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Preparing public administrators for an era of globalization and decentralization: a strategic-contingency approach

Blue Wooldridge

Abstract

For public sector management development professionals to be given the recognition and resources that we deserve, we must be seen to contribute to the organization's 'bottom-line', which is to prepare employees to perform at the level needed to achieve the organization's strategic mission and objectives. Governments can only respond effectively to the challenges of increased globalization and decentralization if we, as instructors in schools and institutes of administration, prepare adequate learning experiences for public administrators. The objectives of this article are to describe the steps in my strategic-contingency approach to management development, an instructional design approach which links the strategic mission of the organizations in which our clients work to the instruction that we prepare. I believe that following the steps of my strategic-contingency approach to management development will produce a curriculum that is more responsive to the needs of the client organization and to the participants. Such instruction will not only benefit the organizations we serve but will also enhance our professional reputations.

Introduction

Recent issues of the *International Review of Administration Sciences* (*IRAS*), the premier journal of international administrative sciences and public administration, have documented the world-wide trends towards globalization and decentralization and the impact of these trends on the performance of public administrators (see, for example, Font, 2000; Rosenbaum et al., 2000; de Vries, 2001; Drewry and Chan, 2001; Geri, 2001; Harlow, 2001; Manning, 2001; Saner, 2001; Bissessar, 2002;

Blue Wooldridge is an Associate Professor in the School of Government and Public Affairs, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, USA. CDU: 35.08:382(100)

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formance'. DeNisi and Griffin (2001: 266) divide training from development by defining training as 'a planned attempt by an organization to facilitate employee learning of job-related knowledge, skills, and behaviors', whereas development, 'on the other hand, usually refers to teaching managers and professionals the skills needed for both present and future jobs'. Sherman et al. (1998: 214) reinforce this division by pointing out that 'many experts make a distinction between *training*, which tends to be more narrowly focused and oriented toward short-term performance concerns, and *development*, which tends to be oriented more toward broadening an individual's skills for the future responsibilities' (emphasis in original). Nadler (1994: 7) also makes a division in his definition but between training and education whereby training is 'learning related to the present job of the individual, and "education" is related to a future but defined job for which the individual is being prepared'. Jackson and Schuler (2003: 351) define training as 'improving competencies needed today or very soon. Usually the main objective of training is to improve performance in a specific job by increasing employees' skills and knowledge.'

Over the years I have developed the following definition: management education and training is an organized learning experience designed to enhance the ability of current or future managerial employees to achieve the desired levels of performance in specific jobs necessary in order for their organization to achieve its strategic mission. This definition has led me to develop the Wooldridge's Strategic-contingency Approach to Management Education and Training. This approach suggests that the specific design and delivery of a learning experience effective in achieving the strategic mission and objectives of the client organization should be *contingent* on the specific learning objectives to be achieved and the anticipated learning styles of the participants. The *strategic* component of my definition stresses that the learning objectives of the training must be related to the strategic mission of the organization from which the training participants come; and the *contingency* component that there is 'no one best way' – transposed, of course, from the organizational theory literature – stresses that the design of an effective training experience (including the choice of trainers, the instructional methods/strategies employed, and the exercises and assessment methods used) must be contingent (depend) on the learning objectives to be achieved and the anticipated learning styles of the training participants (Wooldridge, 1978, 1988; Wooldridge and Bracey, 1999). Some of the steps in this strategic-contingency approach will be discussed in the following sections.

Steps in the management education and training design and delivery process

As Sims (1993: 2) points out, 'for many years, training had connotations of rote mechanical learning. Now we know it is a systematically planned approach to teaching knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes, with certain important features.' Many writers in the field of training design have advocated their own systematic approaches. Nadler (1994) has his 'Critical Events Model'. The American Society for Training and Development (Rothwell, 1996) has developed the Human Performance Improvement Process; there is the Ashridge model for the role of training and development (Woodall and Winstanley, 1998); Rogoff (1987) describes her 'Training

organizational resources in taking advantages of environmental opportunities and repulsing threats' (Dodge and Eadie, 1982: 2).

It is important to remember that, unlike some other resources on training design that stresses the importance of planning (Sims, 1993), my model focuses on the strategic planning of the organization(s) from which the training participants will originate *not* on the strategic planning of the training organization.

