"SAVE TIME AND MONEY AND DEVELOP MORE EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS BY COMBINING MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION PROJECTS FROM THE START."

ASSESSING MANAGEMENT AND OD NEEDS

BY CLARK L. WILSON

The boundary lines between management and organization development are obscure, at best. Some would even say the two are the same thing — or just extensions of each other: Organization development studies will usually reveal needs for coaching, counseling and training individuals; studies of individual needs often reveal organizational stresses.

Of course, we all know the experience of training individuals only to have them return to an environment that does not reinforce their training — may even reject it.

These interdependencies — even if the two fields are distinct entities — suggest one obvious implication: Save time and money and develop more effective programs by combining management and organization projects from the start. It can be done, as shown in a recent experience — if you have the right kind of instruments.

The setting is a management-information department of a large company. Department management faced several problems: Delivery dates on new computerized systems were slipping unacceptably; user groups were complaining more loudly; and, to make matters worse, turnover among technical personnel — analysts and programmers — had increased markedly.

Management saw the issue as one of personnel turnover, aggravated to a degree by certain corporate policies and programs.

It is the contention of the employee relations director and the OD consultant, the writer, that in a project of this sort, you *must* assess the strengths and soft spots of the individual managers as well as the organizational unit. It is the managers who interpret company policies and manage the work flow. If you want to look at problems arising from policies, work processes, or organizational structure, you have to first try to isolate the managers' influence and impact. If you don't, their individual positive or negative influences may obscure the dynamics you are looking for.

Further, you cannot be satisfied with an aggregate or average profile. One reason is that variations from one individual to another can give important insights into what is going on within the sub-units of the organization. Another is that training and development should meet individual needs as much as possible; to do this you need to identify needs at that level.

The Study Phase

Two different surveys were used. These were followed by interviews with individual managers to feed back results and probe certain aspects further.

The *survey of satisfaction* covered general attitudes toward corporate policies, facilities, compensation, performance reviews, etc. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to write in ". . . up to five aspects of the company, the organization, your work, etc. that you find most positive in your motivation or satisfaction in your job." This was balanced by the same request for negatives.

The second survey was the *multi-level management survey* (MLMS). It yields a profile of 15

managerial practices and facets of manager-subordinate relations. (see Figure 1). This survey consists of two forms: the *survey of management practices* is answered by participating managers about themselves. The questions start with "You. . . ." The superior of the manager uses this same form to record his/her ratings of the participant. In this case the "You. . . ." is interpreted as the manager being observed. The participant's subordinates answer the second form of MLMS, the *survey of working relations* to describe their manager. Their questions read "My supervisor. . . ."

Aside from syntax, the two forms of the survey are identical, question for question. This enables one to develop profiles from the three perspectives of self, superior and subordinates.

In the present study there were 36 participating managers, their 36 superiors, and 104 subordinates all told.

The survey of working relations, the subordinate form of MLMS, was also used in a second way: The code word "ORG" was penned on its face and instructions given to ". . . answer about the management information organization as an entity. Your perspective is to think of the whole management information group, its general management and its operations. In other words, instead of thinking of *just* your manager alone, think of the whole organization."

This form was answered by 11 workers, managers and non-managers alike.

Reference to Figure 1 will show that MLMS emphasizes managerial practices rather than personality traits. Surveys for this kind of work must be operationally oriented; they must also provide a wide range of sound statistical information. Both attributes are required to obtain the detail necessary for diagnosis at both the individual and group level at the same time. The MLMS dimensions were developed by factor analysis and other advanced techniques.[1] They have demonstrated reliability and are valid, in that they identify the differences between successful and unsuccessful managers in sales, production, administration and general management.

Personal interviews with individual managers followed preliminary analysis of the survey data. These interviews thus served two purposes: One was to feed back individual survey results, coach and counsel. The other was to probe various managerial and organizational characteristics and problems. In short, the interview was both a feedback and information gathering session.

Figure 1.

THE MLMS DIMENSIONS

Direction of Work

1. *Clarification of goals and objectives.* Involves discussion of goals to be sure they are understood, setting meaningful goals for worthwhile contributions.
2. *Encouragement of upward communications and participation.* Encouraging subordinates to contribute ideas and suggestions and putting those suggestions to work.
3. *Orderly work planning.* How well organized a manager is, orderly in making the work flow, etc.
4. *Expertise.* Technical-functional skills; ability to answer questions about the company, operations, products, services.
5. *Work facilitation.* Coaching, training, and general support in getting work done.
6. *Feedback.* Giving subordinates honest and constructive criticism of performance.

