be gained in terms of increased performance, money spent hastily on programs based on erroneous assumptions yields very little for the organizations and the individuals participating in them.

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, and managers are expected to make proactive proposals for advancing their domains. When executives attend seminars, they sometimes hear motivational speakers. Hooked by the fiery delivery and the bold promises of the management evangelists, the executives become enthusiastic about bringing the new messages home to their organizations and demand, "Hire the consultant and see that everyone in headquarters goes through the program." Then, after a large investment in time and money, everyone in the organization has the language of the consultant, but nothing else in the organization has substantially changed. Who, then, holds those making unsubstantiated claims accountable? Nutt (2003) describes the failure to reconcile claims and reality as a common trap that decision makers fall into. They contract for performance gains, are provided intensive development activities, but fail to acquire the results evidence.

The performance improvement manager who dutifully responds to line manager requests by charging out to hire an external expert is simply fulfilling the whims of his or her boss. Instead, the performance improvement leader should be investigating business performance issues and offering sound proposals for development efforts that directly address important organizational goals. For example:

- What about the quality problem in the Armstrong division?
- Why are our engineers unable to integrate their CAD/CAM files with those of the customers' engineers?
- How can we reduce cycle time for our highest-demand product?
- Why can only two of our twelve financial investors regularly put together sound financial deals?

Each organization is unique. Each has its own mission, strategies, performance goals, and challenges. By implication, faddish, one-size-fits-all performance improvement efforts are not likely to fit a specific organizational physique. With considerable confidence, I can say that in the short or in the long run, performance improvement efforts not accurately connected to an important organizational goal will be seen as the ill-fitting garments they are and will be tossed out of the organization. Nohria and Berkley (1998) sum up the situation by stating, "The manager's job is not to eek out novelty but to make sure the company gets results" (p. 203).

WHEN MANAGERS DECIDE TO FOLLOW UP

It is discouraging to discover how rarely managers provide support for participants following expensive employee development programs (Holton & Baldwin, 2003; McLagan, 2003). Managers have historically done little to ensure that the on-the-job performance of employees reflects what they have learned in organization-sponsored development programs (Parker, 1986). Meanwhile, the same managers say they want hard numbers about the contributions that development programs have made to organizational success. Managers also say they would provide more support for development efforts if such evidence were made available (Kusy, 1986). When upper management does decide to follow performance improvement programs with evaluation, they often do not like what they find:

- The effort did not fill a current or future business need.
- The program did not fit the culture of the organization.
- The principles and systems covered in the program did not reflect the expected work performance.
- Participants did not develop their expertise to the level of mastery required to perform on the job.
- Participants were punished by managers or peer groups for implementing new ideas and expertise back on the job.

THERE IS NO SAFE HAVEN FOR PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT LEADERS

One Friday afternoon, a manufacturer of high-technology medical devices sent termination slips to twenty-six of the thirty members of its quality staff. For years, company insiders had casually discussed the quality function with a mixture of approval and disdain. In their eyes, the Quality Department had almost become an aloof operation seeing itself as a "College of Quality" rather than a part of the business. Senior management had given the director of quality a very loose rein and had allocated considerable resources to provide employee and customer education that was marginally connected to the organization's mission and strategy. The situation had reached the point where major surgery—amputation of the department—was seen by management as the only way to cure this economic drain on the organization.

FOUR PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS ABOUT OUTPUTS

Four simple performance questions, if they were asked at the outset of planning for improvement efforts, could radically change the role and contributions of the development functions in most organizations.

1. Will the individual perform better after the intervention?
2. Will the process perform better after the intervention?
3. Will the work team perform better after the intervention?
4. Will the organization perform better after the intervention?

All four question focus on outputs. All four link development to the primary mission of the organization.

Top decision makers work hard at setting mission, strategy, and goals for the organization. Increasingly, performance improvement professionals are becoming members of this team. The aim, of course, is to maximize productivity and economic return by producing and delivering quality goods and services required by the customer. Managing the core enterprise of most organizations is subject to many uncertainties. The internal environment of the organization reflects the complexity and fluidity of its external environment. Within a context of changing culture, politics, and technologies (Brache, 2002; Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 2004; Swanson, 1999), management's decisions to invest in development efforts are too often made apart from the four questions about performance improvement.

Performance improvement leaders, too, are often distracted from focusing on the organizational, process, work team, and job performance questions. Two factors seem to be the source of the distractions that pull professionals away from their focus on performance. The first factor arises from management itself. Many general managers know little or nothing about sound performance improvement practices, yet they strongly attempt to control new efforts and processes. In the absence of a true understanding of the proper role of development, such managers let their personal agendas take over. The second factor arises from developers themselves. Many are ill equipped to advocate or implement a sound development process for responsibly connecting their contributions to the mission, strategies, and performance goals of their organizations. As a result, many development decisions are based, by

default, on a consultant's promises or management's wants and preferences, rather than on careful analyses of organizational, process, work team, and individual performance issues and the variables that impinge on them.

