Using a Systems Analysis Framework to Improve Performance of the Ukrainian Center for Private Farmer Training and Outreach

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Abstract
A systems-based, two-dimensional matrix was used to analyze the organizational performance at the midpoint of a three-year USAID-funded private farmer training and outreach project established at a state agricultural university in Ukraine in collaboration with a US land grant university. Responses of project faculty and administrators to a set of 30 identical questions grouped under five performance variables - mission/goals, system design, capacity, motivation, expertise – were obtained through personal interviews. An interpreter assisted with translation, notes were made, and the interviews audio taped. Significant performance problems revealed included a hierarchical organization structure unsuited to responsive and relevant extension programming, issues of personnel workload, supervision, coordination and support, lack of clear, facilitative, and well-understood personnel and programming policies and procedures, unilateral decision making, lack of job mobility and enrichment, and salary and compensation inequities. Solution strategies to address the performance problems suggested are development of written documentation on personnel management and program development policies and procedures, development of needed educational curricula, and various measures to enhance human performance.
Organizational Context

The Ukrainian Center for Private Farmer Training and Outreach (Center) began in October 1998 as a Government of Ukraine-United States Agency for International Development (AID)–funded project to improve through outreach education the agricultural productivity of private farmers in Vinnitsa Oblast (state), Ukraine. Vinnitsa State Agricultural University (VSAU), where the Center is headquartered, World Laboratory (Ukraine Branch), and Louisiana State University Agricultural Center (Ag Center) are major partners in the project. By May 2000, about the midpoint of three years of AID funding, the Center, led by the University Rector and Ukrainian and U.S. project coordinators, had 15 U.S.-trained VSAU faculty, 13 raion specialists (similar to U.S. county agents), and 3 district supervisors organizing education programs for approximately 1,000 registered private farmers in the oblast.

It was expected that several factors, i.e., new democratic views grafted on traditional Soviet-era perspectives, the Center’s unique structure and work processes within a University hierarchy, and human relations issues would likely influence the performance of the Center. As such, the idea of analyzing the organization and work of the Center from an internal operations perspective to reveal performance problems and enable the administration and faculty to make adjustments in the remaining period of the Project seemed to have merit.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to assess the performance of the Center based on administrators’ and faculty perceptions of selected performance variables, i.e., mission/goals, system design, capacity, motivation, and expertise, and suggest solution strategies for performance problems.

Methodology

Multilevel models based on a systems approach have been proposed for assessing organizational performance. Rummler and Brache (1995) and Swanson (1994) include the same three performance levels – organizational, process, individual – in their models. They suggest examining performance variables at each level to assess performance. The Rummler-Brache model includes three variables – goals, design, management – while the Swanson model contains five variables – mission/goals, system design, capacity, motivation, expertise. An organization development performance model proposed by Cummings and Worley (2001) includes the organization and individual levels, and substitutes group for process in the other two models. Another difference is that there are 16 performance variables, some of which are the same, and others, such as organization culture and elements of social dynamics, which are different from the Rummler-Brache and Swanson models. Holton’s (1999) Integrated Taxonomy of Performance Domains attempts to reconcile the differences between the OD and the Rummler-Brache and Swanson models.

The Swanson model (Swanson, 1994) was considered most appropriate because it is specifically designed for training and education settings, and is more comprehensive, allowing for more detailed analysis. An adaptation of this model guided the design. The five performance variables at two performance levels – organization and individual – were included for analysis. Process, the third performance level, was excluded because standardized processes were either immature or had not been instituted.
Two 30-item schedules were used to personally interview administrators (organizational perspective) and university and raion faculty (individual perspective). Yes/no responses to certain items were probed for further explanation during the interviews.

Personnel of the Center comprised 8 administrators, and 25 university/raion specialists. All 8 administrators and 7 specialists were interviewed, either in the Project office or interviewee offices. An interpreter translated the questions and responses, notes were taken, and the interviews audio taped. The audio tapes were used to clarify or expand upon the recorded notes. No transcriptions were made. None of the interviewees objected to being recorded. They were assured that the interviews would be confidential, and that the analysis would not identify any particular individual. Each interview lasted 75-90 minutes on the average.

Data were analyzed for each of the five performance variables at two levels. Significant statements from responses to the interview questions were selected and organized by respondent group – faculty for the individual level perspective, and administrators the organization level perspective – and presented for each performance variable. Performance problems were inferred from the findings and solution strategies indicated.

Findings

**Performance variable: Mission/Goals.** Do the organizational mission/goals fit the reality of economic, political, and cultural forces? Are the professional and personal mission/goals of individuals congruent with the organizational mission/goals?

Knowledge of the Center’s mission/goals and work (strategic) plan. Individual faculty responses to the Center’s mission/goals varied and also differed from the written version, but were congruent in essence and spirit. The administrative view was futuristic and expansive of mission/goals.

