

Professional practice

Team self-assessment: problem solving for small workgroups

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Abstract

The "team self-assessment" is introduced here as an effective mechanism for front-line supervisors to develop new procedures and process improvements directed at accomplishing strategic, as well as tactical, organizational objectives. It is shown in a handful of organizational environments to be an effective tool for encouraging employee participation in instigating creative ideas and reengineered process approaches. It can be used to address seemingly intractable process issues and repeated errors and is specifically constructed for employment by small workgroups and employee teams with direct responsibility for day-to-day line and staff tasks. The team self-assessment also is shown to contain a measure of consistency with the theoretical and practical principles of the control self-assessment, Belbin'sTM team roles, and Anderson and West's team climate Inventory.

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Linking strategic management systems with workgroup activities

The development of the Balanced Scorecard system of strategic management was preceded by a general dissatisfaction with the measurement and planning systems that were generally available at the start of the 1990s[1]. According to Kaplan and Norton (1996), original creators and champions of the Balanced Scorecard concept, the single dimension approach of planning of financial results often falls seriously short of optimizing long-term organizational capabilities and competitiveness. When this occurs, it follows logically that the organization's financial results themselves are subjected to sub-optimization.

In addition to the traditional financial measures which generally are found to dominate the planning of executive management, three other key categories for "scorecard" (measurement) objectives are proposed by Kaplan and Norton (1996) to provide the "balance" (complete viewpoint) that was previously lacking. The four Balanced Scorecard "perspectives" are highlighted in Figure 1.

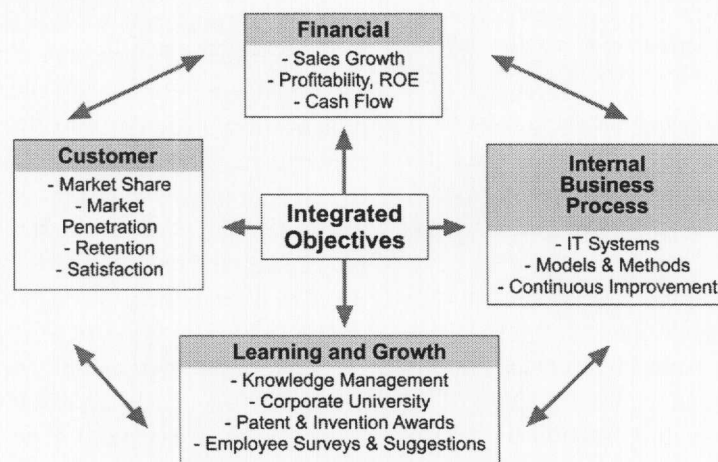
Critical to the success of the Balanced Scorecard approach is the identification of six or seven appropriate objectives in each of the four key categories. A recommended total of 24 or 25 of these widely applicable performance indicators, not dominated by objectives in one or two of the categories, are then implemented as the mechanism for governance of the operations of the organization. Examples of these objectives to be measured are listed directly below their corresponding perspectives in Figure 1.

The Balanced Scorecard is just one example of a handful of competing "strategic management systems" or "scorecard" variants (Beischel and Smith, 1991). All of these approaches confirm the notion that management's attention should be redirected in search of balance between the financial measures and non-financial objectives of the three new categories. This broadening of strategic categories and the proliferation of key objectives has been documented as successfully improving the performance of hundreds of organizations.

In order to make room for the many additional levers identified in the customer perspective, business process, and learning



Figure 1 The Balanced Scorecard



Source: Adapted from Kaplan and Norton (1996)

and growth categories, management should reduce the number of specific financial objectives measured. Compound financial measures such as economic value add (EVA)[2] (Stern Stewart GmbH, 1999) and the Strategic Profit Model (Jablonsky and Barsky, 1998) charting system inspired by the DuPont equation have found favor. In addition to these compound formulas, traditional individual financial measures, such as margins, profits and cash flows, round out the financial measures in a scorecard.

