leveraging know-how for performance!

PRH Consulting Inc.

Building Capability

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THE CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK

Greetings!

Too Much Branding

Sometimes you have to wonder if we've all had too much exposure to business and marketing. Everything seems to be branded these days.

You have product placement where companies will pay to have their products used in the movies. For awhile this summer, I wasn't sure if the Transformers was a movie or a GM ad campaign. (It was both.) Actually though, I am thinking about how to get Matt Damon to use one of our PRH Consulting pen "giveaways" to disarm someone in the next Bourne movie. (Maybe they could even call the movie the Bourne Pen-Ultimacy...get it?)

Product placement is one thing. In consulting today, and T&D as much as any other discipline, it seems that firms are using branding to differentiate themselves from the competition. It may be necessary but it can get annoying. For one thing, it creates verbal clutter—you have to read through all the redundant use of the name of their concept or method to figure out what they are really saying.

Another problem is that many disciplines are learned in school, through reading research and articles, and through experience over a period of years. So it is really difficult to put a box around something and say you invented it and that nobody else does that thing. For example, if I create training, I am going to write objectives. I might have a certain way of doing it that allows me to get done quickly. But I didn't invent objectives.

As a consultant, branding a specific process can also put you in a box. Most professionals have the ability to apply their expertise to a variety of situations. But if you are selling a specific process it can cause customers to think you only do that. There is a great quote by Paul Hawken to the effect that this is inevitable though...he says that the world will let you be known for one thing. If you are successful, maybe you can add a second thing.

So, in this newsletter, you will read about our focus on capabilities. The word is in the name of the newsletter. But I have resisted branding our process as "capabilities-driven design" or something because we bring an entire toolbox to every project. The one thing we want to be known for is helping companies to leverage their know-how to improve their performance.

Please call if you would like to talk over some ideas.

Pete

Peter R. Hybert
Principal Consultant

The Capability Framework

The Competitive Advantage of Capable Employees

What does a business really need? Specifically related to human performance, a business needs people that are capable of performing their jobs.

Companies spend a great deal of effort trying to build, manage, and improve employee and organizational capability. But to often individual internal organizations work independently. As a result, there are no synergies. Employees see a disintegrated set of initiatives, documents, resources, tools, etc.

For example, they see competency models from HR, curriculum maps from training, career paths, skills dictionaries, knowledge management tools, and so on...all of which describe some view of their job and the know-how they need. There are very general requirements from corporate and more narrow requirements from their local organization.

All this becomes noise to the employee and their manager, who are the real users of this "system." Also, it is costly to

Inside this issue:

The Capability Framework, continued

build and maintain all these separate and overlapping deliverables.

We suggest that the key to getting alignment is to create a central framework on which all the deliverables are designed and built. We call this framework the capability framework.

Are Capabilities the Same as Competencies?

We use the word "capability" primarily because the meaning of "competencies" is so muddy. Sometimes "competencies" refers to a very specific methodology. It may mean only the things that differentiate top performers from average performers (instead of the *entire* list of requirements for performance). Or it may mean only the most general, shareable requirements.

> **"…create a central framework on which all the deliverables are designed and built…the capability framework"**

Executives often like to identify specific subsets while those who are responsible for developing capable employees prefer more comprehensive, detailed lists. (There is a reason for this difference, by the way. For execs, large, general competencies are more likely to be stable over time. They also target the culture more than specific know-how.)

What are "Capabilities"?

Capabilities are simply discrete descriptions of the ability to do something OR discrete descriptions of a set of knowledge or skills that help you do something. They can be used in much the same way as requirements are used in engineering. They are both hurdles to clear and reliable predictors of future performance. But having the capability to perform doesn't mean you actually are performing, any more than having the capability to drive means you will always drive safely. Directing and managing performance can be supported by training, process, references, tools, and even incentives but those supports must be used by the manager and employee—actual performance has to be managed in real time in the work environment.

What is the Capability Framework?

Defining a capability framework is essentially defining an organization scheme for all of the capabilities required for the scope you are targeting. (The scope might be a single work process, a single job or role, an entire department, or even an entire company.)