Control

7. *Time Emphasis.* Keeping things moving on schedule, stressing the importance of deadlines, etc.
8. *Control of details.* At the upper end. unless accompanied by strong interpersonal relations, one can be an over-bearing nitpicker. Low scores imply a lack of involvement.
9. *Goal pressure.* High levels, unless accompanied by strong interpersonal scores, can imply excessive pressure, a tendency to shout and scream when mistakes are made, etc. Very low scores can denote lack of push for goal achievement.
10. *Delegation (Permissiveness).* Letting people work at their own speed, set their own goals, etc. If Direction of Work and other Control scores are solid, a high score here can mean good delegation. If these scores are low, it pictures a permissive manager.

Interpersonal Relations

11. *Fair and enlarging work allocation.* Allocating work fairly, without favoritism; also shifting work to try to make jobs more interesting.
12. *Approachability.* Denotes a friendly, easy-to-talk-to manager; one who listens even though he/she does not agree.
13. *Teambuilding.* Getting the work group members to cooperate, to exchange ideas, etc.
14. *Interest in subordinate growth.* Helping subordinates learn and progress in their jobs, advance in their careers.
15. *Recognizing and reinforcing performance.* The pat on the back, the expression of appreciation, compliments, etc. for work well done.

The Results

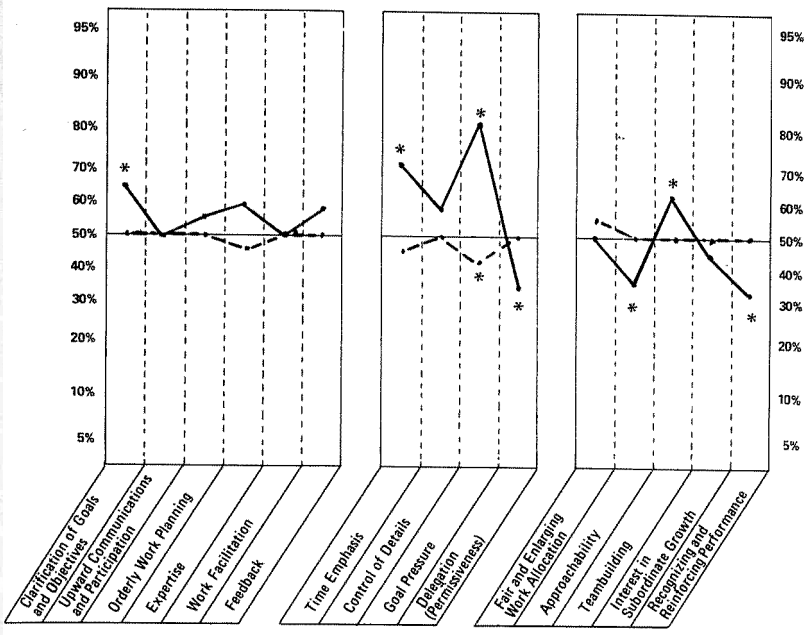
Before the individual interviews, norms were developed for the MLMS dimensions. Separate norms were set up for subordinate ratings of managers on the one hand and a combination of superiors' and self-ratings on the other. In this article, only the subordinate norm is required to tell the story.

In Figure 2, the dashed line represents the average of 65 subordinate ratings of 13 first-line managers in the unit where turnover was highest. The 50 percent line across the chart represents the norm on each dimension. The solid line shows the average rating by 19 managers in the same unit of their superiors: Individuals making up the dashed line are non-managers rating managers; those making up the solid line are managers rating higher level managers.

A little study will quickly show some marked differences in the two curves. Managers see their superiors as above average, or tighter, in control and below average on some important interpersonal relations dimensions. Particularly, notice the severe bump in *goal pressure* as felt by the

Figure 2.

MLMS Ratings of Individual Managers in Unit with Highest Turnover



Legend:

_____ 19 Managers Rating Their Superiors

— — — — 65 Non-Managers Rating Their First-Line Superiors

* Significantly Different from Norm

managers rating their superiors. Contrast that with the dip in the ratings of first line managers by their technical subordinates.

Both the bump and the dip are statistically significant departures from the norm, even though the dip does not appear to be so severe. All significant deviations from the norm are starred.

Managers rate their superiors significantly higher on clarification of goals and objectives, time emphasis, goal pressure and teambuilding. They are rated significantly below norms on delegation, approachability and recognition for performance. If the high score on teambuilding seems incongruous, it represents in this context a rather impersonal effort to get people to work together and communicate.

Looking at each individual manager's profiles separately gave added insight into these aggregate curves.

