Organizational Analysis Leads to Dissections of Recurrent Training Issues

Britta Lafont

University of Alabama at Birmingham

The Problem

The problem began in the Denver, Colorado, with one of nation's leading IT companies. This organization is focused on providing IT infrastructures in "austere locations" throughout the world (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 35). As an independent business, Variant Data Systems (VDS) provides support to "many external customers using full time and intermittent employees in domestic and overseas locations" (p. 35). Variant Data Systems was encountering problems meeting the expectations of their customer, Data Encryption Services (DES), with respect to the IT personnel that VDS would like to send to DES, in Iraq. The contract between VDS and DES stipulated that all "candidates who wish to be considered for a position on the DES contract must have an approved biography packet from the customer" (p. 37). There was a serious problem closing the loop between (a) the recruiters, who found the potential candidates and created a "package" which served as both application and interview (demonstrating qualifications and eligibility), and (b) the technical writer, whose job it was to ensure that each candidate's packet contained all of the necessary information, that it was reported accurately, and that all of the supporting documentation was present in the file. Unfortunately, the recruiters were consistently submitting incomplete packets, which required the technical writer to waste time trying to follow up on, and correct, these mistakes in order to meet the standards that were laid out in the contract. Recruiters did receive training about how to prepare a packet, but it had not proven to be effective. In the past, Variant Data Systems had a stellar record, being the former recipient of the IT Service and Support Award from the National Institutes of Business and Technology for two years in a row, but more recently VDS was not able to meet contractual obligations on a daily basis (p. 36).

The Characters

Variant Data Systems employed 232 full-time personnel and 1000 contract personnel. The case study mentioned several departments, including "operations, contracts pricing, legal, human resources, and staffing" (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 35). Each department had a senior director, with additional senior managers serving as direct reports. There were team leaders within each department who reported to the senior managers. The staffing department was the focus of the case study; it had 25 people, including "one senior director, two senior managers, one technical writer, three team leaders, recruiters, and staffing and deployment coordinators" (p. 36). Of the 25 staffing department employees, there were 16 recruiters. Of the recruiters, "ten [were] responsible for recruiting for the DES contract located in Iraq," and two team leaders supervised the ten recruiters (p. 36). In addition to these positions, the internal performance consultant, the client, DES, and the candidates for the positions in Iraq played a role in the case study (p. 36).

Later in the case study, names were given for some of the positions listed above. Lillian Rockwell was the internal consultant who was working with the staffing department to determine the problem(s) and create solutions to get the organization back on track (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 40). All of the other players named in this case study worked in in conjunction with staffing. Chelsea Bower was named as the Senior Director of Operations, and she and Lucy Hughes were giving Lillian direction about the project (pp. 42 & 44). Lucy Hughes was the senior director of the staffing department. Sadie Altman, one of the two managers in the department, was in charge of recruiting. Dez Whitman was one of two team leaders who supervised the recruiters for the DES contract. In the case study, Dez Whitman was deliberately unhelpful to Lillian, the consultant. Kelsey Parker in one of the recruiters on Dez's team; he had been let go previously for poor performance and was well-known for spending an inordinate amount of his time chatting with co-workers about non-work-related topics. Steven Peters and Heather Beck were also recruiters on Dez's team. Heather had two more years on the job than Steven, who had been in recruiting for just six months. Max Austin was the technical writer who was struggling to maintain the standards on the contract with little to no support (p. 40).

The Issues

A major factor in the case study was the poor training situation. Despite training by, and repeated feedback from, the technical writer, recruiters consistently submitted candidate biography packets that fell below standards for submission to the client, DES (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 37). Upon closer inspection, the training was inadequate for the following reasons: (1) minimal formal instruction with no application exercises during training (a one-hour lecture-style presentation); (2) very little time set aside for training of new recruiters; (3) most learning was carried out by trial and error; (4) though systems, processes, and procedures change, experienced recruiters did not have any annual training to continue to grow professionally; (5) there were no standards for selection of the recruiters who were "shadowed" by new recruits for on-the-job-training (pp. 38 & 41); (6) the handbook for new recruiters was outdated and obsolete (pp. 41-42);(7) and when the consultant observed cross-training efforts by one group of recruiters to another, the presentation was not well-prepared or accurate (subject matter expert was not consulted to help prepare the training) (p. 41).