The customer perspective is also most often described by relatively well recognized and accepted additional measures. Goals for sales growth overall and for specific target markets are most commonly utilized. Market share and customer retention statistics assist in gauging the organization's performance in relation to its competitive environment. Finally, customer satisfaction objectives, most often measured through surveys and referrals, are increasingly expected in a scorecard presentation.

In contrast to these tangible financial and customer perspective categories, upgrading systems, developing better processes, improving employee satisfaction, constructing creative environments, and generating new ideas are critical programs which are difficult to target and to measure definitively. Topical approaches such as business process reengineering, continuous improvement planning, employee suggestion programs, knowledge management systems, patent and invention awards, training and development programs, corporate universities, employee

surveys and suggestion programs, and other teamwork and employee motivation programs are all implemented to support the accomplishment of the business process and learning and growth objectives (see Olve, *et al.*, 1999).

Critical to the success of any strategic management system is the linking of the strategies set by the executives and directors who have governance responsibility for the organization with the detail objectives implemented by the workers who have direct contact with customers, products and services. This requires generally opening up lines of communication between the rank and file (front-line) employees and their senior managers. New ideas and solutions to problems are expected to "bubble-up" to the top where managers should be able to identify the most valuable and constructive of these ideas and see that they are implemented.

Therefore, if an individual manager is going to affect performance in the business process and learning and growth categories favorably, he/she must first, identify those areas that are producing less than acceptable results for current and future performance and then second, implement changes that result directly in improved performance. This responsibility falls classically under the fundamental management function of control. In a seminal article, Merchant (1982) re-defined the challenges of the modern control environment:

... management control is a problem of human behavior. The challenge is to have each individual acting properly as often as possible ... considering the personnel component of the

organization by itself. In some situations, well-trained, highly motivated personnel can be expected, with a high degree of certainty, to perform their jobs satisfactorily without any additional control steps being taken.

Merchant's hypothesis is clearly consistent with the various company-wide initiatives for business process and learning and growth, where employees are the dependent source of new solutions.

This dependence on employees takes on even greater significance as companies continue to evolve from hierarchical systems to "hi-flex" organizations (Ross, 1990). This new form of organization, difficult to describe as a structure in the traditional sense, results in part from the reduction of layers and increasing spans of control of management. It manifests itself in organizations as self-directed teams and virtual workgroups. Technological developments, particularly in information systems and communication, have facilitated also the migration of employee populations away from staff functions to line positions. This has, in turn, led to external customer and supplier relationships becoming closely intertwined with internal line employees. Employees themselves, rather than their managers, are expected and empowered to identify problems on a day-to-day basis and implement appropriate solutions in real-time.

Management then faces an environment where the previous standard command and control structure is becoming outdated and even obsolete. Traditional feedback loops are being short-circuited by direct employee connections to customers and suppliers. Larger spans of control also seriously limit the time available for managers to apply themselves personally to direct line activities. How then can managers identify and solve repetitive and intractable problems? Where can managers turn for a corrective action plan when the "tried and true" ISO approved procedure falls short? How can good ideas developed by individuals be "institutionalised" for wider benefit?

Team self-assessment: a control method for small workgroups

An example of a front-line employee oriented performance review and action plan program is the team self-assessment ("TSA") concept.

The TSA is a part-time, temporary task force that is formed to solve a specific problem or to improve the performance of a specific process in a department. These topics can be generated from almost any source in the organization, inside or outside of the department. The working group involved in the TSA process is identified as a "team". It is not a standing committee, instead, it should only be applied to any issue for a maximum of three to four months.

