

## **Coaching Within a Context\***

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PTC Quarterly, Vol. VI, Number 3 September 2010

Creating effective and efficient learning opportunities within an organization relies on two foundational elements: clearly understanding the parameters of successful performance for the individual being developed and providing this individual with an appropriate developmental opportunity. This article will look at the case of leadership development in particular with the hope that the ideas presented can be expanded to include development in other areas. We will begin by first taking a look at understanding the requirements of successful performance and then examining an approach to providing meaningful and effective learning opportunities.

### Understanding the Parameters of Successful Performance

Deconstructing the elements of successful performance within a given sphere of activity has been historically the driving force in creating the foundations of development and assessment interventions. Within the area of work behavior, this process has begun by first defining the sphere of activity as a set of tasks, interpersonal relationships and process responsibilities which, depending on whether greater emphasis has been placed on the tasks or the relationships, is called either a “job” or a “role” (see for example Morgeson & Dierdorff, 2011 for a discussion of the differences between construing work analysis as job or role analysis).

Once the “job” or “role” has been defined, performance decomposition has taken two predominate forms:

- KSAOs – atomized lists of the knowledge, skills and abilities required of an individual to succeed at the task or role;
- Competencies – factor structures (either rationally or statistically derived) of behaviors that need to be exhibited to succeed at the give job or role.

Each of these approaches is an attempt to understand the “worker oriented” requirements for success in either a job or a role (Moregeson & Dierdorff, 2011; Harvey, 1991). Moregeson & Dierdorff draw attention to five distinct challenges with his approach. While Giumentì & Curnow (2009) and McCall (2011) similarly call attention to a number of defects with competency modeling.

While concurring with the specific concerns identified by these authors we find that the essential limitations with either the KSAO or Competency approach to understanding the parameters of successful performance are:

- Assumption of constancy: the requirement that a static state exists for the role or job, i.e. the identified tasks, relationships and responsibilities do not evolve or do so within a very limited tolerance;
- Assumption of normativity: the requirement that there is one best way to succeed at the job or role;
- Assumption of sufficiency: the requirement that all KSAOs or competencies be mastered and that no other actions on the part of the individual can compensate for deficiencies.

A KSAO or Competency approach can only be successful in identifying the foundations of success within a give job or role if these three assumptions are met. Any of the following will cause this deconstructive approach to be ineffective in defining the parameters of successful performance:

- Changes to the job/role or its setting (e.g. changes in the organization, its environment or the substance of the job/role);
- The existence of multiple behavior paths to successful performance;
- The existence of additional behaviors or other supports which can be incorporated in an individual's behavioral repertoire and used to compensate for deficiencies in one or more of the identified KSAs or competencies.

#### An Alternative Approach

Reconceptualizing the foundations of successful performance as 'Context' can permit the creation of a structure within which to assess and develop individuals while avoiding the three critical limiting assumptions of: normativity (vs. equifinality), constancy (vs dynamism) and sufficiency (vs compensatory performance).

The concept of Context can be defined as encompassing both the concepts of "sphere of action" and "role" while permitting dynamism, equifinality, and compensatory performance. An individual's performance Context can be defined by: 1) Outcome Responsibilities and 2) Object Relations Set

Outcome Responsibilities refer to the outcomes or end-states the individual is responsible for achieving. This is in comparison to process responsibilities that are based on what the individual is responsible for doing. For example, a manager can have the outcome responsibility of having his team exceed a given sales target or she can have the process responsibility of setting goals for each team member.

Object Relations Set includes interpersonal relationships (e.g. peers, clients, etc.) but also includes any "object" with which the individual engages (e.g. databases, organizations, work processes, etc.)

