

Performance Feedback: a powerful decision making tool

Even with the most current data and a beneficial economic climate, lifelong learning programs often find themselves unable to improve their organizational performance. In the following article, Rich Rexeisen espouses performance feedback as a tool for improving this organizational performance. The author asserts that performance feedback aids in complex decision making process at an organizational level when it incorporates human feedback. Rexeisen sees the performance feedback technique of “debriefing” as a solution to incorporating human feedback into any lifelong learning organization’s decision making process.

Abstract

Performance feedback is essential to the success of every organization. The more dynamic the environment is, the more crucial it is that organizations have a systematic process for monitoring and assessing the overall efficiency and effectiveness of their program decisions. Although the measurement of student enrollment, average class size, cancellation rates, retention rates, market share, P&L, student satisfaction and related student outcomes all provide useful information, they fall far short of what is needed to help administrators improve their operating performance.

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An organization can, for example, do everything right and still see student enrollment decline. Unexpected economic conditions can postpone students from taking elective (non-credit) classes, government funding can be curtailed (reducing available grants and scholarships) and larger social/cultural trends can eventually overwhelm the best intentions of individual organizations. Of course the opposite can also occur; an organization can do everything wrong and still see student enrollment increase. A common saying in the field of finance is that everyone is a genius in a bull market. The truth is that decisions are usually made in a complex and interdependent environment and it is very difficult to tease out the causal relationships that exist between individual decisions and observed outcomes.

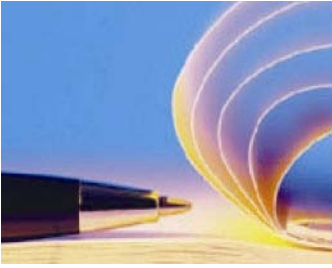
In an ideal world, decision-makers would simply receive a report that would instruct them which decisions result in the most effective outcomes. Regrettably, such a report would have to be based on rather complex and costly experimental designs. For most of us, the ideal world exists only as an aspiration and we must continue to make our decisions under conditions of uncertainty and scarce resources. Having said all of this, there is a relatively easy and robust technique for approximating causality and when used on a recurring basis, it can facilitate organizations down a path of continuous improvement. The technique is formally known as a post-mortem, although some organizations prefer to use the term “program debriefing.”

A post-mortem, or debriefing, uses a brainstorming technique similar to a focus group. Shortly after the completion of a scheduled program, a group of interested stakeholders is gathered to discuss what they have learned from the most recent activity.

For example, the decision-maker, her staff, potential vendors or students might be involved in the discussion. As a general rule, there will be between three and eight people involved in the meeting. Whenever possible, organizations are encouraged to schedule their debriefings during the initial planning process for their programs.

The debriefing uses seven basic guidelines:

1. Participants should be instructed to avoid personalizing past actions. The purpose of the debriefing is to provide constructive group feedback and is not intended to place blame or even credit on any given individual.
2. Some experts believe the physical setting can be an important moderator of an effective post-mortem. The setting should be relaxed and modestly informal.
3. One member of the group should be designated as the group facilitator and another member as the note taker. The moderator should encourage everyone to contribute as much as possible and should take advantage of such common group phenomena as: synergies between ideas, serendipity or spontaneity and the snowballing of ideas. Ideally, the facilitator will have some training or experience working with groups, but every organization can benefit from the technique no matter the level of proficiency of the facilitator.
4. The debriefing will usually last between 45 to 95 minutes. Large programs sometimes need more time, but it is better to break the subject material down into smaller sound bites. It does little good to make everyone tired during the experience.
5. The debriefing usually begins with a brief summary of the program under review and reminds everyone what the intended and actual outcomes are for the program.
6. The remaining discussion focuses on the following four key questions:
 - a. What worked well in the program?
 - b. What didn't work so well?
 - c. Why did things work or not work as intended? This is where the group will brainstorm or render explicit their assumptions of causality.
 - d. Finally, what will we do differently next time or what actions will we preserve?
7. A group summary of the meeting is then discussed, agreed upon, or clarified and then agreed to. A copy of the summary is retained for future reference. As a general rule the summary is no longer than two to three pages and often can be as short as a paragraph. When studied in



retrospect, the summaries can also become a useful tool to see how well an organization is learning from its own feedback.

In conclusion, the post-mortem is a powerful technique that should be regularly used by every organization. The technique is robust enough to be applied to a wide range of activities including marketing, management, issues of policy or any other decision of substance.

Advocates of lifelong learning must remain ever vigilant to identify methods that will help them to sustain a process of continuous improvement. To do less is to undermine the virtues of a positive learning experience and expresses vicariously a set of values inconsistent with the promotion of lifelong learning. If experience is a predictor of the future performance, administrators and managers alike will find the post-mortem technique to be a powerful addition to their decision-making toolbox.