In the strategic planning workshops I have designed and delivered recently, both in Eastern Europe and in the United States, I identified the following steps in the strategic planning process:

Step 1: *Identify stakeholders.* Stakeholders are any persons or groups outside the organization that can make a claim on the organization's attention, resources or output or which are affected by the organization's output. Most public organizations have many persons and groups who feel they have a stake in the organization and hold expectations about the performance of that organization. In many respects, the success or failure of the organization (even survival in some cases) is determined by how well these stakeholders are satisfied by the performance of the organization (Gordon, 1993; Bryson, 1995).

Step 2: *Environmental scan and analysis.* This step involves identifying the pertinent factors in the environment external to the organization and projecting their future shape and magnitude. 'The differences [between strategic planning and other organizational long-range planning processes] have to do with the environment within which an organization does or will find itself, now and in the future, and with the overriding need organizations have ensure that they remain relevant and viable in that ever changing environment' (Chambers and Taylor, 1999: 14; brackets added) 'The training department must be able to forecast the future accurately if objectives are to be attained' (Sims, 1993: 29).

Step 3: *Implication analysis.* In this step, the public manager/planner assesses the present and future impact on the organization of the pertinent factors identified in step 2.

Step 4: *Analyze community/organization strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities (SWOT).* Here the organization identifies the major strengths of its community/organization, identifies the major weaknesses of its community/organization, and identifies the major opportunities and threats facing the community/organization.

Step 5: *Identification of community/organization needs.* Once the implication of the future tends on the organization has been recognized, the future needs of the community/organization can be identified.

Step 6: *Develop a statement of strategic mission.* 'The mission statement of an organization reflects its essential purpose – its "raison d'etre" ' (Gordon, 1993: 23). Examples of municipal mission statements that I have used in strategic planning for local government officials include:

> to be a community of first choice by its residents and to be the premier commercial cultural and light manufacturing hub in this region supporting the economic activities in the region.

- They provide direction to agency activities. Achievement of objectives would lead to reaching the strategic goal.
- They motivate. The goal-setting theory of motivation (Locke and Latham, 1984) suggests that specific 'goals' have a greater motivating influence than 'do best' goals.
- They facilitate the generating and analytical comparison of alternatives.
- They facilitate continuous program monitoring.
- They provide a basis for post-activity evaluation.

As a leading writer in policy analysis once said:

> It is crucially important to chose the 'right' [goal and] objective, more important than it is to make the very best choice. A wrong objective means the wrong problem is being tackled. The designation of the wrong alternative may merely mean that something less than the 'best' policy is being recommended. (Quade, 1989)

Step 10: *Generate and analytically assess alternatives.* Once the strategic objectives have been identified, the next step is to generate a list of possible alternatives for reaching the objectives. Each alternative should be assessed, at a minimum, using Life Cycle, Present Worth Costing Principles; estimating the benefits/effectiveness; analysis for Risk and Uncertainty; and Sensitivity Analysis.

Step 11: *Select the 'Best Alternative(s)'.* Based on this analysis, the organization can identify the 'best' alternatives to be used as the organization's strategies for achieving its mission. These strategies form the basis for the rest of the steps in the 'Strategic-contingency Approach to Management Education and Training'.

Identify performances needed to achieve the strategic mission

Once the organization's strategic mission objectives and strategies have been determined, the next step is to identify the performances and level of performance required to achieve them.

There are many ways in which organizations can arrange their activities necessary to achieve their strategic mission. Organizations can arrange their activities by *purpose, function, customer, time, equipment, geography, etc.* Each organizational arrangement has consequences for specific job performance. After the organization has determined how it will organize and structure its mission-achieving activities, *job analysis* must be carried out to determine specific job performance requirements. I believe that job analysis is the basis of all human resource management (personnel) decisions, including management development and training activities.

Well-carried out job analysis results in the specification of the desired level of job performance. Unfortunately, most traditional job descriptions and specifications are woefully inadequate in describing desired job performance. Perhaps the Results Orientated Descriptions (RODs) advocated by Klingner and Nalbandian (1997: 155–60), which includes not only expected performance but also states the standards of performance under specific working conditions, would improve the usefulness of job performance descriptions. Most training clients (program managers and supervisors) are very poor at describing the levels of performance desired of

Dessler (1997) adds another very important, for this article, purpose that job analysis can serve. He points out that this personnel and human resource management activity can

> provide information for training design, because job analysis information shows the skills, and therefore, the training that is required for performance.