The implementation of a TSA and formation of a team can be accomplished upon impetus of any department member – employees and managers alike. The team is made up of at least three, but no more than seven members, depending on the size of the overall organization. As described in the list below, the members are assigned or agree to take on one of four defined roles – trainer, expert, advisor or mentor – as appropriate to their background:

- (1) *Trainer – a facilitator of the process and meetings.* The trainer takes responsibility for effectively running roundtable discussions where relevant topics are addressed and discussed (teamworker). The trainer ensures regular schedules are met, meeting minutes reports are published, and concrete written procedures are produced and formally submitted as required by organization standards (co-ordinator).
- (2) *Expert – the job-holder directly responsible for the issue.* As the person who is directly responsible for the task on a day-to-day basis, the expert is most familiar with the job routine, interdependencies, details, and exceptions. The expert will in the end be evaluated on the outcome and performance of their job, not the performance of the team self-assessment (completer-finisher). The expert must formally accept new processes and ensure they are put-in-place (implementer). The expert is the preferred author of desk procedures.
- (3) *Advisor – a peer to provide opinions and suggestions.* The advisor could have held the job previously (specialist) or come from a department with significant interdependent activities (plant). The advisor is in the position closest to the expert to provide direct advice, second opinions, additional questions, and recommendations. The advisor takes

relevant issues back to his own department for corrective action.

- (4) *Mentor – a counselor and advocate for needed resources.* The mentor provides positive reinforcement, analyzes theoretical assumptions for validity (monitor-evaluator), negotiates for required support (resource investigator), and sees that issues beyond the scope of the team are elevated tactfully and appropriately, but also forcibly (shaper).

Team members maintain their role for the duration of the TSA process. In particularly small workgroups, one person can take on the dual role of trainer and mentor. The utilization of roles has been shown in practice to speed the start-up period of TSA projects.

At the “heart” of the TSA process is a series of self-scheduled “roundtable discussion” meetings focused on the specific identified problem. The discussions proceed step-by-step to accomplish the following purposes:

- (1) uncover the issues truly affecting poor performance;
- (2) recommend possible practical solutions;
- (3) generate small projects which test the proposed solutions; and
- (4) formally implement and document acceptable practices.

A roundtable forum is used because it places all participants on an equal status in discussions, regardless of their roles, which encourages participation. Ten-step guidelines for running the meetings are illustrated in the “standard agenda” below:

- (1) The trainer is responsible for conducting the meeting and keeping to the schedule.
- (2) The trainer, or a designated “volunteer”, notes attendance and keeps meeting minutes.
- (3) The trainer explains the team topic and the objectives for the meeting.
- (4) Team members review the issues from the last meeting.
- (5) Team members report on the status of the action items.
- (6) Team members identify and discuss new issues:
 - The team should stay focused on the topic:
 - Has the topic been defined clearly?
 - Have the policy and process been documented? Do they need to be revised?

- The team should ensure compliance with and devise improvements to internal controls, periodically summarizing or sampling the actions taken:

- to assure that the control is working; and
- to test the effectiveness of review documentation.

- (7) Team members agree upon and volunteer for action items.
- (8) The trainer schedules the next meeting.
- (9) The trainer presents proposed meeting minutes to the mentor for review within two working days and publishes final minutes on working day thereafter.
- (10) The team members jointly prepare a report of their findings including benefits derived and issues unresolved to management before the team is formally disbanded.

Between team meetings, the members are encouraged to investigate and work out team issues alongside their normal responsibilities, while also ensuring their direct supervisor is aware of their activities. All team members are encouraged to seek actively items of correction, improvement and enhancement. Their questions should be directed to anyone in the local or corporate organization who can add value or understanding to the process under review. Team meetings serve as a forum for reporting back findings and “kicking around” ideas.

Because the people on the team have their own daily responsibilities to attend to, roundtable discussions are generally held no more frequently than biweekly, for 45 to 75 minutes per meeting. However, one of the team members must be elected to summarize meeting minutes with agreed action items noted, including both successes and failures encountered. Solutions to issues are to be appropriately documented in desk procedures, normally by the expert, for future department reference. Each individual on the team is self-motivated to contribute their efforts because they are genuinely interested in the opportunity to contribute to the success of the department as a whole. In this spirit of voluntary cooperation, no person’s personal performance evaluation is affected by TSA performance or team participation.