Object relations are defined by the following parameters:

- Psychological distance (the real and perceived "closeness" of the actor and the object, defined through frequency of interaction, level of trust or confidence, and approachability)

- Affective quality (positive or negative emotional states generated between the actor and the object)
- Directional impetus (do interactions typically originate with the actor, the object or bi-directionally)
- Influence (extent to which the actor and the object can effect change in the behavior of the other)

### Creating Effective Development Opportunities

Seligman (2002) applies the physiological concepts of tonic and phasic states to explain the mediocre performance of typical psychological measurement in explaining performance. According to Seligman, measures of, for example electrical impulses in muscles, are not directly relatable from their tonic (or resting) state to their phasic (or in motion) state. Similarly, he suggests, assessments of behavior and performance that are made in a tonic state, such as tests or interviews, have only limited relationships to behavior and performance in a phasic state (actually engaged in performance).

This line of thinking can be extended to development to explain the limited utility of learning when an individual is in a tonic state (e.g. a classroom or reading a book) vs the pronounced increase in learning when the individual is in a phasic state (e.g. living through an experience). McCall (2011) provides an overview of the limitations of classroom development programs and the desirability of experience based learning opportunities as they relate to leadership development.

For the purposes of this discussion, an individual's phenomenology will be thought of as divided into two states of being:

- Existence (tonic psychological state): in which the individual repeats familiar, consistent patterns of behavior within established contexts;
- Experiences (phasic psychological state): in which an individual has the opportunity to display novel behavior patterns within unfamiliar Contexts.

Learning and the opportunity to assess an individual are much more likely during an Experience. In order for an Experience to move an individual to phasic (in motion) state and have the potency to elicit either learning or assessment we find the following aspects must be present:

- Novelty: new parameters within which the individual must operate including:
  - Content – the purpose, substance or process within which behavior occurs
  - Setting – the environmental conditions within which behavior occurs
  - Scope/volume- the range of impact of the generated behavior
- Elevated affect: substantial change in the individual's arousal state

- Either positive or negative affective change is effective
- Opportunity for proactivity: situation must permit behavior innovation
- Inherent Feedback: outcome feedback must be generated within the experience.

#### A Leadership Development Example Combining These Two Concepts

To put these theories into practice the authors developed a global leadership development paradigm which we call Coaching within a Context. The resulting development program, MyLead, has now been in existence for three years with over 500 participants. Using the concept of Context to understand the parameters of successful performance and analysis was conducted of the leadership roles in a variety of disciplines within a global professional services organization.

Based on this analysis a number of simulated situations were developed each with containing the elements of novelty, elevated affect, opportunity for proactivity and inherent feedback. Situations were presented to individuals via a web delivered assessment center-like simulation in which interactions with various “characters” occurred via phone at the direction and discretion of the participant over three separate one week periods. During each simulation period the participant could interact with objects (other individuals playing clients, colleagues, subordinates, bosses, etc.; data; business process; etc.) in any manner they chose. Interactions with individuals resulted in short feedback reports that were posted in real-time. In weeks between simulation events, an executive coach reviewed the actions of the participant both in terms of their outcomes and the object relations and provided an framework for feedback and jointly understanding and changing behavior patterns.

Tables 1 and 2 below show the outcomes of the program. We believe that these results indicate that this approach to leadership develop to be engaging and effective over time. Based on these results we believe that this approach warrants investigation into areas beyond leadership development.