The organizational structure was also part of the problem. Early in the case study, the authors reported that the departments of VDS operated as “windowless silos” with a traditional vertical view which “severely limits the organization’s ability to mature because managers work against each other rather than together; [and where] meetings between departments become activity reports rather than engaging partners in the battle against competitors” (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 36). This lack of mutual cooperation and accountability trickled down the organization. The recruiters did not respond to appropriate requests from the technical writer. These employees did not hold themselves, or each other, to the standards (pp. 41-42). Most disturbing, one of the team leaders essentially boycotted efforts to solve departmental performance issues, even though the consultant was reporting directly to the Senior Director or Operations (pp. 42 & 44). Weak accountability within the organization compounded the training problem since the recruiters were meant to learn by trial and error, but there was no incentive to improve and no penalty for continued failure; recruiters did not learn from their mistakes and substandard work continued to be the norm (p. 38).

Along with training issues and organizational structure/culture, a significant contributor to the lack of accountability was the absence an efficient information management system. When recruiters submitted a substandard candidate packet, the tracking method in place created more work for the technical writer who was trying to obtain missing data. It did not allow him to document the errors of recruiters to identify where additional training was necessary. The technical writer was spending excessive amounts of time, personally following up on errors, but recruiters continued to repeat the same mistakes (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 38). Unfortunately, the submission of substandard packets did not allow candidates to be processed, even if they were qualified; so greater numbers of candidates had to be reviewed to fill the positions. This situation was a double problem: more work without the results and the possibility of missing out on excellent candidates due to paperwork errors by recruiters (p. 38). The way that the system was designed, recruiters were rewarded for a greater number of submissions and not penalized for mistakes, so there was no incentive to improve (p. 52).

From a positive perspective, the technical writer was a dedicated and valuable employee. He was quite an asset with his wealth of knowledge. No doubt, his willingness to meet standards and his technical expertise was useful on projects like the update of the recruiting manual. The company would have been in serious trouble without him standing in the gap, but he seemed very fatigued by his position. Executives should know they must invest in making the performance improvements successful, or they could lose him; then the contract for DES (and many others) might be at risk since no one else seemed able fulfill the contract requirements. One employee should not be completely irreplaceable. Investing the professional growth through training and accountability measures and providing a useful data management system would distribute the responsibility for contract compliance more evenly, which could decrease the likelihood of a hopeless work situation driving him away. In the same sense, if the recruiters were well trained and motivated, and the data was easily managed, the department could withstand his departure, should it take place. This fact should provide the consultant with some leverage or negotiating power—the organization should feel a sense of urgency about supporting these important interventions because now is not the time for stop-gap measures.

The Facts

Some facts were easy to overlook in the first reading of the case study. For example, the management of information did not seem to be as much a priority as the training problems, but with deeper analysis, it became obvious that being able to document errors by employees is part of following up on training. The lack of accountability was obvious in other ways, from the beginning, because the recruiters continued to make the same mistakes over and over. However, after reading the case study several times, a concern about regular employee evaluation emerged. Other than the formative feedback about the errors in the candidate packets and discussion of the "lack of accountability," there was no specific mention of employee evaluations, annual or otherwise. The study said that the recruiters were responsible for meeting one accountability measure: quantity (the number of personnel submitted into the system and the number of packets submitted to Max) (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 52). The case study seemed to say that they could not be penalized, but were they able to be rewarded? If neither was true, what was done with this information? The answer was not clear, but the lack of self-improvement efforts on the parts of the recruiters suggested that there was no long-term reward or consequence related to performance. The consultant was planning to submit a proposal for accountability metrics, and does create a plan to reward high performers at the end of the case study (p. 52).