At the initiation of the TSA concept in an organization, either the trainer or a senior

department manager acts as a "schedule keeper," who sets the dates for the first team meetings and assists in assigning or enrolling members to teams. Once a TSA team is formed, the trainer should simply "register" with the TSA schedule keeper. As the team meets and begins to produce results, the trainer should provide copies of all published meeting minutes to the schedule keeper as well. The schedule keeper tracks the progress of all of the teams on a very simple timeline based on data provided in the meeting minutes. No pressure need be exerted to keep to a specific schedule. Rather, the schedule keeper should motivate a team to move forward to accomplish its suggestions or to disband formally when the team has stalled indefinitely. At times, it will be appropriate for a schedule keeper, trainer or mentor to elevate the problem to higher levels when solutions require significant strategic efforts and resources beyond the scope of a TSA. In its final meeting, the team should document which difficulties or obstacles apparently interfered with solutions being uncovered or implemented.

Team self-assessment in practice

Example organization no. 1

The Appendix depicts a facsimile of a TSA schedule used in the accounting department of the production and product development facility at a \$500 million personal computer business unit of a global information technology corporation. Teams were formed to improve six common processes in the department. This business unit found, just as the Auditor General of the US Air Force observed, that "because of their unique responsibility for stewardship and accountability, (controller) organizations at all levels are good candidates for (internal control self assessments)" (Crawford, 2000).

Four of the six topics operated measurably successfully by developing solutions completely within the structure and time parameters of the TSA concept. The remaining two topics showed some positive progress, but were disbanded when it became clear that the issues were more difficult to resolve than appropriate for the TSA method. This, in fact, was a favorable result, because senior management was left with a higher

awareness of the difficulties facing the department.

One fully successful team was assigned to review the "processing delays of accounts payable documents" and:

Recommend/implement a plan to keep the processing current for all A/P documents e.g. inventory invoices, non-production invoices, RMN's [return material notices], shipping memos, and other debits.

Prior to the implementation of the TSA program, the relationship that the accounts payable department had with other internal departments as well as suppliers can be depicted as in Figure 2. Issues, misunderstandings and errors with purchasing or supplier processes and documentation were manifested in delays in payment. This put a negative focus on accounts payable, which was considered to be poorly equipped and the source of the frustration. Problems had been corrected one at a time by employees of accounts payable continuously running between purchasing and suppliers, but few prescriptive solutions were conceived or implemented. As transaction volume increased, problems were multiplied, leaving the department "caught in the middle" and highly resource constrained.

When the team was formed to address this serious problem area, the head of materials and purchasing was pleased with the initiative shown by the accounts payable employees and therefore became motivated to assist them. Many of the problems encountered were grouped into issue categories:

- delays in confirming receipts of raw material deliveries;
- correction of supplier invoice problems; and
- improving the handling and documentation process of materials returned to suppliers for non-conformance.

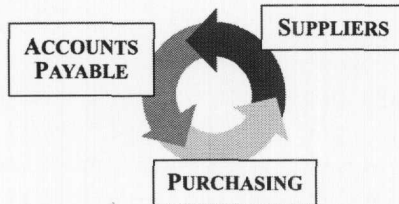
It became clear quickly that resolutions could be attained only by changing the approach to the working relationship of the parties involved, especially through better monitoring and communication directly between purchasing and its suppliers, as illustrated in Figure 3.

New cross-departmental policies and processes in all of the categories were developed and accepted. In addition, in the accounts payable department itself, a new

Figure 2 Before TSA "caught in the middle"



Figure 3 After TSA "peer participant"



signature acquisition process was implemented, and the department effort of producing a required monthly aged accrual summary was reduced from five employees for two days to one employee for one day by changing invoice input timing.