There are three basis considerations in conducting a job analysis (DeNisi and Griffin, 2001). The first two are *determining information needs* (including job-related attributes such as specific skills, education, and training, work experiences and related jobs, physical characteristics and aptitudes); and *determining methods for obtaining information* (a variety of methods are used to collect job analysis information — the most common methods include the observations of task and job behaviors, interviews with job incumbents, and the use of questionnaires and check lists). Finally, there is *determining who will collect information* (in general, the responsibility of job analysis is jointly shared by three different individuals or groups: one is the line manger, the human resource department is also responsible for job analysis and, finally, the responsibility also partially lies with the job analyst who actually conducts the job).

Dessler (1997) elaborates on these generic principles of job analysis by suggesting that the following six steps are usually required:

Step 1: *Identify the use to which the information will be put, since this will determine the types of data you will collect and how you collect them.* A human resource specialist normally aims to collect one or more of the following types of information via the job analysis:

> *Work activities*: information is usually collected on the actual work activities performed, such as cleaning, selling, teaching, or painting. Such a list may also indicate how, why, and when the worker performs each activity.
>
> *Human behaviors*: information on human behaviors like sensing, communicating, decision-making, and writing may also be collected. Included here would be information regarding human job demands such as lifting weights, walking long distances, and so on.
>
> *Machines, tools, equipment, and work aids used*: included here would be information regarding products made, materials processed, knowledge dealt with or applied (such as finance or law), and services rendered (such as counseling or repairing).
>
> *Performance standards*: information is also collected regarding performance standards (in terms of quantity, quality, or speed for each job duty, for instance) by which an employee in this job will be evaluated.
>
> *Job context*: included here is information about such matters as physical working conditions, work schedule, and the organizational and social context — for instance, in terms of the number of people with whom the employee would normally have to interact. Also included here might be information regarding incentives for doing the job.
>
> *Human requirements*: finally, information is usually compiled regarding human

- *Job specification* is a list of a job's 'human requirements', i.e. the requisite education, skills, personality, and so on, which is another product of a job analysis. This focuses more on the individual who will perform the job. Specifically, a job specification indicates the knowledge, abilities, skills, and other characteristics that an individual must have to be able to perform the job.

Taken together then, the job description with all of its components should provide a parallel and mutually consistent set of information and details that focus on the job itself and the individual most likely to be successful performing that job.

Job descriptions would be more useful if they clarified the organization's expectations of employees and the linkage between tasks, standards, skill, and minimum levels of acceptable performance. These improved Results Oriented Job Descriptions (RODs), would contain the following information:

- *Tasks*: What behaviors, duties or functions are important to the job?
- *Conditions*: What things about the nature of the job or the conditions under which tasks are performed are particularly easy or difficult? What written guidelines or supervisory instructions are available to aid the employee in performing a task?
- *Standards*: What objective performance expectations are attached to each task, expressed in terms of standards of quantity, quality or timeliness, which are meaningfully related to organizational objectives?
- *SKAs:* What skills, knowledge, and abilities are required to perform each task at the minimally acceptable level?
- *Qualifications:* What education, experience, and/or other qualifications are needed to ensure that employees will have the necessary SKAs for task performance.

These results-oriented job descriptions provide clearer organizational expectations to employees. They encourage supervisors and employees to recognize that both standards and rewards can be contingent upon conditions. Results-oriented job descriptions focus on performance standards, the conditions that differentiate jobs and the linkage between standards, SKAs and qualifications. In doing so they resolve many of the problems attributed to traditional job descriptions.

Determine the 'performance gap' caused by a lack of competencies

Management education and training is usually called upon when there is a discrepancy between current (or future) required job performance and actual job performance. However, as Mager and Pipe (1984) point out in their approach to analyzing performance problems, there might be several causes of low performance. Formal management development and training is a solution to only one of these causes. Therefore, in the next step, it must be determined whether or not *the cause of the performance discrepancy is a skill deficiency*. Mager and Pipes's chart for analyzing performance gaps is a useful guide for this step. These authors ask a series of insightful questions once a performance gap has been identified. For example: Is the

(1991) discuss how the Delphi technique can be used to assess educational needs. They used Delphi with public sector executives in New Jersey to determine their assessment of educational needs and found that the iterative process made a difference, reflected in preferences changing over the three rounds. The Diagnostic Assessment of Lending Skills and Knowledge was developed by Robert Morris Associates to help bankers involved in the commercial lending process identify needs in seven critical areas (Hamm, 1995). Reeves (in the teaching of business ethics, 1990) and Niehoff and Whitney-Bammerlin (in the development of Total Quality Management educational programs, 1995) describe how Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives can be used in conducting needs assessments. In his taxonomy, Bloom describes six levels of cognitive educational objectives: (1) knowledge, (2) comprehension, (3) application, (4) analysis, (5) synthesis, and (6) evaluation. He then identifies action verbs for assessing students' ability for each level of learning. Niehoff and Whitney-Bammerlin (1995) discuss how a needs assessment can be conducted to determine where the participants are on the taxonomy and to sequence the activities during the educational experience. I use a similar process, at the first class meeting, to determine the self-assessed level of competency of doctoral students in organizational behavior and public–non-profit management courses.