A key fact was that recruiting for the staffing department became a problem after the company reorganization and the subsequent downsizing of the recruiting staff in 2013. Apparently, the company had some period of time where they performed well enough to receive the IT Service and Support Award, but something had happened since then. Lately, the management had been made painfully aware of a critical performance issue: the organization could not be successful without qualified personnel in all departments, including the staffing department (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 37). The absence of a healthy recruiting corps was a great concern. The lingering question was: did the business reorganization and the layoff of experienced personnel contribute to the demise of the recruiting system (and to what degree)? The answer was not made clear. In addition, there was a lack of clarity about the number of recruiters who were laid off/hired during this period. On page 37, the case study said that the 2013 reorganization led to reduction of the department's recruiters *by half*, "reducing the number…to six," so presumably there were 12 recruiters before layoffs? Were the 12 recruiters dedicated to DES only, or was this the total number of recruiters, including those working on the DES contract? Then the text went on to say that, after seven months, six recruiters were hired, which should have brought the number of recruiters back to the original total, which must have been 12 (p. 37). However, the current number is 16 recruiters, with ten dedicated to the DES contract. The case study does not account for the differences: there were either four recruiters hired to take the total from 12 to 16, or the number of recruiters dedicated to DES went from 12, after the re-hiring, to ten due to some unmentioned change. After terrific scrutiny, this is still a mystery, though it is possible that the answer lies somewhere within the case study. On the other hand, this may be (1) an error in the numbering or (2) an omission of employment data in a section that gives very detailed information about the numbers of various recruiters within the staffing department. It is counter intuitive to be so detailed and ambiguous at the same time.

In terms of the structure of the organization, there was some degree of detail about the staffing department, but it would have been helpful to have a true organizational chart to put the staffing department and the importance of the case study into context. On page 35, several departments were listed, specifically "operations, contracts, pricing, legal, human resources, and staffing," but it was not clear as to how many other departments there might be, or if this was the entire list. The mention of the problem of windowless silos raised the value of this information—how did this attitude affect other departments? Would the performance interventions be company-wide?

It was not clear if compliance was a problem for the contracts handled by the six other recruiters, who did not work with DES. Likely, the same problems existed, since training was the same for all the recruiters. If so, the situation was even grimmer than depicted in the case study. Though there was talk about the change from international work to domestic work, it was unclear as to what percentage of work was done without the kind of arrangements that the DES contract stipulated (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 50). It is necessary for a performance improvement consultant to have a clear, general understanding of an organization, including information like the elements of its strategic plan—vision, mission, goals, strategies—along with any other critical issues that are driving change (Van Tiem at al, 2012, p. 133).

The Feelings

A performance improvement specialist could feel encouraged by this situation. There is a good deal of work to be done in this organization, but there was good support from the leadership. The Senior Director of Operations and the Senior Director of the department concerned were working directly with the consultant, committed to and encouraging her early in the consultation. Later, they disagreed with her suggestion to perform a needs assessment, but she carried this plan out, in spite of their opposition, which suggested that she had support from above the senior director level. The history of this company suggested a commitment to customer service, which, if it still exists, could serve as a motivating factor when it comes time to implement change. In addition, there was a very committed and expert subject matter expert to assist with the design of training content. At the team leader level, there was a problem employee at the helm. Dez Whitman was downright rude, disrespectful, unsupportive and oppositional to the improvement process. This could be a difficulty, since he was the leader of a team of recruiters who need good guidance. On the other hand, it was helpful to know, at the beginning, who was willing to work for improvement, and who was not willing to do what it takes. Dez did everyone a favor by making his position clear. He gave cause for termination. The decision is up to management. They can give him another chance, with the threat of termination to back them up, or they can terminate him and send a message to the rest of the recruiters. Either way, Dez's non-compliance put him at a distinct disadvantage, and this was fortunate for the consultant and the leadership of the company. The word that comes to mind with this whole situation is opportunity—here is an organization in need of help, where performance improvement has a chance to do good, to make a difference for people who want change.

The Angles

Looking at the situation from the perspective of the various parties involved is helpful. Max Austin, the technical writer was frustrated because he was spending an excessive amount of time dealing with the mistakes of others. In addition, the people he was spending time trying to help, and teach, were unwilling to learn. He was correct when he complained that the recruiting arm of the staffing department was staffed with underperformers who were "empowered to do what they want without any repercussions" (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 43). Max's concerns dealt directly with the stated problem that VDS was not able to meet contractual obligations on a daily basis (p. 36).