As another example, the schedule keeper noticed that although the team looking into improving the commercial invoice process for overseas billings had met, there had been no minutes produced for almost a month. Upon asking for the minutes from the team, he found that one of the supervisors, who was not a member of the team, had taken an interest in the project. The supervisor had volunteered to make some simple inquiries with other departments regarding their issues. The assistant controller asked for the minutes to be completed so he could see the status, and the following was published by the team advisor:

[The supervisor] reviewed our previous meetings minutes and ... informed us of a log kept by Product Distribution in bill of lading number order. This report will be available to [the expert] for reference, therefore eliminating the previously discussed new and old issues.

[The expert] will prepare a detailed job summary of billings. The purpose is to enable anyone to be able to have a working knowledge of billings and be able to generate any paperwork necessary in the absence of the billing clerk.

No new meetings have been scheduled, as the problem has been satisfied.

Without the TSA process, the commercial invoice problems could have remained languishing indefinitely.

Example organization no. 2

The TSA concept was also employed at the credit department of a \$300 million leading developer and manufacturer of computer

peripherals. Credit lines were set conservatively for channel customers including international distributors and resellers. Unsettled invoices and account disputes had been a recurring problem, blocking a portion of the credit lines from being used for new business. The credit department recognized that clearing these items faster would contribute to higher sales potential without adding to credit risk.

Small teams were set up to address four areas:

- (1) return materials from customers;
- (2) letters of credit for overseas orders;
- (3) production shipment releases; and
- (4) channel promotion credits.

Advisors were invited from the departments involved to assist in fixing the internal problems inherent in the credit department. However, the positive results were dramatic in that in the first three cases, corrective actions which provided permanent resolution to these credit problems were institutionalized by these other departments.

For example, the return materials department agreed to process all returns within a timely manner, to prepare a report of all discrepancies between the return authorization requested by the channel customer, and to notify the customer and credit department accordingly. Agreement to the proper credit amount could be made immediately by the credit department with the customer, and disputes adding up to hundreds of thousands of dollars were summarily resolved. Both Figure 2 and Figure 3 accurately describe this before and after situation by simply substituting the credit department for accounts payable, return materials department for purchasing, and customers for suppliers. Similar sustaining, cooperative efforts, with similar results were established by the credit department with the order management and shipping departments.

On the other hand, in channel promotion credits, little headway other than a better understanding of the issue was achieved for the company. Channel customers either

misunderstood or chose to interpret differently the guidelines and approvals laid out by the marketing department of the company. The marketing department had little to do with the process of product shipments to the channel. Marketing was itself seldom inconvenienced in meeting its own promotions projects and product planning objectives by these discrepancies. The credit department was unable to reach a compromise of mutual interest with marketing employees, and the delays could not be avoided.

Example organization no. 3

Finally, the TSA was applied, in a less formal approach, at an Internet technology software company for the maintenance contract renewal process in its operations department. During the TSA, a discussion with a customer representative revealed that the customer was the prime contractor on a specific government contract and that a prime contractor was required by law to renew any sub-contracts when the government itself had renewed or extended the prime contract. The maintenance contract, therefore, placed the software company officially in the specifically defined legal role of government sub-contractor.

After some simple research, employees determined that this situation applied to contracts with a number of other customers who had inadvertently allowed their maintenance contracts with the company to expire. The application of this new knowledge contributed the vast majority of a one-time increase of cash and revenue of close to \$300,000 (more than 10 per cent of the quarter's maintenance revenue) as well as the potential for annual renewals of the same value. At the same time, this did not disturb the customer relationships, as the cost of the maintenance contracts was planned into their program budgets, and the proper compliance with management of sub-contracts protected the customers in the case of government audits.

