PRH Consulting: Building Capability October 2010 Msg

Like

PRH Consulting Inc.
www.prhconsulting.com
leveraging know-how for performance!®

October 2010 v6no5

Building Capability

Know-How

In This Issue

Quick Links

PRH Consulting Website

PRH Consulting Blog

Join Our Mailing List!

Next Issue

Stay tuned for more on process and capability, as well as other relevant topics related to building and supporting human performance. Some topics we have on deck include:

- Is your performance organization more like an army or a group of lone rangers?
- Rant: Is compliance with a standard process equivalent to

Dear Peter

Greetings!

In this issue, we have a couple of articles addressing the idea of know-how. Tom Gilbert wrote about the "cult of knowledge" in which people gain power through the possession of knowledge. In that type of environment, you need to keep your knowledge secret and exploit it for your own gain, otherwise, it loses value. If everyone knows how to do your thing, your thing becomes a commodity.

Yet, in many corporations this is a serious challenge to productivity. If people lose status and influence by sharing knowledge, people won't share knowledge but will hoard it. Eventually the organization will perform poorly.

In Gilbert's cult though, there was another dimension. He described how people tend to value academic knowledge, that is, knowledge of information or facts, which can be quite different from actually knowing how to do something. If you look closely at the knowledge (or skills) actually *required* to perform a given task you often find that it is a manageable, focused amount. We shouldn't need someone with a masters degree in computer science to set up a home wireless network...sure that person knows more but you don't need that knowledge. In fact, they may know more computer science and still not be able to set up your network any better than the teenager next door.

We prefer taking a minimalist approach to performance and knowledge -- defining the work and then the specific know-how needed to perform it. We especially enjoy finding ways of distilling complicated concepts, information, and rules by embedding them in tools. This improves performance, expands the audience that is capable of performing, and reduces the cost of training and other performance support. This is one way we leverage know-how for performance.

I hope you enjoy the newsletter!

Pete

Peter R. Hybert, CPT
Principal Consultant

mastery performance?
- And more...

And for additional content, check out the Library on our website.

Twittering, etc.

We are on Twitter *(though, we are not yet sure why)*

Chirp with us: @Prhconsulting

Related Information

We've got articles, presentations, and project profiles on the website. Visit our online library for all kinds of materials on human performance, learning, and business.

Discuss Amongst Yourselves...

Don't Forget the Blog!

We hope the blog format has not been overshadowed by the 140 character Twitter or similarly brief Facebook and LinkedIn posts.

There are a few new posts on our blog www.prhconsulting.com/blog.

We use the blog for short notes and commentary on business and human performance issues. Recently, we posted

- Disasters are Unlikely
- Back to the Scroll?
- Practice Makes Really, Really Good

Know What, Know About, Know How

The Difference Between Labeling and Understanding

There is a great story by physicist Richard Feynman in which he describes his father taking him on walks in the woods to learn about birds and animals. He learned alot about them...in fact so much that his parents friends started taking *their* kids on walks too. At one point, Richard Feynman (as a child) got into a discussion with his friend about who knows more. It turned out that Feynman's friend knew a lot more names of different bird species but Feynman knew more about how birds behaved. Talking with his dad later, he learned that knowing the *name* of a thing doesn't mean you know anything about the thing at all. You just know what it is called...you just know its label. Feynman attributes this approach to learning (which included observations and questions or hypotheses vs. memorization) to his interest in science.

Sometimes it can be helpful to think about the kind of knowledge that learners need. There are formal taxonomies like Briggs' or Bloom's...here is one we created that we sometimes find useful for modularizing content so it can be re-used across multiple audiences.

- Know what it is called (label)
- Know what it is for (purpose)
- Know how it works
- Know how to do something

An interesting insight is that, quite often, you can be able to perform a task without the other level of knowledge. Using a saw to cut a board doesn't require that you understand how it works. Selling a product or service doesn't require fully understanding how the product or service works but you probably need to know what it is called to be able to talk about it with potential customers.

This is important for companies in technical businesses. They often spend a great deal (in time and dollars) to educate their employees on how their equipment works. It creates a lot of overhead. However, a careful analysis of the work can often result in a significantly reduced volume of learning and learning curve cycle time (and the associated costs).

This can be key with new employees who are often inundated with learning activities packed in the early weeks of their employment. The organization, rightly, believes the new hire would benefit from knowing a lot...so they err on the side of giving them everything they can think of. Or, the other extreme, they keep people in a trainee mode forever because they really aren't comfortable letting them go solo -- there is always more they could learn.

- What do Instructional Designers Do?
- If Less is More, Nothing Must be Everything

For the details, visit our blog.

Pass it On

It's easy to forward this newsletter to interested colleagues -- just click the "forward" link at the bottom!

Check Out the October PI Journal

Verifying Capability to Perform

PRH Consulting did a large-scale project to build a system for qualifying operators in a pharmaceutical plant. The intent was to build and verify capability using a combination of on-the-job orientation, training (on-site and in a "safe training environment"), coaching, and then observation of performance on-the-job for final qualification.

