

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE WITH SKILL CHARTING

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Introduction

This paper offers a tool, skill charting [SC], to assist managers and employees to improve performance quality by systematically examining and improving skills and knowledge, particularly performance that has a behavioral focus. This tool has more than one label, such as performance mapping, or skill roadmap. Skill charting offers supervisors and managers the means to do several important and interrelated things, among which are to improve: the quality and quantity of some performance, the learning of managers and employees; and, importantly, to incorporate some findings regarding human motivation so as to enhance employee job skills, feelings of being "in" on things or connectedness, and feelings of improved competence and positive self-image. Many of these topics are explained in detail in publications by Cardy (2004), Gilbert (1996), and Lyons (2005).

Focus of This Paper

The general plan of this conceptual paper is to define and explain what skill charting is about and how it is used in practice. Also included in the paper is some theory-grounding for the approach as well as how the skill charting tool compares with some other quality learning tools. Finally, the paper includes details of how the tool is applied in an intervention as well as some outcomes and consequences of its use.

We know that business or organizational competitiveness is tied to improving managerial skills as well as improving the training and development of the workforce,

that is, the enhancement of human capital (Worrall & Cooper, 2001). The quality of performance of human resources is usually grounded in the application of skill and knowledge competencies. Skill is the application of some behavior that has some discriminations of mastery, for example, quality and/or quantity. Like competence, skill has relativistic referents and virtually every task or job may be performed more or less skillfully depending on results achieved, time used and resources applied. Both competence and skill are qualitative terms. If we can improve an individual's skills we are also improving their competence and their capacity to more carefully discriminate among alternative approaches to skill application.

Theory Bases

In general, we base skill charting [SC] on what is often referred to as a constructivist approach to employee learning and change. In such an approach the manager or employee is constructing or creating new knowledge over a foundation of prior or previous learning. If what we discover in taking on new learning activities is at variance with what we already "know", we have choices to make about behaving and performing differently. In the context of SC as presented here individuals, working together to improve performance, make meaning socially as they construct their experience together so they can cooperate and communicate and achieve consensus about what is happening. There are multiple representations of reality and managers and employees, together, construct reality and the construction is ongoing and changing as accepted meanings and understandings among or between individuals are negotiated in a social context (Raelin, 2000).

In more specific terms, SC is grounded on Experiential Learning Theory [ELT], and in the steps of the processes of SC it is possible to map the features of ELT directly to the steps of SC. For our purposes, learning is generally defined as a change in performance. Adult learners make use of several forms of educational or training processes. This paper relies on the use and influence of ELT particularly in the training portion of the work. Experiential approaches usually seek to involve learners in new experiences, tend to be somewhat holistic in nature, and often integrate other approaches into a single framework as action, cognition, reflection, and experience (Kayes, 2002).

In general, experiential approaches include action-driven learning approaches that seek to improve task behaviors that contribute to effectiveness in achieving goal-directed outcomes. Also included are cognitive approaches that are concerned with thinking processes (e.g., memories, perceptions, representations) that emphasize intra- and interpersonal transformations that take place within and between employees, and employees and managers. Finally, reflective approaches as part of experiential learning tend to focus on processes of self-discovery and questioning whereby managers and employees learn to reflect critically on their assumptions and beliefs, and then, ultimately, free themselves from assumptions that limit their perspectives.

ELT, as an interdisciplinary field, is grounded in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cognitive science (Carver, 1996). Perhaps the most established and discussed model of experiential learning is that of David Kolb (1984). The skill chart creation and use examined in this paper parallel, in sequence, the behaviors explained in Kolb's model of experiential learning. Kolb's model (1984) is grounded in the humanistic concept that people have a natural capacity to learn.

Experience acts as the catalyst for engaging in the process of a dialectic inquiry - process that is based on and confined to the data of human experience. The process operates whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience (Kolb, 1984, p. 41) and the learning activity rests on six assumptions: Learning

- (a) is a process, not an outcome,
- (b) derives from experience,
- (c) requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposed demands,
- (d) is holistic and integrative, it goes beyond cognition to include thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving;
- (e) requires interplay between a person and environment, that is, we assimilate new experiences into existing concepts and accommodate existing concepts to new experiences; and
- (f) results in knowledge creation.

Moreover, learning involves the interplay between two interdependent dimensions of knowledge: acquisition and transformation (how to get information and what to do with it). Each dimension requires an individual to resolve a dialectic or a set of competing learning tensions. In *acquisition*, the learner resolves the tension between apprehension (concrete experience) and - comprehension (abstract conceptualization). Apprehension is the taking in of information, while comprehension is when the learner breaks down this information into meaningful events and places them within a symbolic system of culture and society (how the information fits with what we know/believe).