In the usual study of a group of managers, over half will show good balance between direction of work, control and interpersonal relations. There will be hard and soft spots here and there, but scores will hover about the norms or above. Of the remaining, most will be out of balance in the direction of the "nice guy" or permissive side. High scores on upward communications, delegation (permissiveness), and approachability; below norms on clarification of goals and objectives, orderly planning, and the control functions except for delegation. This leaves a lesser number who are overly tight controllers, like the solid curve in Figure 2.

As a generalization, in the usual group, about 60 percent will be balanced, 25 percent on the permissive side and 15 percent tight controllers. By contrast, in this study, about 25 percent were balanced, 25 percent were permissive, and 50 percent were tight controllers.

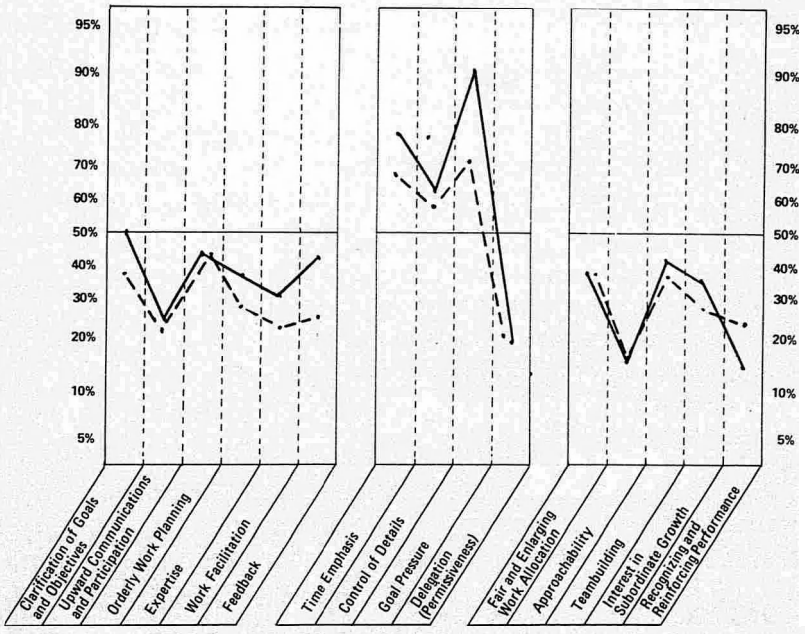
Further, as might be expected from Figure 2, the balanced and more permissive managers were at lower levels, supervising nonmanagerial personnel.

Figure 3 shows the curves for the same two groups of people as Figure 2 except that here the plot shows the average response to the "ORG" survey on the organization as a whole and upper management. (Curves are plotted against the same norms as Figure 2.)

First, note how closely the two curves track each other across the chart. Note how both groups place

Figure 3.

MLMS ORGanization Ratings in Unit with Highest Turnover



Legend:

_____ Ratings by 19 Managers

— — — — Ratings by 65 Non-Managers

Note: All ratings below approximately 40% and above 60% are significantly different from norm.

organization management as a whole very high on the goal-pressure dimension, even though they differ in degree. The tightness in control is underscored by the lack of delegation and the higher scores on time and detail control. The shortfalls on upward communications, approachability, and others reinforce the general image of tightness.

The general attitude survey, the survey of satisfaction, showed several things of interest. First, company policies and benefits were seen as positive on average; compensation was OK, as were performance-review practices. The lack of technical training and management development were sore spots. But the company was seen as a good place to work. The write-in free responses added depth of understanding. The work was considered challenging; company policies and benefits also drew positive comments. Training, or lack of it, was the largest negative. But management also came in for some licks in comments such as lack of openness, lack of delegation, excessive control, finger pointing or witch hunting for mistakes, etc.

Top management's initial interpretation of the aggregated information focused on first-line management — for their lack of a sense of urgency and exercise of control to get the job done. They were considered as not understanding the problems; not getting the message. One reason was that middle management was not delegating enough. One comment was that middle management was not holding first-line managers accountable for their unit's work. Presumably, that was why top and middle management ended up exercising so much pressure — to catch up when things went wrong or got behind.

Field Probing

Individual interviews confirmed much of what had come out of the surveys and amplified it. It soon became apparent that the pressure identified in the individual and ORG MLMS surveys, and the witch hunting or finger pointing from the attitude survey, were one and the same. Top management not only put great stress on meeting deadlines. They also came down hard on such matters as aborted computer runs, regardless of the reason and regardless of the time delays occasioned. The attitude was amplified by one middle manager, "Top management does not ask, 'What went wrong?' and 'What have we done to fix it?' Rather they ask, 'Who screwed it up?' There always has to be a culprit."