In the USA, various needs-assessment document the desired performance of public administration practitioners. These assessments include the efforts of Kerrigan and Hinton (1970), the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (1975), Watt et al. (1973), Wyman (1981), and the National Training and Development Service (NTDS) (1975). In my report of this last endeavor, which I directed, and which used questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, I wrote: 'The educational needs identified in this assessment are those which, if met, will presumably contribute to effective performance of those who have . . . management responsibilities at the local level' (NTDS, 1975: 9).

Durant (1997) refers to this approach when course content and design is based on a needs assessment as 'backward mapping'. This 'backward mapping' of curriculum design requires the faculty 'to start by identifying what the "behavioral outcome" or student "product" of the program would look like. More precisely, what skills, knowledge bases and values should our student have to function in today's blame rich and credit poor public service?' (p. 406).

Identify behavioral 'SMART' learning objectives

A goal is a general statement of what the teacher hopes to accomplish during a course (Hannah and Michaelis, 1977). After the training goals have been specified, participant-oriented behavioral learning objectives (POBLOs) can be developed (Wooldridge, 1987, 2000). Mager (1962: 3) describes an objective as 'an intent communicated by a statement describing a proposed change in a learner – a statement of what the learner is to be like when he has successfully completed a learning experience'. Others have defined training objectives as 'a description of a performance you want learners to be able to exhibit before you consider them competent' or what the trainee should be able to accomplish after successfully completing the training program (Goldstein, 1974). My own concept of POBLOs, as difficult as it might be

objectives that reflect the familiarity, understanding, and *application* levels of knowledge. More than syllabi in the arts and sciences, the syllabus of a professional course should emphasize POBLOs that describe the ability to apply skills (Wooldridge, 1987).

Moreover, research has suggested that clearly articulated course objectives improve student learning (Serafin, 1990). She found that '[M]ore explicit course syllabus in terms of number of objectives, content, instructional resources and grading components represent greater information and instruction that are better capured and processed in the learning situation experienced by the students' (Serafin, 1990: 11). Her findings, of course, are completely compatible with the Goal Setting Cognitive Theory of motivation as suggested by Locke and Latham (1984, 1990), Latham and Locke (1991), and Tubbs (1986). 'Goal setting theory is based on the simplest of introspective observations, namely, that conscious human behavior is purposeful' (Latham and Locke, 1991: 212). The existence of a goal (objective) creates a tension that motivates individuals to achieve that goal. There are certain characteristics of a goal that strengthen the motivation: specific goals motivate more than 'do-best' goals; up to a point (the limits of an individual's ability) difficulty goals tend to lead to increased effort and performance (especially for high need achievers); goals that are accepted by the participants motivate more than those that do not (Tubbs, 1986; Latham and Locke, 1991). This is particularly important for my strategic-contingency model of education and training design since other research indicates that trainees accept and are more likely to use training if they perceive that it is job related.

After the goals and behavioral objectives for each administrative course have been clearly spelled out, the instructor should compare the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be gained from the course with those identified during the needs assessment stage.

Group learning objectives into useful categories and sequence the learning objectives

The next step in my Strategic-contingency Approach to Management Education and Training which I will discuss here is how to group the POBLOs, developed in the previous section, into meaningful categories and provide suggestions as how to sequence the resultant groups.

Several authors have suggested different categories in which to group learning objectives. McCleary and McIntyre (1972) suggested groups identified at specific levels of learning – familiarity, understanding or application combined with the type of learning to take place (technical, conceptual or human relational). Other authors have suggested such categories as: Knowledge Acquisition, Knowledge Retention, Acceptance, Changing Attitudes, Inter-personal Skills, and Problem-solving Skills (Carroll et al., 1972; Newstrom, 1980; Shoenfelt et al., 1991). Using common categories such as these are useful since these researchers have attempted to relate the effectiveness of various instructional strategies to each of these groups of learning objectives.

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