This knowledge (acquisition) interacts with the second learning dimension:

knowledge transformation. Here, one resolves the tension between knowledge intention (reflective observation) and knowledge extension (active experimentation). The learner moves inwardly to reflect on previously acquired knowledge. Then, he/she moves beyond the self to interact with an external environment. Taken in concert, these four processes constitute the learning cycle. As employees and managers resolve these dialectical tensions, they orchestrate their way around the cyclical process of learning. Learning, then, is a continuous process of responding to diverse personal and environmental demands that arise from the interaction between experience, conceptualization, reflection, and action in a cyclical, but not necessarily orderly, fashion. The four processes mesh very well, indeed, with the skill charting creation and maintenance activities identified in this paper.

How Skill Charting is Used

Skill charting as a process is frequently used in organizations, on a small or large scale, to identify domains of knowledge, skills, and abilities that represent the individuals of a particular group or unit. Individuals using direction and guidelines map the competencies (Lyons, 2003). The SC is primarily the result of a process of listing critical skill and knowledge elements of a task, job, role, or unit so as to demonstrate or discover, or re-discover, what is needed for successful performance. Identities and listings are followed by activities that seek to create refinements of skilled behavior, create standards for measuring skilled performance, and related activities.

Relationship With Other Quality Learning Tools

The skills charting [SC] approach has characteristics that parallel some of the features of methods used in quality management. There are many valuable sources (such as Evans

and Dean, 2002) that demonstrate the broad array of tools and methods used in quality improvement efforts. An in-depth examination of these tools is beyond the scope of this paper; however, brief attention is owed to those tools that parallel skill charting, namely, the Relations Diagram and the Affinity Diagram. The Relations Diagram attempts to illustrate all of the different relationships or connections between factors or processes. If done skillfully, a Relations Diagram helps us to detect the forces that drive action in a situation; hence it is particularly useful in locating important factors of a situation on which to focus attention in problem solving efforts.

The Affinity Diagram is a widely used tool that shifts results from a brainstorming, listing type of activity into groupings (sets) of items or elements from a field of events, functions, and activities that seem to belong together. Credibility is granted to the groupings as participants in the process establish criteria for groupings membership. Participants have at their disposal organized, classified, and categorized information as the groupings become more clearly segregated and partitioned. Both the Relations Diagram and the Affinity Diagram are tools that help individuals or groups reach greater understanding of situations through the construction of information that may serve as a springboard for analysis, decision-making, and action plans.

Skill charting [SC], similar to Relations and Affinity Diagrams, has brainstorm, graphic, and categorization features, however, skills charting as a comprehensive process moves well beyond classification into the development of skills identities, scripts, and performance assessment. Skill charting is what Applebaum and Reichart (1998) call a facilitating factor within the learning organization.

Effectiveness of Skill Charting and Related Tools

Several training and educational approaches demonstrate the effectiveness of skill charting processes. All of the tools are aimed at script or guide-creation for skill applications. Frankly, we do not know of many unsuccessful attempts in the use of the methods as such efforts do not find their way into the literature. We report here, briefly, upon the research to which we have access. Keleman and others (1993) used a form of skill charting creation and management to demonstrate how group support systems can be made more effective. The primary focus of their research was the implementation and use of group support systems in various arrangements for problem-solving, decision making and so on. They developed an approach that permits a facilitator of a group to enable skill adjustments on-the-fly in real time situations with problem solving groups. The approach enables better use of time and more effective use of information by the group.

Lyons (2003, 2004c) used similar processes extensively in skill development and performance improvement training and education. Skills development was housed within a training design that applied skill charting activities. Performance definition and focus are critical elements in the process and once skill attributes and behaviors are identified, in this example, customer satisfaction pursuant to some types of transactions with employees, the learners go on to create performance standards for each one. The process is somewhat reflexive and self-reinforcing. In one study (Lyons, 2003) team leaders' performance of specific supervisory and leadership skills with team members was improved from using script creation processes in their training. In another study (Lyons, 2004a) a senior management team making use of skill charting processes was able to

positively influence a serious employee turnover problem through the skillful creation of behavioral profiles of ideal work associates.

Finally, in a recent study (Lyons, 2004b) a training model was developed that made use of hypothetical problem situations (cases, incidents) with skill charting activities superimposed on the case analysis work. The resulting approach was named Case-Based Modeling and was used to improve the performance of team members in certain performance areas such as skillfully managing meetings. The approach has broad applicability for training in general supervision, management, and for higher education in business and management. With adaptation, the approach could be used in many different situations and with many different occupational groups.

The Functions of Skill Charting

Commencing with SC relies on the analysis of performance in some general-to-specific areas. The analysis of performance relies on recent data and historical information. For illustrative purposes, we need some target performance domain. Suppose our business has a sales function and we have several individuals primarily involved in direct selling to customers, in-person or by telephone. This sales group we refer to as a team and this team will use the SC processes explained here.

Our performance domain within sales is "assisting the customer to define his/her needs." Further, suppose that a variety of performance indicators such as data from customer satisfaction surveys, random telephone surveys of customers' buying experience, unsolicited communications from customers, team leader observations of associates' performance with customers, and other means have yielded information that indicates that knowledge and skill of associates in dealing with needs of customers is an

area that requires improvement in quality. The analysis should ordinarily result in the identity of performance gaps or problems. Such discovery is central to the overall process of skill charting.