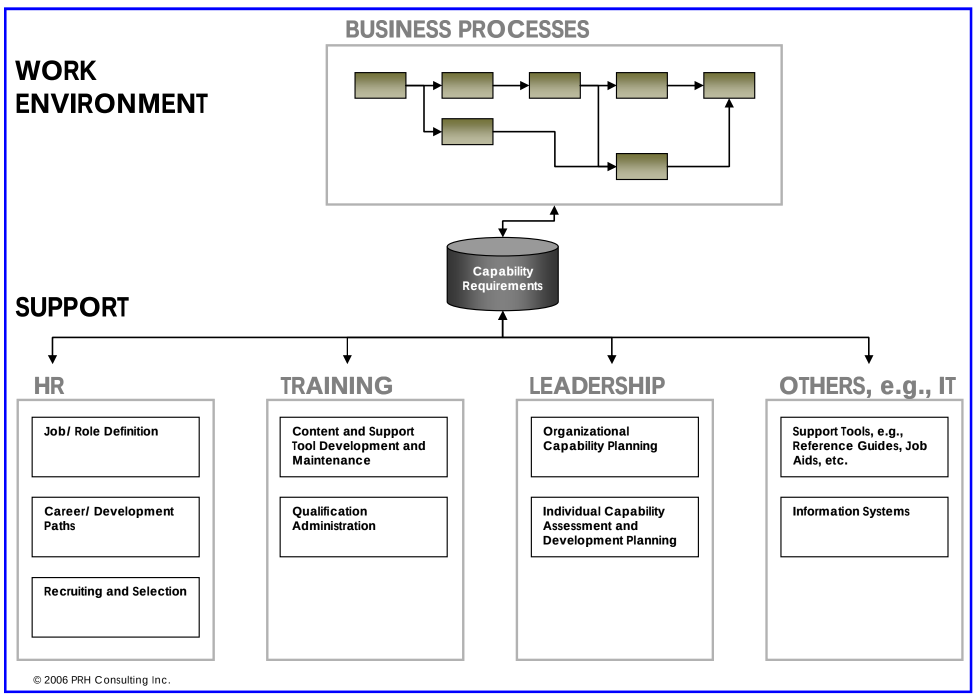
The framework would define individual capabilities at a manageable level of detail (which is a little bit of an art). Those capabilities must be able to be "drilled into" for additional detail and "rolled up" to larger categories to make the framework useable.

What we do with the framework is use it to establish the requirements for performance. Then, individual deliverables (such as training materials, job aids, reference materials, tools, performance tests, etc.) are linked to the capabilities they support.

In the diagram above, the starting point would probably be the work processes. The work processes require specific things to be done, which in turn are allocated to individual roles.

Some examples of how the capability framework can be used to align performance support.

1. By linking capabilities to processes you can identify which capabilities are needed for individual tasks. Different organizations can create generalist or specialist roles as needed.
2. By identifying the capabilities each individual has, you have the inputs you need to evaluate their fit with new jobs or to plan their development.
3. You can use this information to assess the impact of process changes or new tools on capability requirements.
4. If you are merging two similar departments, you can find capability gaps and figure out the support you will need to provide to make sure things work when you "go live."



This all may seem a little abstract but it is really just a way to focus on one of the few areas in which a business can improve competitiveness—employee capability. Next issue, we will show a partial example of how this works with an example role.

Top 5 aka "The List"—Tips for Facilitating Group Meetings

No matter what your job, there will be times when you have to get work done with a group. Here are five tips for making it work.

Clarify/reinforce the purpose—People can't get excited about completing a task unless they understand what you are doing, what is expected of them, and why it is important. We are always surprised that people will show up at a meeting when they don't know what the meeting is for. But even if they are ready individually, in a group setting everybody needs to hear it together.

Write it down! People like to talk but it will eventually become frustrating when the discussion continually goes around the same issues again and again. Use a flip-chart to capture key points and make decisions about them...and move on. You may feel uncomfortable at first standing up and documenting the discussion live—but once you get over that, you will be uncomfortable when you attend meetings where they don't. (By the way, we suggest paper because you can take it with you after the meeting.)

Deconstruct logjams—If you get bogged down, figure out how to convert the talk to action. Is there information you need? Figure out where to get it. Is there a decision your group can't make? Identify who needs to be engaged. Is there a technical problem that has to be solved? Figure out workarounds or experiments you can conduct.

Have a process—Don't just make a list of topics to be discussed. Instead, have a process for making the decisions needed. Even status meetings can be focused around solving issues (vs. individual reports).

Execute the fundamentals—they always work. Have a purpose and agenda (i.e., output and process). Make sure the right people are invited and know why they are needed. Summarize actions at the end. Follow-up with minutes after the meeting. Nothing fancy but the fundamentals make all the difference.

Project Profile: **Policy Training**

The Situation

Our client was gaining an increasing amount of work with government customers. As you may know, the "rules of engagement" for working with government customers are different than with commercial customers. For example, you might not think twice about taking a customer to lunch. But if the customer is a federal government employee, it is probably illegal (unless it costs less than $25).

This company uses one of three different approaches to introduce a new policy.

1. Publish the policy on their intranet and send out an email—aka, "we told you."
2. Email employees directly and require that they sign-off that they have read the policy—aka "no plausible deniability."
3. Build a brief training program and test to verify that they employees understand the policy.

For this policy, they opted for #3, which made sense due to the potential risk. A violation might mean that not only can the employee find him or herself in trouble, the company can be fined or even barred from future government work.

But we knew that we had a little bit of a challenge. After all, if they were worried that employees wouldn't read the policy, it seems just as likely they wouldn't complete a training program either.

Then there was the timeline...the policy was already written and they needed the training ready ASAP (four weeks, including review/revision cycles). The primary SME was a corporate attorney with a full calendar and travel schedule.

The Approach

We decided that the key would be to build the training around a set of scenarios, forcing the learner to practice looking up the right answer in the policy, rather than just telling them the answer.