Working with a team of consultants, we produced about 6 weeks of material in about 12 weeks of calendar time (with holidays in the middle of it).

More importantly, the client measured ROI at 44% over five years (and 191% if you included loss avoidance). If you are wondering, their costs included all SME time and the time the operators were being training and qualified.

The right amount of spin-up for a new hire varies with the role and business environment. For example, are there people around who can help or are they in the field on their own? Are there usable support tools and resources or it impossible to find anything in the chaos of the company intranet? And, the individual is a factor...did they come from a similar industry, something totally unrelated, or even fresh from school?

Ultimately, the answer is balancing what is necessary for the employee to learn so they can generate value against the need for some soak time and experience so that the learning really happens. We have designed development paths for all kinds of jobs and industries and we use a structured process to work through a series of trade-off decisions. It isn't simple but it is very achievable if you know what you are doing.

Of course, in a true employee development path, training is only part of the answer. Coaching, on-the-job experience, and even performance aids can all reduce the time it takes to reach "know-how."

The point is not to limit employees to nothing more than followers of step-by-step procedures. But you can often defer some of the concept and theory learning for later in their development path. This saves cost, allows the company to evaluate the employee's capability before investing in significant training, and gives the employee time to get experience on which to scaffold the concept learning.

If you are interested in learning more about a project we did to design development and qualification paths in a call center environment, visit the library and check out "Project Profile: Simultaneously Redesigning Call Center Processes and Training." Or, wait for ISPI's October issue of the PI Journal and read the article "Building and Verifying Capability to Perform" about a similar project in a pharmaceutical manufacturing environment.

____

ASIDE: There are a series of videos of Feynman talking about a number of topics on YouTube. For an interesting perspective on how our minds and senses work to decode the information in our environment check this out. "Richard Feynman Talks About Light"

The "Peter Principle"

Random Promotions

Imagine you're a manager at a medium sized corporation and you've been directed to promote a new manager from a pool of five technicians. How would you decide who to promote? Would you promote your top performer? Most experienced? Conventional wisdom might recommend evaluating previous work and choosing the individual with the best track record. But, what if you just selected the individual at random? Is it possible that randomly promoting individuals could actually *more effective* than promoting the top performer? That's what

Pete and Dottie Soelke (who worked with us on the project) have an article describing the project scheduled for publication in the October issue of the Performance Improvement Journal. It will be coming out any day!

Dr. Lawrence J. Peter, a psychologist from Canada posited in his 1969 book The Peter Principle.

The Peter Principle hypothesized that organizations promote people who do well at their current job and continue promoting them until they reach their "level of incompetence" (i.e., the point at which they stop performing well). This theory is founded upon the premise that different roles require different capabilities, and consequently, that past performance of one role has no bearing on the future performance of an unrelated role. Someone that is an excellent technician might make a terrible manager and someone that is a terrible technician might make a terrific manager. By promoting the good technician, you would simultaneously lose your best technician and also gain a poor manager. Even if it turns out the technician is a good manager, he or she will go on being promoted until they stop doing a good job. The longer a company operates under such a system, the more inefficient it becomes.

However, Peter's ideas were merely theory until recently when a trio of Italian researchers, Alessandro Pluchino, Andrea Rapisarda, Cesare Garofalo, confirmed the principle in their work: The Peter Principle Revisited: A Computational Study. Their study utilized "agent based simulations" and a "game theory-like approach" to demonstrate various promotion strategies. They found that when "promotion rewards the best members and where the mechanism at their new level in the hierarchical structure does not depend on the competence they had at the previous level" the Peter principle was not only "unavoidable" but "yields in turn a significant reduction of the global efficiency of the organization." After exploring different promotion strategies the scientists discovered "the best ways for improving the efficiency of a given organization are either to promote each time an agent at random or to promote randomly the best and the worst members in terms of competence."

However, there exists another alternative to either blindly promoting top performers to new roles irrespective of their skills/capabilities or promoting randomly. At PRH Consulting, we often recommend that our clients document the skills and capabilities required for each role in their organization and then tailor subsequent training and recruitment accordingly. If your organization suffers from the Peter Principle, contact us at info@prhconsulting.com we'd be happy to help.

ISPI Skillcast

Collaborating Over the Web

International Society for Performance Improvement
WHERE KNOWLEDGE BECOMES KNOW-HOW

On September 15th, Pete and Dottie Soelke (a long-time colleague) presented an ISPI-sponsored Skillcast on how to collaborate effectively over the web (based on the presentation they gave at the International Conference).

The costs of travel have become much harder to justify in today's cost-conscious business environment. Perhaps even more important is the time it takes -- both in making the arrangements, all the wait time, and the lost opportunity of being out of the office.

So, companies are increasingly relying on web-based meetings and working sessions to get work done. But, it isn't a one-to-one swap. There are trade-offs.

