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‘Role’ing Stones!

The impact of an interactive role-goal relationship on training

Organizational processes and functions are in a constant state of change. Left with little option but to stretch and strain goals to meet higher performance levels, organizations believe that the only way to survive is to, as a training analyst says, “*keep upping the ante and sustain the learning.*” Surprisingly that seems to be working for most organizations.

Performance improvement training and tough global competition are the reasons for the success of this ‘*upping the ante*’ approach. However, when it comes to guaranteeing a future berth, this approach might not be as promising as it looks today. That is because the workforce will eventually face the law of diminishing returns.

With workforce pundits predicting a thinning out of the executive or managerial cadre, it may become impossible to achieve the objective of increasingly demanding goals. Albeit in a small way, the law of diminishing returns has already set in, which is why organizations are now turning to solutions that have never been applied before - for instance, outsourcing abroad for higher end human capital.

Training to the rescue

Organizations are quick to turn to training to get them through tough times; however, with organizational goals undergoing major transformations, can training provide viable solutions? The answer is an emphatic “yes”, but only if the training framework is redesigned to accommodate new business dynamics and workforce metrics.

An offsetting shift that proves that training can adapt is seen in the emergence of diagnostically driven training where the emphasis is on getting to know more about the trainee. Learning styles tests and psychological assessments are extensively employed to reveal gaps that can be plugged with customized training. However, to redesign the training framework, organizations will have to re-examine the existing role-goal relationship.

What about the role-goal relationship?

It takes a set of skills or a role to achieve a certain goal. However, because goals are perceived as more significant, they are instrumental in defining the roles or skill sets needed to achieve the objectives of a given goal. For an organization, goals are “where all the action is” and roles are more or less static in nature. Organizations also assume that the role-goal relationship is not dynamic in nature. In fact, they are considered mirror matches. Therefore, it made more sense to focus on the goals.

Focusing on the goals alone however, is possible only when goals are both achievable and manageable and not when they need to be stretched to meet increasing performance levels. Contrary to belief, there is a highly volatile interaction between goals and roles. This interaction has been underplayed or gone undetected for sometime now. However, it

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is important to give this relationship its due in order to develop or upgrade performance improvement training.

Goal dynamism

Some organizations experience only a few goal transformations, while others undergo major transformations that warrant a corresponding role change. When studying goal transformations, it is wise to remember that as organizations have become focused on goals, they have become more concerned with goal changes. However, it is important to acknowledge that role changes are as much part of the goal achievement process as are goal transformations.

Listing out the role changes that correspond to each goal transformation will help organizations appreciate the intimate goal-role relationship. Traditionally, roles have been defined by job descriptions. These job descriptions were so rigid that role spillovers were ignored. With goal transformations, roles will no longer be constricted by the rigid description parameters. Some major goal transformations that most organizations will experience are:

Reconfiguration. An increase in job rotation drives a corresponding increase in cross training. Today, most structural reconfiguration is based on open-ended and fluid business functions and processes. An employee's role includes being more innovative and less mechanical. Organizational goals will also be more open to variations.

Alignment. Both individual and team priorities will change regularly and routinely. Organizations will strive to align these dynamic priorities with their objectives. Organizations that successfully alter the direction and momentum of their workflows and processes to help alignment will have better chances of survival. An employees' new role will include active participation in the process of prioritizing.

Incremental. Incremental or stretch goals will soon be a matter of routine rather than an exception. Just as technological advancements require constant updating, goals will undergo incremental increases where the scope and degree cannot be predicted. The corresponding role change will require employees to be more flexible.

Multiple. With incremental goals becoming a norm, organizations must prepare for sudden add-on tasks, variations, change in direction and evaluations in quick succession. In other words, all business functions and processes must be in a constant state of transition. An employee's new role will include multi-tasking. As one trainer says, *"Everyone has to become a juggler!"*

The story so far

It is amply clear that none of these transitions can be accomplished without the corresponding role changes. While organizations have pacified a common employee outcry, *"That's not in my job description"* with a sarcastic, *"Welcome to the new world of business"*, this reaction undervalues the importance of the role-goal match.

Goal transformations are not stand-alone events; they ultimately affect the workforce. Organizations that fail to synchronize roles with the goals that house them will soon lose



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sight of the skills sets required to meet the objectives of the emerging stretch goals. While certain goals (those that are manageable and achievable) can still be accomplished without associated role changes, current business demands are such that even a shop-floor worker is required to multi-task!

In addition to underachievement of objectives, ignoring the reciprocity between roles and goals limits a trainer's understanding of the type and degree of behavioral and attitudinal changes required to achieve stretch goals. Training then fails to address the growth potential in employees. For training to be accurate and adequate, it has to link goals to roles. There are a few role-goal facts that a trainer must know.

- Traditional job descriptions are based on the assumption that the role-goal relationship is static in nature. Therefore, most of the current training programs target goal transformation while ignoring the associated role change.
- To achieve the objectives of more demanding or incremental goals, corresponding role changes are necessary.
- Role-goal metrics have a direct and huge impact on the workforce. While training has focused on the goal side alone, this lop-sided approach will not hold good in the future.

Role changes do not necessarily drive goal transformations. However, morphing goals can be achieved only when the associated role changes occur. The role-goal mismatch can affect the quality and effectiveness of training and ultimately the performance levels of the workforce.