We began by analyzing the policy to identify the key capabilities. We figured learners needed to know

- Which employees are expected to comply with the policy
- Which customers are under the policy
- What activities are "in-bounds" and which are "out-of-bounds"

We then identified a set of scenarios to exercise the decision-making. (Clear "in-bounds," clear "out-of-bounds," and some trickier ones.)

Key Tips

Link capabilities to testing

We use a spreadsheet tool for test development planning. This helps us ensure that all capabilities are tested, we achieve the desired balance of questions across capabilities, and that we use a good mix of question types.

We used this spreadsheet in our initial meeting with the SME to get the questions and answers right from the start.

Re-use

This design would work with almost any policy. Of course the scenarios and related rules would be different but the overall structure works, whether the policy is about things you can/can't say during an interview or whether you can/can't approve a specific expense or...you name it.

> **"key to re-use is having the organization scheme ready from the beginning"**

Within the project we designed a set of object templates upfront that we re-used throughout to both accelerate the development and give the program a consistent "look/feel."

At the lowest level of re-use, we built and used a graphics library for the same reasons.

The key to re-use is having the organization scheme ready from the beginning. We've been doing this on development projects for years so it didn't take us long to set up the system.

Simple is better

We used a simple software program (Articulate Presenter™) so that it would work as a CBT program but be easy for the client to make modifications downstream if needed.

News and Events...

In addition to client work, here are a few other things we've been doing.

ISPI

Pete recently chaired an ISPI conference committee, which meant reviewing a large number of proposals for 2008 conference presentations. It was very interesting to see what different people are working on in various industries and companies.

We set up our usual project management website to provide information to the fourteen-person committee and to track progress of the reviews. (Each proposal needed to be reviewed by three people and there were about fifty proposals—that is about 150 separate items to track!) The committee members appreciated the tool...but it is still hard to evaluate the work of a large number of capable professionals.

Dottie Soelke and Pete are working on a three-part article for the Chicago ISPI Chapter (CISPI) newsletter based on a large-scale project we completed in which we built all the training and performance testing to train operators in a pharmaceutical manufacturing line. *For a related presentation, see "Qualifying Employees in a Regulated Environment—A System for Developing and Assessing Performance" given in 2007.*

Visit "the library" on our website for past presentation hand-outs and related articles!

What's New on the Blog?

There are a number of new posts, in spite of a brief drought as we dug out from under several coinciding deadlines.

- The Real World isn't Simple
- Change Must be Integrated
- Why Six Sigma is Annoying
- Is Pressure Needed for Performance?
- Do Limits Improve Creativity?

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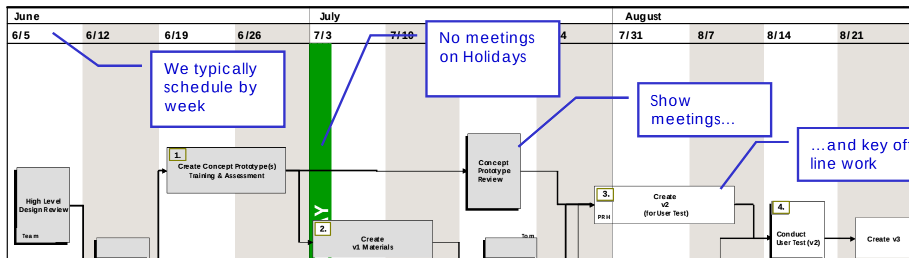
Project Tool

A PERT chart is a project management tool that shows tasks and interdependencies. We like to build PERT charts into a timeline so you can see streams of project activities, the dependencies, schedule fit with holidays, and, of course the "critical path." See below for a partial example.

If you work on multiple projects simultaneously, use the same scale for the timeline so you can line up the charts and make sure you don't double-book yourself or your team.



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For Fun—Music to Listen to While Working

When you need to get a lot of work done in a concentrated setting, Do you like quiet or background noise? Pete used to work with someone who used earplugs...not a bad strategy but a little disconcerting if you were trying to get her attention and didn't know about them.

Some of us focus better in a Starbuck's or an airplane than our office. The key is that the background has to be background—you can't work while listening to a Cubs game but music can work.

We don't like bland drivel though...here are couple of our favorite "hip but still ok as background" classically-influenced contemporary records.

- William Basinski: "The Disintegration Loops." (While transferring old analog "tape loop" pieces to digital, they disintegrated and he just went with it.)
- Arvo Pärt: "Tabula Rasa" (and others).
- Philip Glass and Foday Musa Suso: "Music from the Screens." Not the usual Philip Glass…
- Kronos Quartet: "Early Music."

Send us your suggestions!

Research...Reading Line Length

We found an article that was pretty interesting in an issue of ASTD's T&D journal. IBM did research to evaluate the impact that line length had on reading speed and comprehension (using a device that track eye movement).

Maybe not surprisingly, they found that using narrower columns resulted in faster reading and better comprehension. Somewhat surprising was the finding that people more frequently did not finish reading the narrow column paragraphs...and *still* had better comprehension. Maybe due to being able to get the bulk of the content from the first sentence or two in a paragraph?

For the details, see "The Long and Short of Learning" by Peter Orton, David Beymer, and Daniel Russell in the February 2007 issue of T&D.