For one, you have to hold shorter meetings. Working with a group to figure out a process or role or training design, we often hold meetings that last for multiple days, from 8 to 5. But people can't tolerate web meetings that long. So, you need smaller, focused goals that can be done in 90 minutes to 2 hours.

Additionally, you can only see one screen at a time which makes it more difficult to keep details in context of a larger model. You can email documents for participants to print and refer to, or you can toggle or zoom between the "big picture" and the details, but it isn't the same as being able to walk over to a flipchart taped to the wall and point to where something fits.

Another obstacle arises if the presenter is documenting as they go. Because there isn't sufficient movement to maintain the group's attention, people tend to lose their focus on the screen. (And, if you move through the document, they can't even tell if you are going forward or backward...to them, it is just a series of confusing flashes on the screen that might not even refresh in time.)

Pushing meetings to the web tends to reduce the work into a series of much smaller transactions and discussions. It may break the work into more "bite-size" chunks but it also hides the context. This is also a challenge we face when we use our object-based approach for content development. In many ways it speeds up the process (and fits a "lean" manufacturing model) but requires additional work to maintain the focus and context...so developers remember where the boundaries for their objects are. For more on this topic, check out our blog post on "Tiny Transactions."

Meetings on the web are especially susceptible to multi-tasking. For one thing, the pace of the discussion and documentation are limited to the skill the presenter/facilitator has with the tools. Maybe you can grab a red marker and write a quick note on a flipchart in five seconds without even thinking about it, that is, without stopping the discussion or changing your focus from the group. Using the web, you have to select the text icon, click where it is supposed to go, type the note, maybe pick a color or font to make it stand out, etc...lot's more tiny steps you probably have to actually think about and, while you are doing all that, everyone else realizes they have an opportunity to go back to whatever multi-tasking temptation they have available to fill any available slice of dead time.

But, we digress...our skillcast included a decision tool using a matrix format comparing the capabilities of several project management, document management, on-line meeting, and even social networking tools. If you need to get a group together to work over the web, you check out the recording of the session on the ISPI site -- it may save you the time and trouble of researching dozens of options yourself!

You can also download the decision tool from our website: Presentations -- see "Web-Based Collaboration Tools"

Rant

We Don't Plan, We Schedule

At one time, we wanted to write an article about why time management doesn't work. This was right after one of our clients started the practice of assigning facilitators to help with various teams by managing the meeting process. It didn't work. The person moderating the meeting had only one thing at stake -- sticking to the times on the agenda. *"OK...we are out of time on the first topic so we have to move on." "But wait, until we make the first decision, we can't start the second topic." "Sorry but we agreed to only allow 30 minutes* *for that item."*

We don't advocate wasting time in meetings. But facilitating is a tricky process. Sometimes you need to allow the group to get their heads around the issues...sometimes it takes a little more time and even a digression or two. At the end of the day, you need to have a solid decision or output ***and*** an aligned team. This is an example of the problems caused by focusing on a single metric (in this case time). And the problems caused by a leader that sees their role as simply pushing (or even driving) the team forward, rather than leading them.

A similar problem occurs when the culture doesn't plan. A few years back, we were planning a project and trying to discuss the series of tasks that had to be completed to get to the end of the project. Each of the tasks required specific inputs and resources and we were trying to figure out how to get it all done and still hit the original (not-at-all-realistic-to-begin-with) deadline. It got frustrating for one of the managers who didn't want to deal with any level of detail. His style was to just set dates and make people meet them. (One of his favorite expressions was "hold their feet to the fire." Did you ever think about that one?) One of his colleagues made the joke "we don't plan here...we schedule." It was funny but rang true...it stuck.

Unfortunately, many managers create unnecessary stress for their employees when they refuse to plan but don't hesitate to schedule. We've all done it. When we don't actually have to execute something, we don't want to hear about the details or the challenges...we just want it done.

Too bad that isn't how things work. Especially today, where we use teams of specialized resources to achieve a common end, leaders need to be able to facilitate discussion, negotiate agreements, gain consensus, and build commitment. That means facilitating planning sessions that make realistic assumptions about risk, unknowns, individual availability, cycle times for tasks, testing and revisions...lot's of variables. Making a plan in which everyone agrees to pretend we can do it and then waiting until something blows up so you can breathe a sigh of relief (because you dodged a bullet) doesn't do anyone any good. It breeds cynicism and dampens the level of effort team members contribute. Planning is better than scheduling.

____

By the way, we are working on a brief on-line program showing a method, along with some tips and tricks, that we use to plan projects...stay tuned!

Thank you for your interest in PRH Consulting! For more about our company, approach, and experience, please visit our website at www.prhconsulting.com.

We hope you think of us the next time you need help improving or supporting performance.

Sincerely,

Pete Hybert, CPT
PRH Consulting Inc.
Wheaton, IL
630-682-1649
www.prhconsulting.com

Forward email

PRH Consulting Inc. | 20 Danada Square West | #102 | Wheaton | IL | 60189