Outcomes clearly stated and performance expectations known to faculty. Both faculty and administrators were aware of the Center’s stated outcomes, namely improvements in farming, changes among farmers, and sustainability of the Center. Administrators were concerned about the lack of work performance expectations or standards.

Understanding of job goals. Faculty stated individual job goals in different ways but the basic focus was servicing the needs of farmers. Administrators felt that faculty understanding of job goals could be better, and that specific standards identified in job descriptions were a means to accomplish this.

Effect of economic conditions, political climate, and cultural factors on the Center’s work. Faculty and administrators felt that current political and free market economic forces had the potential for future benefits but currently hindered accomplishment of the Center’s mission/goals. Both external and internal politics were implicated. Tradition and lack of understanding of the concept of private ownership were seen as barriers to realizing the Center’s mission/goals.

**Performance variable: System Design.** Does the organizational system provide structure and policies supporting desired performance? Does the individual face obstacles that impede job performance?

Appropriate and effective organizational structure. Both groups commended the new organizational structure established April 1, 2000 as effective and appropriate. Most negative comments concerned the consulting or teaching function. Also, there was concern regarding
strict adherence to a formal communication and coordination system for technical assistance from consultants, and inordinately long response times.

**Job responsibilities centralized/decentralized.** Faculty were evenly divided. Some said centralized management was being practiced; others felt there was a balance of centralized and decentralized job responsibilities. Administrators thought job responsibilities were largely centralized, though not rigid, and favored this arrangement.

**Coordination of work.** Faculty said they cooperated at the university and in raions as needed, either directly or with the assistance of regional supervisors. Administrators felt communication among faculty was open, but that coordination of the Center’s work could be improved through more proactive planning.

**Job flexibility, independence, and authority.** Faculty indicated they were free to plan programs, commended the advisory process for providing program direction and supporting agent autonomy, and building these elements into job descriptions.

**Leadership and management practices.** Faculty appreciated the democratic leadership style of supervisors, as well as their open, caring, and strict behavior. One supervisor was described by an administrator as practicing authoritarian and democratic leadership as dictated by specific situations.

**Personnel management processes described, documented, and communicated to faculty.** Faculty and administrators agreed that personnel processes such as recruitment, selection, job descriptions, performance appraisal, promotion, and staff development have not been described, documented, and disseminated within the organization. Apparently, the Center was using university policies and procedures and/or improvising procedures, as needed. The was expressed to standardize and codify these procedures.

**Program development processes described, documented and communicated to, and also followed by faculty.** As a result of training in the U.S. of university faculty and the training of newly hired raion faculty by the U.S.-trained faculty, faculty had a better understanding of program development processes. Also, reporting processes were documented and being implemented. However, several programming processes and policies governing their use were still undeveloped.

**Performance variable: Capacity.** Does the organization have the leadership, capital, and infrastructure to achieve its mission/goal? Does the individual have the mental, physical, and emotional capacity to perform?

**Center’s resources appropriately allocated, accessible, and adequate for job performance.** Most faculty felt the Center’s resources for job performance were inadequate both for university and raion personnel. Administrators thought that while resources for current work were adequate, additional resources would be needed as the work expands. Specific additional needs cited were a feeds analysis laboratory, office space for regional supervisors at the Center, and office space for university faculty at the university.

**Center faculty possess skills, knowledge, and abilities to perform the job.** Both faculty and administrators felt that university and raion personnel had the technical expertise to do their job, but may need training in process skills such as communication, programming, and teaching.

**Expectations of supervisors regarding faculty workload, time, and job performance.** A variety of expectations by management of university and raion personnel was indicated by
both faculty and administrators. Some felt these expectations were reasonable, others felt the expectations were high.

**Performance Variable: Motivation.** Do the policies, culture, and reward systems support the desired performance? Does the individual want to perform no matter what?

- **Feedback on job performance.** Faculty indicated receiving supervisory feedback, both positive and negative. Feedback was informal and formal. Administrators also felt there was a system for receiving and giving feedback, but mostly informal. Regional supervisors felt they were providing program assistance to raion personnel.
- **Faculty recognition and reward system.** Faculty felt that recognition and reward for work was the personal satisfaction of a job well done. Extrinsic rewards were mostly verbal and informal. Administrators agreed with faculty, suggesting that a comprehensive system linked to performance should be developed.
- **Faculty satisfaction with work.** Generally, faculty and administrators felt that faculty were satisfied with their performance, but considered some dissatisfaction to be good for improving performance.
- **Faculty motivation to do more when achieve job goals.** Faculty responses were in the affirmative.

**Performance variable: Expertise.** Does the organization establish and maintain selection and training policies and resources? Does the individual have the knowledge, skills, and experience to perform?