Importantly, several managers, regardless of the shape of their personal profiles, felt that the detailed and exacting nature of the work had a lot to do with the pressure. Some reacted by amplifying the stress and pressure on their subordinates. Others were laid-back, almost detached, shaking their heads in mild amusement at what they observed.

With many managers, but especially the more relaxed, the prevailing strategy was self-protective to escape the spotlight when the hollering started. This cover-your-flanks syndrome was

more prevalent than one usually finds in studies of this nature.

Consequently, it became apparent that the lack of delegation revealed in the MLMS data was matched by an unwillingness on the part of first-line managers to accept responsibilities. It was more protective not to take the lead.

In general, the data led to the conclusion that there was more than just the nature of the work that led to the situation. And, that it was more than bad managerial manners on the part of a heavy proportion of incumbents. In fact, that proportion was sufficiently high as to lead to the conclusion that something was operating to keep it that way. Something was perpetuating an unsettled condition, over and above the personalities of some managers or the nature of the work.

The problem was pursued by following the flow of work — the organization's processes. They are best described in terms of the life cycle of a project:

A systems project is initiated by a request from the management of a user department. It is scoped out with upper management in the systems department. It is then delegated to a middle level systems manager, and further to a lead systems analyst. A team of analysts and programmers is assembled. Working-level users are brought into the team framework. The flow of communications becomes user-analyst-programmer and v.v. with most all communications routed through the analyst.

It is policy that analysts not commit the systems department to a final delivery date until the project is far enough along to permit reasonably firm estimates. Eventually, they are made and confirmed by systems management. However, it is human nature that unintentional, even unjustified expectations get built up informally in users' and others' minds from the start. It is also natural that, as a project proceeds and both sides begin to understand the details more intimately, changes are made in the systems design. These changes, of course, necessitate changes in delivery dates. They occur up to the final moments, continuing to cause slippage in delivery times.

Also, as one would expect, considerable misunderstanding arises in the linkage of user-analyst-programmer with communications channeled through the analyst. This linkage was further obstructed by the defensive self-covering antics of the analysts and programmers.

Final Analysis and Recommendations

Ultimately, the situation was sized up as follows: The systems department, like most such technical service groups, had grown substantially in recent years. At first, management had intimate contact with every project; control was not that difficult.

As work load and organization grew, control efforts focused primarily on exception reporting. With continued expansion and ubiquitous problem of turnover of computer personnel of all kinds, exceptions increased, as did management problems. Management's response was to tighten controls. This cycle of increased problems and tighter controls eventually became counterproductive when it reached the "Who screwed it up?" stage. Frustrations were evident on all sides.

To synthesize, conclusions were put in the context of the project life cycle: The focus of control was on the later phases of the project, rather than the beginning. If more participation were encouraged to get a systems project started properly, there would be fewer exceptions later — fewer frustrations and disappointments on all sides; less adrenalin expended.

Based on the clear indications of the surveys of both the individual managers and the organization, several recommendations were made.

For individual management development, programs should be started as soon as feasible. Curriculum content should be aimed at the specific needs of individuals as revealed in their surveys. Coaching should be continued with certain managers to reinforce the

training and monitor their progress. Technical training should also be stepped up.

On the OD side, a program of team-building sessions should be initiated. On all current projects, and especially on new ones, analysts, programmers, and users should be brought together to indoctrinate each other on their needs and expectations so communications might be freed up and projects managed more smoothly. These sessions should continue on a regular basis throughout the life of the project so that the needs for change and the actual changes may be talked through and the consequences — time slippage, etc. — be fully understood on the part of all. Summary minutes of these sessions should be kept and communicated to upper management on both the systems and user side.

These periodic reports have a special significance for top management. They should provide timely and early warning of changes in scope and timing. This, in turn, is expected by all concerned to reduce the need for after-the-fact tight controls which had been generating the feelings of witch hunting and pressure.

Finally, it was recommended that the surveys be repeated in six months to a year, to provide, along with more objective measures, an assessment of progress. The surveys had identified specific soft spots at both the individual and organization level and had demonstrated sufficient reliability to be used to measure change — the effectiveness of the development programs.

Conclusion

As in most OD projects, changes were recommended in both management and organization development spheres. Patently, changing one without the other would have been less than fully effective.

A broad-range, reliable, multilevel instrument such as MLMS can provide the necessary diagnostic information to guide development plans for both individual managers and the organization.

In this case it highlighted needs for skills in planning, monitoring and communicating. As these are developed in training, they immediately become applicable in group team-building.

With this approach, time and money are saved as well. This project took less than 12 days of consultant time from planning through reporting; less than two months' elapsed time, including the Christmas holidays.

REFERENCES

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