At the heart of the problematic employees was the team leader, Dez Whitman. Dez was a terrible leader, encouraging the wrong kinds of behaviors and giving an anti-example when it came to working for the good of the organization (by opposing the performance improvement consultant). He defended an under-performer, Kelsey Parker, enabling him to continue wasting time when he ought to be producing work (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 43). The team leader became "incredibly defensive" when it was asserted that recruiters did not know/understand the contract requirements; this attitude suggested that he was not interested in addressing the problem (p. 44).

The steering committee consisted of the Director of Operations, Chelsea Bower, Senior Director of Staffing, Lucy Hughes, Senior Manager of Recruiting, Sadie Altman, Recruiting Team Leader, Dez Whitman, and Technical Writer, Max Austin. The committee was frustrated, confused, and puzzled by the meeting. Some members, Chelsea and Lucy, opposed a needs assessment on the grounds that it might prolong the improvement process (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 44). The entire committee did not understand the problems, but they were frustrated that previous interventions had failed, nonetheless (p. 45). Sadie, the Senior Manager of Recruiting was grateful for Lillian's work and expressed appreciation for an "unbiased" perspective after the needs assessment was done (p. 48). Lillian, the consultant, dealt professionally with the opposition she received from the very people who needed her help. She was focused and persistent. It was helpful that she operated in a very neutral way. By keeping a low profile, she allowed the problems to speak for themselves.

The Resources

Available assets

There were many resources available for this performance improvement, including the people. First, though not specifically discussed, at the top of the organization there must have been support for performance assessment and intervention, or the process would have failed early on when resistance was mounted. Next, the internal performance improvement technologist was a major asset. Lillian pushed for a needs assessment to identify the issues. She observed, interviewed, and surveyed the staff. This “multi-layered approach” to needs assessment and performance analysis helped her to design and develop interventions (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 39). Finally, though the case does not specify, surely Max Austin contributed as a subject matter expert and was likely an excellent resource. Throughout the case, Max Austin had been like a one-man army, expert and resolute, in spite of tremendous opposition.

The text said that instructional and non-instructional interventions were developed “to promote change among recruiters’ efficiency and accuracy in locating qualified personnel.” A mandatory formal training unit was prepared which is focused on institutional knowledge and provides directions to the organization’s resources (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 39). “Non-instructional interventions include a communication plan, knowledge management database, accountability metrics, and an internal advancement plan” (p. 39). The internal advancement plan will reward recruiters who develop professionally by expanding their understanding of the job and contract requirements; this plan allows for recruiters to advance via a ranking system, which will require them to master certain information in order to advance through basic, intermediate, advanced, and expert levels (p. 39).

Assets needed to resolve the performance problems

Comprehensive plans for instructional and non-instructional interventions were developed to address the training, accountability, and communication issues that plagued Variant Data Systems. It sounds as if these plans are ready to roll out. Yet, the interventions designed and developed by the performance improvement specialist are broad and significant. Before enacting such a sweeping transformation, a change management plan should be created and launched. Going forward, continued support by the organization will be needed to implement and maintain these performance interventions. A long-term commitment to comprehensive evaluation is necessary to analyze the success of the interventions on an on-going basis and to make appropriate modifications when necessary.

The Recommendation

The initial concern was the ability of the recruiters to meet contractual obligations on a daily basis (p. 36). Taking a closer look, the performance improvement professional performed a needs assessment and developed a cause analysis. She determined that the continued errors in the applicant packet were due in part to a knowledge gap, but there were other significant factors at play as well. Lillian has created a comprehensive plan to address gaps in knowledge, motivation, environment, and communication. The plan promises to be very helpful, but based on the specifics given in the case study, some additional interventions targeting the environment should be implemented, a change management plan must be created and implemented, and thorough and on-going evaluation must be made a high priority.