Benefits of department peer participation and status upgrade

In all three organizations, tangible rewards and awards were earned by the participants in the teams. In organization no. 1, the general accounting manager was awarded a division level bonus for having the most accurate and timely month-end financial reports

throughout the year. In organization no. 2, the credit department received the highest level corporate "Sales Hero" award for the year. In organization no. 3, the maintenance contract renewal clerks in the operations department were granted a supplemental commission incentive program. "Problem" departments saw their status upgraded in the organization to a "peer participant" level with other departments, and resource attention was finally directed to prescriptive solutions. Referring to analysis of team functionality performed by the Hay Group with Richard Hackman of Harvard and summarized in *Top Teams: Why Some Work and Some Do Not* in 2001, Glover (2002) reports:

... that those in outstanding teams were not brighter ... What people on these teams contributed was emotional intelligence – the ability to understand the emotional make-up of others and empathise.

Perhaps the TSA approach was able to elicit higher cooperation levels without changes to department structures or participants because it contributed to raising the emotional intelligence level of the organizations where it was introduced.

Team self-assessment: theoretical basis

The findings of the team implementations at these three organizations clearly showed that valuable practical benefits were derived from the TSA approach. The author's personal involvement in these situations, however, means that the TSA process by itself was not the only factor introduced in common to the three organizations. This could cast some doubt on the value of the empirical results versus those arising from controlled experiments. In order to determine whether it is likely that the effectiveness of this approach can be also expected in other organizations, the TSA concept should consistently be supported by, rather than in conflict with, other accepted empirical studies of both practical and theoretical nature. Control Self-assessment, Belbin'sTM team roles, and the Team Climate Inventory are examined and presented below towards this purpose.

Control Self-assessment: employee participation in objectives

The Control Self-assessment ("CSA") is a proven methodology for review of internal

controls. A CSA is a formal process for collaboration of internal audit and operating staff consisting of the following four main process components:

- (1) specific objectives for internal control evaluation or revision;
- (2) defined roles and responsibilities for participants;
- (3) a structured environment for interaction of the participants; and
- (4) thorough documentation of process recommendations and activities.

It is used for examining the effectiveness of systems and processes while simultaneously evaluating the associated environment of risks and opportunities. As one of the pioneers of the CSA, McCuaig (1998), asserts more than a decade after its initial use, the CSA has become an increasingly accepted tool "providing assurance . . . regarding the likelihood that a business-end result objective will be met, taking into account both controls and risks."

The preferred and most frequently employed CSA approach is a workshop, also known as a facilitated team meeting. The team addresses specific issues, problems or practices influencing organizational effectiveness in one of four pre-selected categories:

- (1) controls;
- (2) processes;
- (3) risks; or
- (4) objectives.

The workshop resembles a classroom style discussion environment with an expected mix of participants coming from various departments and multiple managerial and non-managerial levels and job categories. The workshop is led by one or more trained meeting facilitators, skilled in internal control system design, who is recommended to come from the internal audit staff. Because the CSA process is interested in generating consensus recommendations, it is important that it fosters a non-threatening, collegial environment for its participants (De Loach and Julien, 1994). The implementation of a workshop approach is only recommended for organizations that have determined that employees respond appropriately in and will benefit from a participative forum.

Where a formal participative approach is not considered to be productive because it

has a substantial risk of causing dissension among the participants, alternative CSA approaches include the questionnaire (or survey) and the management-produced analysis. Due care must be given to the development of the former, including selection of the population to be polled, objective analysis methods of the survey results, etc. The latter is produced by staff members, often from the internal audit department. Opinions from managers and direct line employees should be incorporated, along with direct objective situational evidence and information.

The introduction of the CSA mechanism (a workshop approach) in 1987 at Gulf Canada preceded the Balanced Scorecard and similar concepts, but the CSA's focus on achievement of organizational objectives from an internal control assessment perspective makes its use highly consistent with the purpose of these strategic management systems. In addition, audits have traditionally been applied to "hard" controls consisting of the types of tangible measures normally included in the financial and customer perspectives of the Balanced Scorecard. The CSA has been employed in a broadly versatile role for evaluating the challenging arena of "soft" controls of the internal business process and learning and growth perspectives, while still having application for "hard" controls (Figg, 1999).