Competent, responsible managers ought to be asking the organizational, process, work team, and individual performance questions. Performance improvement managers should be skillful in accessing the information required to answer these questions. Performance improvement efforts that are based on sound analyses will almost always stand up to inquiry by decision makers when they ask any of the four performance questions—relating to organizational, process, work team, or individual performance—or all four together. Development leaders ought to be able to show that their programs make a positive difference in their organizations in the form of improved performance.

Responsible performance improvement efforts are realized through an orderly process that *starts* with

- specifying an important performance goal,
- determining the underlying performance variables,
- documenting work processes, and
- documenting the workplace expertise required of the performance goal.

These four steps comprise the analysis phase of the systematic performance improvement process and the scope of this book. Beyond the analysis phase, the other phases address the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the performance improvement effort. Because the analysis phase defines, frames, and directs the remaining steps, it is considered the most critical. Thus, learning how to diagnose organizational performance and document workplace expertise pays off for analysts, their organizations, and the integrity of the improvement effort.

ANALYSIS WORK IS IMPORTANT

The top executives of a major financial organization recently established a task force to evaluate its executive development center. They wanted to know whether the programs the center offered were connected to

the business plan. They also wanted to examine the quality of the center's individual programs. On investigation, it was found that the center's most popular offering was a program on "managing people" that had been in place for ten years. Over the years, several thousand managers had attended the program, and year after year, they had rated the program highly. But beyond the participants' personal satisfaction with the course, no substantial evidence could be found to support the idea that this expensive program had any positive impact on the organization. Further investigation showed that the program was severely lacking in content appropriate to the organization's philosophy of doing business or to the required day-to-day work expertise of its managers.

Most development and performance improvement programs based on the whims of organizational decision makers die out within two years. This ten-year-old program had become institutionalized. It provided busywork for a whole cadre of staff members and consultants. Regrettably, it took a major investigation to uncover a lack of purpose and content that should have been confronted when the program was first considered. The development staff, who had banked on the program's continuation into the distant future, had honed their presentation skills to a high art. Unfortunately, they were not prepared to perform the up-front analysis required to connect the executive development function to the performance issues facing the organization.

Performance improvement professionals must be able to perform analysis work. They must be able to analyze performance at the organizational, process, work team, and job levels and must know how to interpret the resulting requirements for workplace improvement before implementing development solutions. Their expertise and comfort levels increase by using proven diagnostic and documentation tools, thereby providing a solid foundation on which to build responsible performance improvement solutions. The goal is to develop interventions that have an impact on individual, process, work team, and/or organizational performance. The future of most performance improvement functions depends, at least in part, on managers and development professionals learning to work in partnership to achieve greater positive return from performance improvement activities (McLean, 2005; Swanson, 1999). Careful analysis and follow-through are the means for accomplishing high performance returns.

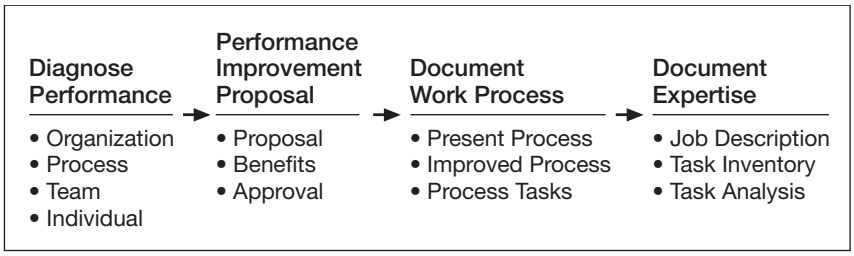

Figure 1.1 Overview of analysis for improving performance process

LONG-TERM SUCCESS

The work of performance improvement professionals should be no different than that of other competent business leaders. The careful analytical processes that are expected and regularly performed in areas of strategic and tactical planning, product development, marketing, and systems engineering can also be applied to performance improvements. The content boundary for this book is devoted to sound and systematic tools for diagnosing and documenting workplace performance and expertise. The book's core content focal points are displayed in Figure 1.1. Analyzing organizational performance for goal attainment at one or more of the four levels culminates in a performance improvement proposal. That proposal leads to work process analysis and documentation of the expertise required for performance improvement.

CONCLUSION

The case for engaging in front-end analysis is a practical one. It results in an accurate connection to important and attainable performance gains. It is not an empty promise of performance. Analysis reduces the amount of perceived chaos in the organization through professional expertise and purposeful inquiry. Analysis takes time but ends up saving more time than it consumes.

This is not a book about one perspective or technique promising to improve performance (e.g., total quality management, reengineering, and knowledge management). This is a book focused on outcomes and performance. This is a book that presents a variety of tools for directing performance improvement efforts. This is a book for take-charge

managers, performance improvement specialists, and workers wanting to improve their organizations. This is a book that facilitates team effort and commitment to organization-specific performance improvement efforts

The following chapter steps back to provide the theoretical basis that underlies performance improvement in complex organizations. The remaining chapters provide the "real-world" knowledge, tools, examples, and exercises aimed at developing your expertise in diagnosing organizational performance and documenting workplace expertise—the keys to long-term organizational success.

this material has been excerpted from

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