Once performance gaps have been identified, clarified and understood, it is important to establish objectives for the SC effort. Ultimately, we want to be able to specify what performance is desired and how much improvement is needed. We need to address the focus of improvement efforts. For example, is the improvement only at the individual performer level, or, is it at the level of a unit, the team, and so on. Might the improvement be focused on a combination of levels? In the example provided above, assisting the customer define his/her needs, the primary focus of improvement level is the individual performer.

Objectives should be general enough to allow the skill charters enough freedom to find good solutions and specific enough to convey what the change effort ought to accomplish. Changes need to be driven by ends and not means. While the quality of the thinking and effort that goes into the construction is important, it is merely a means to an end, that is, identities of improved performance activities. The small group or individual construction of a skills chart for a particular performance need is a central aspect of this article. The chart starts out as a graphical representation of activities and behavior that *might* be part of an episode where the employee needs to behave in a more skilled manner to be effective. As performance gaps are known, the group commences to chart, on poster sheets, whiteboard, Powerpoint, etc., the bits of information, data, intuition, guesses, expert opinion, and so forth, that may influence improved performance. Then we

commence with a type of brainstorming activity. This activity is similar to the use of the quality improvement tools of Relations Diagram and Affinity Diagram.

The creation of the map is just the beginning. The construction of the map serves as a as a graphic organizer of ideas. Individuals or small groups can brainstorm a number of ideas, behaviors, or performances that may help to define skilled performance in some area. Again, our sample skill area is: assisting the customer to define his/her needs and we are assuming that our individual or small group used this skill area as its stimulus or trigger.

The team lists the major activities, and actions that would need to occur as part of a skillful repertoire of behavior to address the performance gap. This is how the physical map commences. Several significant component areas could be identified, such as these examples:

Greeting, meeting/encountering the customer

Creating questions and using questions with the customer

Active listening to/with the customer

Reflecting and summarizing customer statements

Focusing on how product/service choice meets customer needs

Below we explain how the ideas are translated into a set of performance improvement possibilities.

Implementation

The team will identify several important performance activities or behaviors. Each of these activities frequently has subordinate parts. As the charting takes on complexity and details we discover that the participants are creating a form of a script or

repertoire of skilled performance. That is, the participants are constructing the features, activities and language of a skilled performance. The graphical nature of the map helps to illuminate interrelationships among components as well as interdependencies.

This process, in time, will yield a set of performance requirements intended to improve performance, that is - per our example, assisting the customer to define his/her needs. As all requirements are not of equal value, the requirements will need to be placed in priority order according to team-developed criteria, for example, importance, perceived value to customer, and so on. In addition, the requirements must go through some valuation of what performance activities are "musts" and which ones are "wants." This classification and musts-wants testing require careful facilitation.

Selecting Specific Components

Once a somewhat detailed and/or hierarchical set of actions or behaviors has been identified the team may discuss the adequacy of the repertoire as a sufficient improvement to achieve the original goal: assisting the customer to define his/her needs. Each of the actions or behaviors can be examined in terms of skilled performance. The following questions may be helpful. What criteria would define each action as a skilled performance? What criteria make sense in terms of quality or consequences? This is a refinement of the activity explained above. The team has to question where the gaps remain in the repertoire we are referring to as skilled behavior. This reflective dialog is often very useful in aiding understanding. Once all of the possible actions are discussed, adjusted, agreed-to and the like, the details are to be documented.

Prepare the Actual Intervention

The assumptions underlying all of this preparation are: improvement is continuous,

improvement is based on trial and learning, and most likely there is no "silver bullet" or one best way to achieve improvements. The preparation for the actual changes in performance is, fundamentally, a codification of a script for a skilled repertoire of behavior. The team has created a script of behavior to result in improved performance. Not all team members have mastered all of the needed skills (for example, active listening to, and indirect questioning of customers) to confidently and competently enact the script. Additional training may be required for some team members. The team leader or highly skilled associates can assist with this training. Once training is completed, the team members are prepared to interact with customers using the results of the skills charting process and we can anticipate qualitative improvements in performance.

Outcomes and Consequences

The skill charting process may assist managers and supervisors attain a more complete understanding of the transferability of skills from job activity to job activity (Gunner, 2001). A manager or supervisor can use the process as an instructional tool. It can be used in a work session with employees in reference to some activity that needs to be performed with more precision, attention, or care.

The charting strategy tools have implications for many aspects of the human resources and employee learning domains to include: the conduct of job analysis, in-depth task analysis, and skill development over a broad range of potential skill domains, the development of new competencies and standards, training, performance analysis and appraisal, and performance improvement. Virtually all of these matters influence individual learning and organizational performance and have clear implications for the competitiveness of an organization.

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