

Maximum performance

Design challenging work for your employees

Question:

In your column in the July 25 edition of SBT, you emphasized “ARMED,” the need for employers to acquire, retain, manage, educate and develop their employees. I understand what you are driving at with this acronym, but I’m curious about the foundation for these activities. How do you organize them so they “hang together?”

Answer:

Peak performance is the target of the ARMED acronym. This is, of course, a primary goal for most any organization. In my experience, oftentimes when a discussion is held regarding what makes for an environment of maximum performance, it quickly focuses on rewards and recognition. Yet, while it clearly is important to let employees know that you value their efforts, I believe there are even more fundamental elements to consider: (1) the work; and (2) the employee.

From my perspective, designing challenging work (i.e., job design) is the foundation for getting ARMED. Therefore, in this column, I’ll spend some time talking about what might just be the best way to extract full performance from your employees – by deploying them in jobs that are stimulating.

Let’s start with a quick operational definition of “work.” Practically speaking, we might define work as the tasks the employees confront every day, the tools that they have to carry out their tasks, the physical environment in which they operate, and so on.

Without work to do, there would be no need for employees. Before we get too far, though, let me be clear on one point: I’m

not minimizing the importance of employees. Longstanding readers will recognize that I feel quite the contrary. You can’t make your living as a performance consultant and not understand the critical contribution offered by employees. What I am saying, though, is that the work comes first, then the employees.

Some of you might be wondering, “So, what’s the track record of job design as a means of promoting peak performance?” The answer is that it’s been pretty impressive. Job design as a means of impacting work performance initially was explored in earnest beginning about 50 years ago. Researchers like Charles Walker, Robert Guest, Frederick Herzberg, and Louis Davis identified that by changing how the work is done, gains in employee performance were possible.

Subsequent research by people like Richard Hackman, Ed Lawler, and Richard Steers built upon the earlier findings, eventually culminating in the quality of work life movement of the 1970s. So, as we operate here in the 2000s, we have a formidable body of research upon which to draw when we talk about designing work in order to encourage maximum employee performance.

Well-designed work processes unite thinking and doing, engage work groups in goal setting and self-control and are built on enriched, multi-skilled jobs. In these systems, participants are readily able to answer these key questions:

- How well does the work group’s structure support decision making nearest to the line of action?
- How effective is the coordination of the group’s work?
- How effective are existing human resource systems (e.g., acquiring, retaining, managing, educating, and developing)? Do they support the level of ownership and teamwork necessary to reach the group’s goals and achieve its quality of

work life?

- How well do existing organizational values and norms support the group’s goals and desired outcomes?

In order to answer these and related questions, the following model of job design is recommended:

- 1. Identify and orient stakeholders who might be affected by structural change.** Determine if individuals and groups inside and outside the immediate work group will be affected by a new system. Determine how they will be affected. Brief the stakeholders and the methods that will be employed, their expected roles, and the anticipated results.
- 2. Analyze structure and human resource systems.** Identify what the work group must have control over in its work processes. Identify if there are misalignments between the responsibility and authority of group members. Specify where coordination problems impact the process. Determine skill and incentive deficits in the work group.
- 3. Determine core job components.** Analyze the work in terms of these essential elements:
 - **Skill variety:** The extent to which employees use various skills and abilities on the job.
 - **Task identity:** The unity of a job—the extent to which employees perform a whole unit of work.
 - **Task significance:** The importance of a job to the lives and well being of co-workers and consumers.
 - **Autonomy:** The amount of independence employees have in scheduling and organizing a job.
 - **Intrinsic feedback:** The amount of information employees receive about the effectiveness and quality of their job performance.

4. Prioritize problems. Identify the most significant problems in the work process. Select problems that have the greatest impact on improving the process and focus the design efforts there.

As you can see, to go about effectively designing work is to look at the tasks to be accomplished as well as the processes that are used to complete these tasks. This includes examining how the work group is organized.

The savvy job designer also carefully synthesizes both “task” and “people” elements. You cannot do a good job if you don’t consider both sides of this equation. Jobs have to be designed within their environmental context.

Some organizations are traditional top-down bureaucracies. Some organizations are highly participative and team-oriented.

The kind of organizational setting will dictate the manner in which jobs are designed.

In the final analysis, to do an effective job of structuring the work, these five variables must be considered:

- 1. The performer.** Does the person have the physical, cognitive, and behavioral capability needed to perform well?
- 2. Inputs to the performer.** Are the available job procedures, workflow, information, money, tools, and the work environment adequate to support the desired performance?
- 3. Outputs of the performer.** Do performance specifications for the outputs exist and is the performer aware of them?
- 4. Consequences of the performer’s action.** Are consequences designed to support the performance and delivered in a timely and specific manner?
- 5. Feedback that the performer receives about the performance.**

Does the performer receive feedback and, if so, is it relevant, timely, and specific?

By attending to the variables I’ve touched upon in this column, you’ll be ready to help your organization get ARMED.

With well-designed jobs and work processes in-hand, you’ll be better able to turn full attention to the human resources (i.e., your employees) who occupy these jobs. This is a high-performance recipe.



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