Because the CSA is a group of processes which focus almost exclusively on employee inputs, through their confirmable observations and consistent opinions, it is a highly relevant tool for addressing the internal control challenges of modern decentralized employee-centric organizations (Foh, 2000). It also provides the substantial related benefits of contributing to the employee development of the participants and underwriting the employee acceptance of the solution. This is a formula for higher likelihood of a successful implementation and positive results – "by transferring ownership to operating employees" (Institute of Internal Auditors, 1998a).

In a recent article, the CSA's strengths are pointed out especially in how its workshop format supports the corporate governance principles for internal controls of the Committee of Sponsoring Organization of the Treadway Commission (COSO). The CSA utilizes employees who directly have the

ability to influence or have an interest in goal achievement. It assists in unifying the interests of the overall organization, various departments, and individual employees. It furthers an organizational culture which values openness and empowerment, which also recognizes the importance of internal controls (Marschdorf, 1999).

The CSA approach succeeds by integrating the objectives of the strategic management system and the organization control model with the efforts of groups of employees in the organization. However, referring to research by Richard P. Tritter and Daniel S. Zittnan of Arthur Andersen, the Institute of Internal Auditors (1998b) cautions in "CSA: avoiding the pitfalls":

CSA implementation is not a simple process. It requires much planning, structuring, dialogue, documentation, and follow-up. It is not a matter of just getting people together in a workshop environment . . . Successful CSA sessions require skilled facilitation and individual/group participation.

The access to the CSA as a tool, therefore, is strictly limited to the senior management leaders of fairly large organizations with hundreds or thousands of employees and above with full involvement of an internal auditing department.

The team self-assessment, however, is specifically designed and simply structured to be applicable to first level managers and supervisors and their departments of direct employees and small work teams. It is an approach consistent with the general principles of a participatory CSA, and therefore it complies with the internal control standards particularly recommended for "managed system self-assessment" (Archer, 2000). Since the trends in organizations are expected to continue to move in the direction of "hi-flex" organizations, it would be particularly beneficial to broader application of the CSA when the TSA is included as a CSA approach. In larger organizations the TSA could be used to research issues or implement solutions as a follow-on to the activities and findings of a previously assembled CSA. Conversely, in some situations, the TSA concept could be implemented as the first step in an organization's preparation for rolling out a comprehensive CSA program.

Belbin team roles in TSA

According to many years of research carried out at the Henley Management College under the direction of Meredith Belbin (Belbin Associates, 2001; Glover, 2002), identifying and understanding team roles in advance is critical to success of workgroup interactions. Managers from different countries and cultures were observed intensively while they were participating in teams performing complex management exercises. Psychometric tests were completed concurrently which assisted the researchers in isolating psychological behaviors into "clusters" of nine separately identifiable team roles. Included in the description of team roles are behavioural examples corresponding to the roles identified by BelbinTM (shown in italics).

BelbinTM further places his psychometric inventory of nine roles into three categories:

- (1) people-oriented – *teamworker, co-ordinator and resource investigator*;
- (2) action-oriented – *completer-finisher, implementer and shaper*;
- (3) cerebral – *specialist, plant and monitor-evaluator*.

Therefore, the TSA is structured so that the trainer has a primarily people-oriented role, the expert an action-oriented role, and the advisor a cerebral role, while the mentor should be qualified to take on responsibilities spanning all three of the BelbinTM categories. The adoption of defined roles for all of the participants in the TSA process is also supported by the Institute of Internal Auditors's strong advice to give due attention to the role of the facilitator in the CSA workshop approach (Institute of Internal Auditors, 1998b).

Team climate inventory in TSA

Research studies investigating successful work group innovation have been directed not only towards structural factors, such as the small size and assigned roles defined for a team, but also to "team climate factors". A psychometric survey instrument developed by Anderson and West (1994) known as the Team Climate Inventory (TCI), is shown to measure effectively the five critical independent factors for innovative organizational environments (Kivimäki *et al.*, 1997), namely:

- (1) vision;
- (2) participative safety;

- (3) task orientation;
- (4) support for innovation; and
- (5) interaction frequency.