Additional interventions targeting the environment

The environment of an organization is composed of the world, the workplace, the worker, and the work (Van Tiem at al, 2012, p. 146). The human resources department is conspicuously absent from this case study, yet this group should play a major role in managing and encouraging many of the necessary workplace improvements and interventions targeting the work and the worker at Variant Data Systems. “Talent management is a new way of looking at human resource management…[where] employees are empowered to think and act while they create a unique brand of value for the organization” (Van Tiem et al., 2012, p. 326). Developing a talent management mindset would be a paradigm shift for VDS and should be implemented in three specific areas: staffing, employee development and retention. Talent management sees people as a critical and invaluable resource, therefore a high priority is placed on strategic staffing and personnel planning—poor performers like Kelsey would not be considered for rehire from a talent management perspective. While accountability metrics, a communication plan, and an internal advancement plan are in the works, a shift in organizational culture is needed. With talent management, employee development (including training) is seen as the dual responsibility of the employer and the employee—workplace culture should encourage employees to invest in themselves in order to work at the highest level (p. 329). Retention of top talent is a priority in talent management as part of the strategic personnel plan (p. 330). No apparent efforts have been made to retain Max; he seems to do a thankless job, but he is the kind of employee that VDS needs to cultivate and encourage. Adopting a talent management mindset would also work against the current problem of “windowless silos” since the goals are cross-departmental and would encourage an organizational culture that values working together to benefit employees for the long-term health of the organization.

Additional workplace improvement should arise from specific talent management interventions dealing with employee training, employee development, career development, and organizational development (Van Tiem et al., 2012, p. 329). Regarding both formal training and on-the-job training planned at VDS, the recruiters would also benefit from just-in-time assistance through job aids, like up-to-date contract specification checklists, from coaching by skilled mentors, and from social learning networks within the organization (Dirksen, 2016, pp. 245 & 261). Since the recruiters' and team leaders' attitudes tend to be self-serving, and motivation for excellence is low, employees would benefit from team-building activities, engagement of respected opinion leaders who model motivation and excellence, and development of the belief that being team-oriented and working to improve the organization would be "useful" to them, personally (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 36; Van Tiem et al., 2012, p. 329; Dirksen, 2016, pp. 219, 222-223, & 225).

Change management

"Change management is 'a process whereby organizations and individuals proactively plan for and adapt to change'" (Van Tiem et al., 2012, p. 61). Leaders, including the Senior Director of Operations and the Senior Director of Staffing, who opposed the needs assessment and the DES team leader who refused to participate in it, displayed resistance to the performance intervention consultant. This evidence of resistance is indicative of the need for a change management program. There are many models for change interventions, but three seem to apply most directly to this situation. Lewin's Three Stages of Change model directs organizations to unfreeze-transition-refreeze, which tend to mitigate "workforce resistance to change" by approaching change predictably and methodically (p. 64). Business Process Re-Engineering is a "top-down approach for rethinking and redesign of competitive advantage," and Kotter's 8-Step Model to Organizational Change posits that leaders "must lead by example for change initiative to be successful" (p. 64). Either Business Process Re-Engineering (BPR) or Kotter's 8-Step Model could be helpful to this organization considering the previous attitudes of leadership. However, since BPR is especially helpful "when organizations exist in a competitive or fast-changing environment" like Variant Data Systems, a combination of BPR and Lewin's process of unfreeze-transition-refreeze, which addresses resistance, would be likely to manage change well for this particular organization (p. 64).

Thorough and on-going evaluation

The internal performance improvement technologist has already begun to use evaluation for the improvement process at Variant Data Systems, beginning with the needs assessment as part of her performance analysis (p. 44). "Needs assessment provides data about gaps in results, and therefore sets up the evaluation framework to be used when evaluating the solutions that were implemented to close such gaps" (Kaufman, Guerra-López, Leigh, & Watkins, 2008, p. 9). Later, while interviewing personnel, meta-evaluation allowed the consultant to change the format to a take-home questionnaire because the process wasn't working as she had expected (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 45). Meta evaluation examines evaluation, like interviews, to "determine the quality of their processes and findings…[and meta evaluation] may be conducted for formative or summative purposes…A formative meta evaluation serves to improve the evaluation while it is underway" (Cooksy & Caracelli, 2009, p. 2).

