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Project training evaluation: Reshaping boundary objects and assumptions

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Abstract

Training evaluation is an important component of personal development which has received insufficient attention by project managers, members of project teams and their organisations, making training a target for cut-back at times of tightening budgets. Assessing training has historically been operationally oriented, emphasising financial justification, content and quality of the training rather than the potential of improved project performance or organisational transformation. This qualitative, multi-case study demonstrates the limitations of normative boundary objects (the processes, artefacts, documents or technical language or vocabulary in common use within the project community) such as 'best practise' models and 'bodies of knowledge' as the driver and basis for training. The paper proposes using alternate boundary objects to incorporate reflective practises which can increase the utilisation of learning by embedding it in specific contexts. Study findings are of relevance to project workers by helping them think differently about the purpose and outcome of training attendance, and for managers charged with developing the project and programme talent pool within the organisation.

Keywords: Training evaluation; Boundary objects; Appraisal; Learning

1. Introduction

As project management (PM) becomes more central in executing in-house initiatives and contracts delivery, effective talent management of project personnel is vital for organisational competitiveness. Whilst the foundation of project success rests on the workforce tasked with their delivery, the responsibility for ensuring workers' knowledge currency and practical competence falls primarily on the employing organisation through their human resource (HR) learning and development function. As HR does not normally hold the budget for funding professional PM-related training, the business community or line management has to agree to foot the bill and free-up time for attendance. Naturally, as sponsors they will want assurance of 'value for money' which generally translates into expecting employees to learn new tools and techniques for better planning and controlling of schedule-sensitive tasks. Training evaluation, therefore, justifies the training budget by providing an assessment of how training has helped employees perform better.

Training evaluation is a process which seeks to weigh the cost of training with the intended learning outcomes assessed in terms of improved performance by those who underwent the training (Buckley and Cape, 1990). Mann and Robertson (1996, p14) suggest that "the evaluation of the effectiveness of training programmes is critical because without it, organisations have no good way to know whether training pounds are being spent wisely". Despite the general agreement on the importance of training and development for increased competence, research suggests insufficient attention is paid by employees and their organisations on the quality and effect of training (Lin, 2008; Wang and Wilcox, 2006). Whilst many organisations have an

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explicit personnel review and development policy (e.g. the ones with Investing in People accreditation) few, in practise, conduct systematic evaluations to assess the true worth and relevance of training for the organisation. Lewis and Thornhill (1994, p25) reported that "85% of British employers make no attempt to assess the benefits gained from undertaking training". The apparent disinterest is slow to change as Sugrue and Kim (2004) found only limited evidence of consistent and systematic evaluations. Training evaluation is also often viewed as a nuisance by attending delegates because of ineffective design or poor timing of information gathering. Sometimes the perceived coercion of having to attend a course can prompt negative or inattentive evaluations. The low utility of training evaluation to employees, their managers and the organisation makes training itself a target for cut-back at times of tightening budgets.

Scriven (1996, p.395) notes that "evaluation is a very young discipline — although it is a very old practise". The recent growing interest in the project literature on preparing project managers to cope effectively with uncertainty and complexity (e.g. Alam et al., 2008; Berggren and Söderlund, 2008; Smith et al., 2008; Thomas and Mengel, 2008) reflects pressure on companies to account for their investments in formal staff training and education (Cifalino and Baraldi, 2009; Tharenou et al., 2007). Crawford et al. (2006) also advise project managers to broaden from their technical skills-based and practise reflective management. Researchers' discussions with practising project managers indicate that focus has largely been on development inputs with limited attention on post-training effects on project behaviour and performance.

The time is right for a closer look at training evaluation in project organisations as specific search (date of search: 4th March 2010) of the project literature on ABI Inform for 'training evaluation' and 'project performance' yielded only two relevant empirical studies focused primarily on producing mode 2 knowledge. There is little written about training and project management in general and certainly no reported study on understanding boundary objects (something that is shared and sharable across different problem solving contexts) and their use for training evaluation in the project management context. In this paper we demonstrate that the current evaluation practise in project management skills training is inadequate owing to an over focus on specific contents (inputs) as boundary objects rather than choosing ones that genuinely reflect changed behaviour and impact on performance (outputs). Inappropriate choice of boundary objects can be harmful: for example, over reliance on 'best practise' models and professional competence frameworks encourage managers to concentrate on the skills to perform the adopted process without adequate reference to the contextual intricacies of the project or programme.

We argue that developing reflective project managers capable of managing the complexities in modern projects will require the reshaping of the boundary objects currently used to assess their training and development needs. Findings from four publicly listed organisations illustrate the shortfalls in current boundary object assumptions which are aimed at measuring acquisition of predefined skills and concrete changes to job aptitude (but not attitude). The study verifies our proposition to reshape the way success is measured and judged.

2. Evaluation practises

2.1. Potential problems

Present-day tools and techniques for evaluation are generally founded on Kirkpatrick's seminal work some 50 years ago in which he proposed four levels of training effectiveness, tracking improvement in reactions, learning, behaviour and results (Kirkpatrick, 1959a, 1959b, 1960a, 1960b). Moving up a level each time, the efficacy of training is evaluated in terms of: How did participants find the learning experience? Did the intervention provide the learning the participants expected? Did participants change their behaviour as a result of the training or intervention? Was the training aligned with the strategic development aims of the organisation and did it deliver the intended learning outcomes? Kirkpatrick's simple to understand and easy to apply 4-level learning model has stood the test of time — but other researchers have identified gaps in the process. For example Phillips (1977, 1996) added a fifth dimension, return on investment, to attach a value to the training programme (computed as a benefits over cost ratio). Several other evaluation models have also been developed, such as the CIRO evaluation model developed by Warr et al. (1970) and Hamblin's five-level model (1974). Worthen et al. (1997) attempted to classify the models according to their core aims: (a) objectives-oriented, (b) management-oriented, (c) consumer-oriented, (d) expertise-oriented, (e) adversary-oriented and (f) participant-oriented evaluation. Cifalino and Baraldi (2009) synthesised the literature to provide some common issues such as the selection of different levels of training based on a cost–benefit analysis, the evaluation of a complex programme consisting of various training units, the timing and methods of data collection and analysis and the isolation effects of training from other drivers of organisational performance.

The learning objectives of professional or executive training are generally well defined and explicit. Evaluation tends to follow the end of the training event. The most common form of evaluation is still a questionnaire completed by attending delegates assessing their satisfaction (Sugrue and Kim, 2004). For example, if trainees have to learn how to use a knowledge management system (e.g. one that captures lessons learned), the ability to demonstrate access, navigation and data manipulation is normally sufficient to show additional skill (Earl, 2001). This type of post-training assessment is operationally driven, aimed at assessing training content and delivery. These assessments are usually done in a hurry with limited reflection as participants prepare to return to the reality of work. They are unable to provide data on actual application or decision-making improvement at work, as reflected by Casper's (2005) observation that over 80% of the knowledge and skills learned in training fail to transform behaviour at work.

Kearns (2005) criticised the Kirkpatrick's model and its variants for failing to distinguish between pre and post training effects and for their lack of attention on mapping impact on