The TSA was designed and developed with small work groups specifically in mind in order to provide a mechanism that served to connect individual efforts with more advanced organizational activities and higher level strategic goals and objectives, i.e. the vision arising from strategic management systems. Strategic planning may be excellent at supplying senior management with the "what" and "why", and even "who", "when", and "where" of the organization. On the other hand, the TSA is a process which can improve the effectiveness of those involved at the supervisory and employee levels as they perform their basic daily responsibilities – the "how" of the organization.

Contributing positively to team participative safety, the TSA approach, in common with the CSA facilitated workshop, provides a forum which allows interdependent working relationships to be enhanced (De Loach and Julien, 1994). This benefit does not have to be limited to relationships within and among a single department. By inviting individuals from other functions or operations into sessions, when appropriate, to perform any one of the four roles, the team becomes a potential bridge between the separate workgroups. The team members acquire a new level of understanding which can reduce the uncertainty or perceived threats which outside departments may have of each others' intentions, and, allow members of different departments to "become more closely aligned" (Servage, 1998).

Fulfilling expectations for task orientation, the TSA and CSA should be used by front-line supervisors and senior managers, respectively, in conducting critical performance reviews of the achievements and activities of their workgroups. The main purpose of these reviews is to identify elements of the workgroups' basic responsibilities which are failing to meet reasonable standards or expectations of achievement of organizational objectives. An action plan can then be constructed and implemented to adjust internal and external activities appropriately. The TSA process further provides for direct implementation and documentation of desk procedures for new

work methods (as well as updates to existing processes) which arise from team suggestions.

Support for innovation is internalized as employee's jobs are enriched by involvement in the TSA. They discover and more fully utilize their own creative abilities to uncover problems and provide solutions. They also experience the opportunity of adapting their work to their environment as it changes. They receive instruction from other team members and can themselves provide valuable information in return. The team can therefore be an effective venue for development of valuable professional and interpersonal skills for the future.

Higher interaction frequency is particularly important in resolving problems of higher complexity. Improvements in relationships and lines of communication between supervisors and employees within the department as well as between the reviewed department and other departments can result from the TSA process. According to Hoffman (1987) "subjecting a department to review draws the workers together. It increases their awareness of their own jobs and how they interact with others. As a result, each person may become more aware of the underlying purpose of the department. The reward is improved performance of each worker and the department."

Conclusion

The importance of connecting an effective management method like the TSA, which has an empirical basis in practice, to these studies of a theoretical nature, is further underscored by Huysman (2000). Methods employed in practice, presented in the form of prescriptive literature, whose purpose is intervention to affect organizational improvement, generally are placed under the category of the learning organization. In direct contrast, academic studies, consisting of descriptive literature, whose purpose is theory building to describe potential organizational change are generalized into organizational learning. Huysman hypothesizes that by bringing these two dichotomous conceptual views together, a better understanding can be gained of what constitutes a "good learning organization". Huysman concludes by recommending self-reflection as a process in the context of

continuous learning as the critical mechanism for achieving this status.

The thoughtful examination of responsibilities on a day-to-day basis should allow a department to make incremental improvements in the short term and to adapt to major organizational change over the long term. Development is continual, requiring repetitively employable tools such as the TSA for small workgroups to make positive progress in a continuously adapting competitive environment. The self-reflection process is never complete, but it can help to ensure that the strategic vision of the board of directors and objectives of senior management, as contained in a strategic management system, are closely connected to the day-to-day activities of individual employees.

Notes

- 1 The Balanced Scorecard™ is a trademark of Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton.
- 2 EVA™ is a trademark of Stern Stewart & Co.

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Appendix

Figure A1 Team self-assessment: June meeting schedule