Table 1. Participant reactions – six months post intervention. n=467

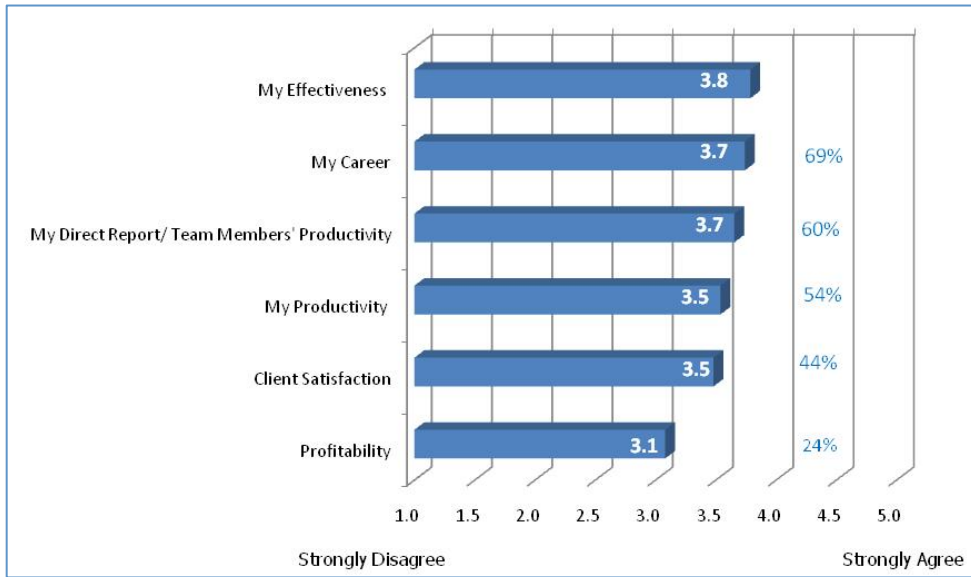
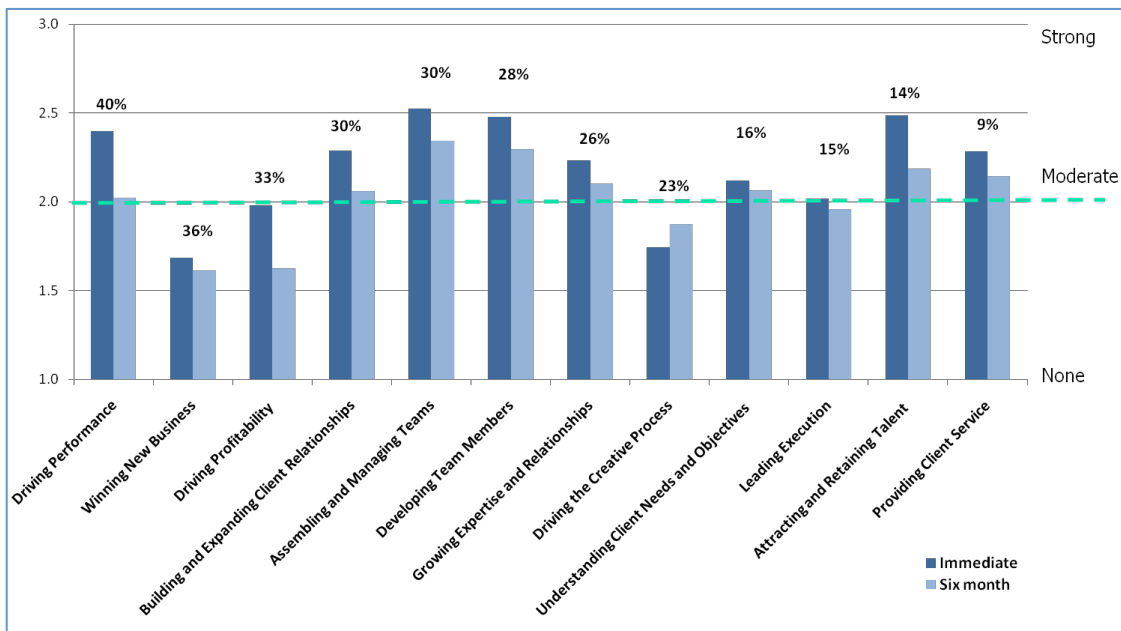


Table 2. Areas of Participant Improvement Over Six Months Follow-up. N-467



\* This article is partially based on a presentation at the 25<sup>th</sup> annual SIOP Conference entitled Coaching Within a Context by Frank Guglielmo, Ph.D and Lynn Gracin Collins, Ph, D. April 2010.