Using Situation Appraisal to Sort Priority Concerns

Purpose

To help you appropriately categorize the situations you face on the job as problems, choices, potential problems, or potential opportunities that have to be addressed or actions that have to be taken.

Introduction

You have to handle many different kinds of situations every day. One useful way of categorizing these situations is to identify the thinking process—necessary for their resolution. For example, you might have the following work-related concerns:

- Why are we having trouble with Product X?
- Whom should we move into this new job?
- How do we make sure this presentation succeeds?
- Why are communications around here not what they should be?
- How can we leverage this meeting with the technology experts?

Each of these concerns requires the use of information. But how you gather and sort that information will depend on the type of concern. The first concern for example, "Why are we having trouble with Product X?", requires finding the cause of an unexpected event that has already happened. In contrast, deciding who should be moved into a new job requires a different approach—looking into the future and choosing one of several people who would do the best job.

A necessary initial step in appraising a situation, then, is to identify the kind of thinking process that is needed for a specific concern.

There are four basic thinking processes that may be used to resolve a situation:

Problem Analysis
Decision Analysis
Potential Problem Analysis
Potential Opportunity Analysis

Problem Analysis

Some of the situations you deal with are problems—a deviation of the Actual from the Should with an unknown cause. You see a situation where performance is off-standard. Your concern is to find out why.

For example:

- Region 6 customers are complaining about poor response time.
- Product X is being rejected for out-of-round fittings.
- Employee accidents are increasing.

When a situation requires you to find out why it happened, you apply the process of Problem Analysis. *Problem Analysis is the systematic processing of information to find the cause of a deviation.* If the cause of a deviation is already known, then Problem Analysis is not needed.

Decision Analysis

These are situations that require choosing a course of action. You have to decide what to do.

For example:

- Select a replacement for a vacant position.
- Decide what interim action to take when you can't meet a commitment.
- Select a new technology to purchase.

If you want to choose between different ways of doing something, apply the process of Decision Analysis. *Decision Analysis is the systematic processing of information to determine the best choice.*

Potential Problem Analysis

Some situations involve anticipating problems that threaten your plans or actions. These concerns may occur when you are about to take an action or when you know someone else is planning an action that could affect you.

For example:

- Making an important presentation.
- Integrating a new product into production, distribution, or sales.
- Training a new team member.
- Assessing the impact of a new raw material or packaging process.
- Assessing the impact of new government legislation.

When your concern requires that you think about what could go wrong, apply the process of Potential Problem Analysis. *Potential Problem Analysis is the systematic processing of information to protect an action from future difficulties.*

Potential Opportunity Analysis

Some situations, including those where you anticipate trouble, may present you with opportunities to leverage the value of a plan or action. These concerns may occur when you are about to take an action or when you know someone else is planning an action that could benefit you.

For example:

- Making an important presentation.
- Integrating a new product into production, distribution, or sales.

- Training a new team member.
- Assessing the introduction of a new raw material or packaging process for unexpected benefits.
- Assessing the adoption of new government legislation for unexpected benefits.

If your concern suggests possibilities for improving a plan, apply Potential Opportunity Analysis. Potential Opportunity Analysis is the systematic processing of information to enhance a future action.

Separate and Clarify Concerns

Some work-related situations can be easily understood. For example, selecting an individual for a brand-new job is clearly a situation that requires a Decision Analysis.

Other situations may require you to apply more than one thinking process. For example, a customer complaint situation may require:

- A Decision Analysis for interim action—selecting a way to satisfy the customer's immediate need.
- A Problem Analysis to determine the cause of the defective products.
- A little later, a Decision Analysis for corrective action; a Potential Problem Analysis for implementing the corrective action; and a Potential Opportunity Analysis for applying the lessons learned to improve how similar situations are handled in the future.

This splitting apart or separating of a concern into its sub-concerns enables you to attack the priority concerns efficiently. A few situations are so complex that additional separation is required. Because these "messy situations" are so broadly stated, little meaningful progress can be made against them. As they are broken down it becomes clear that they are an assortment of different things that cannot be resolved with a single analytic process or action. For example, many managers may feel "Communication Problems" exist. But it is rare, of course, for two managers to have the same communication problems; their specific problems, causes, and appropriate actions are different. An individual manager at one point in time may separate the communications mess as:

- Weekly production reports are suddenly inaccurate (use Problem Analysis to find the cause).
- Some team meetings are too long (the cause is known—too many topics on the agenda—use Decision Analysis on what to do about it).
- Engineering continues to bypass some of the team leaders on manufacturing process changes (the cause is unknown—use Problem Analysis).
- Equipment changeover on Line 3, which involves three teams, must go smoothly (use Potential Problem Analysis to make sure everyone understands and operates according to plan; use Potential Opportunity Analysis to improve the plan to create unexpected benefits).

This manager has separated a mess into more specific concerns that can be attacked individually and has clarified the concerns enough to understand how to analyze each situation. Next the manager needs to set priority for each of these concerns to identify which situation to handle first.

Separating and Clarifying Your Job Situations

Use a Situation Appraisal worksheet to write a brief description of the five or six priority situations you currently face. These should be specific situations you must resolve over the next few weeks. Review the work situations you identified in the pre-work information.

Be alert for the need to separate and clarify. Breakdown a concern into two or more concerns, if it will help you to identify the action or analytic process needed to resolve the concern. Rephrase each concern if it will help you clarify how to resolve the concern.

Set priority on each of the concerns. Consider the current and future impact and time frame of each specific concern. Document information that suggests a concern should be given a certain priority.

Identify the analytic process or action you will use for each concern by checking the appropriate column or columns on the worksheet. Consider what is already known about the concern and what additional information and analysis is needed.

Determine the help you will need. Who has information necessary to analyze the concern? Whose commitment is necessary for successful resolution?

During the session, your instructor will spend time working with you and the others in your group on these concerns. Note any specific questions you had while doing this task.