- **Assessment of faculty performance.** Faculty and administrators indicated that a formal system to assess job performance should be developed. Currently, the only assessment is informal feedback from farmers, and informal supervisory observation of the work of raion and university faculty.
- **Effective training system in place for faculty.** Faculty and administrators felt that a systematic system of faculty training, properly planned, conducted, and evaluated should be instituted. The need for ongoing training and specific training areas were indicated.

**Performance Problems**

- **Hierarchical Organization Structure.** Problems inherent or observed in the Center’s traditional hierarchical structure were (a) erratic functioning of the Center’s administrative and management councils, (b) lack of a clear policy on workload, balance of teaching and extension roles, and reporting lines for university faculty, (c) inappropriate communication, supervision, coordination, and support structure of the consulting function of University specialists causing delay in responding to field requests for assistance, (d) lack of an office facility at VSAU for the Center faculty to come together, share ideas, and work, and (e) lack of transport for outreach work in raions.

- **Personnel Management Policies and Procedures.** Except for job descriptions of certain Center positions, no codified personnel management policies and procedures for recruitment, selection, orientation, professional development, supervisory channels and practices, employee performance appraisals, and promotion were in place. Apparently, university policies were informally adopted. However, the Center’s unique outreach function requires procedures that are different from traditional university teaching.
Programming Policies and Procedures. Except for a monthly educational activities report form, no other programming process—planning, teaching implementation, evaluation—had been written up. Policies and guidance for these processes were also not developed.

Decision Making. A level of frustration and dissatisfaction was observed with managerial decisions on personnel hiring/termination and uncoordinated program activities. Crop demonstrations set up at agricultural colleges instead of farmers’ fields as was intended was cited as an example of a decision motivated by political and personal considerations.

Communication. Formal communication among Center personnel follows the organizational hierarchy. Informal communication crisscrosses the organization. Center personnel have to constantly work at overcoming communication barriers and breakdowns.

Workload and Workload Expectations of Faculty. Faculty generally felt their workload was reasonable. However, some faculty felt supervisory expectations of work output exceeded their capacity to deliver in a satisfactory manner. When this occurred, supervisors tended to be critical of their job output and performance, which could influence annual job performance ratings.

Regional supervisors do not get release time from university teaching to perform outreach consulting and supervisory duties for the Center. Multi-raion specialists are not compensated for time and travel.

Job Mobility and Enrichment. The Center’s administration does not have policies for promotion and/or job enrichment opportunities. For example, promotion tiers were not established for the university and raion level positions, opportunities are not available for raion specialists to become University specialists, and there is no provision or compensation for cross-raion work assignments/projects.

Salary, Compensation, and Incentives. University faculty are paid a higher salary than raion personnel because they have statewide responsibility and specialist expertise. Regional supervisors do not receive additional compensation for the extra supervisory responsibility. No merit raises, bonuses, and awards for superior performance are provided for. There are no norms for travel and other forms of compensation.

Solution Strategies for Addressing Performance Problems

Documentation and Guidance. A serious drawback to faculty understanding and task accomplishment is the lack of documentation and guidance. The situation could be improved by producing written guidelines on personnel management and program development policies and procedures, and a teaching methods and techniques handbook describing the characteristics, advantages, and limitations of, and how to plan and integrate the important extension teaching methods and techniques into education programs.

Curriculum Development. A curriculum development task force of university subject matter specialists and raion personnel should be established to determine subjects on which curricula should be developed, to assign responsibilities and establish timelines for the work, and to monitor progress.

Enhancing Human Performance. The following suggestions should be considered to enhance performance of Center personnel:
1. Establish job parameters specifying goals, tasks, workloads, and growth opportunities.
2. Administrators and managers make personnel and program decisions in a systematic manner based on input from concerned quarters/individuals and considering alternative options.
3. Eliminate to the extent possible barriers to open and lateral communication.
4. Provide needed transport, equipment, resources, and facilities to personnel to do their job.
5. Reward, recognize, and provide incentives for superior performance.
6. Afford staff development opportunities to personnel.
7. Use personnel and program evaluations as counseling and motivation tools.

**Conclusion**

Performance analysis of business and industry in the private sector is common. Unfortunately, such assessments are not done as much in the public sector under the mistaken belief that performance analysis only works in the private sector. In reality, all organizations must perform, and therefore performance analysis is very useful. In times of declining resources that most public sector organizations face today, it is even more imperative that operate as efficiently as possible. Performance analysis is the way to find real fixes to performance problems and maximize use of resources. Most measures of public sector performance focus on process rather than outcome. Performance analysis forces a focus on outcomes and accountability.

Most of the above solution strategies have been implemented and problems alleviated. Thus, it can be concluded that performance analysis of a public sector organization’s operations and program is feasible and beneficial. More public sector organizations need to consider this tool for appraising their performance.

**References**