Lillian's needs assessment could be the first step in a more methodical plan for comprehensive evaluation. Brinkerhoff's Six-Stage Model begins with the Needs and Goals stage, which measures the "value and importance of the problems or opportunities that trigger the intervention" (Van Tiem et al., 2012, p. 533). Brinkerhoff's second stage ensures formative feedback concerning the Design of the intervention as it responds to the identified needs and goals. More formative evaluation of "the installation and implementation of the performance intervention" occurs during the Operation stage (third). Evaluation of Learning occurs in the fourth stage, with a summative assessment of "the level of the user's knowledge, skills, and attitudes when he or she first uses the intervention on the job" (p. 533). Comparative evaluation measures the value of the intervention over its lifetime (p. 535). Stages five and six are comparative evaluations since Usage and Endurance (stage five) measures "how well the performance achieves the intended result over time, and Payoff (stage six) measures "the return on investment of the intervention" (p. 533). Having a comprehensive plan from the beginning will document successes and help explain failures. Brinkerhoff's model is "iterative," meaning its purpose is to change and improve the interventions as needed, as indicated by the evaluative data (p. 533).

The Lessons Learned

A very important lesson from this case study, which also ties back to Human Performance Improvement, is that organizational structure sets the tone for organizational culture. The word "silo evokes an image of an invisible but windowless tower surrounding vertically stacked groups [preventing them] not just from interacting with one another, but from even being able to see another group's perspective" (Espinosa & Parada, 2014, p. 4). When departments and teams prioritize vertical relationships, if reporting relationships are the only channels of communication, organizational silos can occur. In the case study, the departmental goals encouraged managers to work against one another and the primary purpose of meetings between departments was to report information, rather than to work together on common objectives (Ross & Stefaniak, 2015, p. 36). In fact, the organization did not seem to set common goals, but fixed personal and departmental goals only (p. 51). Organizational silos create "an unconscious state of mind and mentality that takes on a life of its own. Silos result in the splitting of organisational artefacts (sic) and relationships, and impact negatively on relationship forming between individuals and within teams" (Cilliers & Greyvenstein, 2012, p. 1).

Organizational silos can allow one department to undercut the goals of another. In some cases, organizational silos can undermine the goals of the entire organization. Several years ago, on a United States Marine Corps (USMC) base, the Naval Dental Battalion, which was assigned to provide oral health care of the Marines stationed there, made a request. The dental battalion questioned the sale of tobacco at the Naval Exchange (NEX) and shoppettes and asked if the sale of tobacco products on base could be terminated. The dental battalion explained that tobacco, even in moderation, has ill effects on the oral and general health of Marines. "Tobacco use reduces soldiers' physical fitness and endurance and is linked to higher rates of absenteeism and lost productivity. In addition, service members who use tobacco are more likely to drop out of basic training, sustain injuries and have poor vision, all of which compromise troop readiness" (Tobaccofreekids.org, 2018). In all branches of the service, including the Marine Corps, the health of each individual is critical to the success of the organization. The stated purpose of the USMC is: "The Marine Corps defends the people of the United States at home and abroad. To do that, we make Marines who win our nation's battles and return as quality citizens" (United States Marine Corps, 2018).

One of the goals of the dental battalion was to promote tobacco cessation. Tobacco cessation is beneficial to the individual as well as the entire military organization. "Interviews with military leaders and junior enlisted military personnel reveal that easy access to cheap cigarettes on military installations is viewed as one way the military promotes a culture where tobacco use is accepted" (Tobaccofreekids.org, 2018). Thirty-six to forty percent of current military members who smoke report they began smoking after joining the military, with a 2011 study finding that the Marine Corps had the highest rate of tobacco use among U.S. military services. Despite the compelling arguments for terminating the sale of tobacco products on the base, the request was denied. Morale, Recreation, and Welfare (MWR) oversees the NEX and shoppettes. Proceeds from sales at NEX locations are received by MWR to fund its programs (Nexcom, 2018). MWR responded to the dental battalion that the sale of tobacco products provided substantial income for them and they needed to continue to sell the products for their own funding purposes. The organizational silo that was MWR was more invested in providing income than in contributing to the welfare and mission of the larger organization. The lesson of the organizational silo is that it is easy to lose sight of the mission of the organization when we are focused more on our own well-being.

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