TABLETOP ANALYSIS

Purpose

Tabletop analyses are facilitator-led discussions that are used in a wide variety of settings to identify gaps, performance deficiencies, and communication problems in a given system.

Needs Assessment Applications

Tabletop analyses can be used as a decision-making technique for numerous needs assessment applications. They can identify gaps in performance at several levels (individual performance, unit or group performance, or organizational performance). In addition, they can *identify gaps within systems*, such as communication breakdowns or poor resource allocation). Finally, a tabletop analysis can *identify, analyze, and evaluate potential solutions* to a performance problem.

A tabletop analysis is a discussion-based activity in which a group of participants works with a facilitator. A problem or need, which is based on a specific performance area (such as municipal sanitation services), is presented to the participants. The participants then (a) systematically work through, discuss, and refine the problem focus; (b) develop a strategy for analyzing the problem; (c) collect data on the basis of the analysis plan; (d) analyze the data to determine the specific performance gaps; and (e) identify potential solutions for the performance gap. The participants and facilitator use a collaborative problem-solving approach to identify and find solutions to performance-related problems. The outcomes from this exercise allow you to identify and analyze the actual performance and to identify potential sources (and solutions) for a given performance area.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- You do not require access to a lot of resources to conduct a tabletop analysis. This technique is not expensive to use in terms of material requirements.
- Tabletop analyses are usually conducted over a time frame of only a few hours, so the time requirements for participants are minimal. Note, however, that the time required to effectively prepare and analyze the tabletop analysis is longer.
- Employee participants learn about the needs assessment process and key issues (such as goals, gaps, actual, and ideals) through their active participation and are, therefore, able to create awareness of such issues in their on-the-job environment.[1]
- The tabletop analysis is an effective technique for
  - Reviewing and analyzing existing plans, procedures, and policies
  - Identifying any factors inhibiting effective performance
  - Handling breakdowns in communication between groups or systems
- Tabletop analyses promote buy-in for both the process and the results of the exercise, because stakeholders and representatives from the organization are an active part of the process.
- Tabletop exercises generally require participants to review performance-related documents and to participate actively in discussions about the performance environment. The tabletop analysis can, therefore, yield much information in a short time span, potentially reducing the necessity for extensive use of other techniques and tools to complete the needs assessment.[2]

Disadvantages

- The tabletop analysis process is a discussion-based approach to analyzing performance within a system. Because no simulation and no on-the-job performance observations are conducted, the tabletop analysis may not be a true test of the effectiveness of a system's performance.
- An essential ingredient for the tabletop analysis is the active participation of key representatives from the system where the performance gap is sus-

pected to be. If you are not able to secure the involvement of key participants, the effectiveness and accuracy of the tabletop analysis will be hampered significantly.

- Active participation and dialogue are an essential part of this technique. If the facilitator cannot enable a high level of active engagement during the technique, then the amount of insight gained from the activity is very limited.
- The activity requires two sessions (or meetings), with some work being done by group members in between sessions.

Process Overview

Planning and Preparing

1. From the list of information required for the needs assessment, determine the specific scope of the tabletop analysis by focusing on what functions or elements should be analyzed through the tabletop analysis and on who should participate in the tabletop analysis.
    a. When identifying the functions or elements, ask, "What is the specific performance area, and what are the key procedures or operations that should be analyzed by the tabletop analysis participants?"
    b. When selecting participants, ask, "Who are the specific individuals who should take part in the exercise?" Examples of individuals interested in municipal sanitation could include sanitation department managers and supervisors, sanitation workers, staff members from the mayor's office, commercial business owners, and community members—among others.
2. Schedule the tabletop analysis activity, and invite the appropriate participants. Introduce the participants to the tabletop analysis by (a) introducing them to the concept of a tabletop exercise and (b) explaining how the tabletop analysis is being used in the context of the needs assessment. Set the tone for the collaboration process and the ground rules for the activity, if appropriate.
3. If possible, arrange to have an experienced facilitator coordinate the implementation of the tabletop analysis.
4. Make arrangements for a comfortable meeting facility that provides conditions for the use of projection technology, if appropriate.

Conducting the Tabletop Analysis: First Session

1. Use the broad information identified during the planning and preparation stage. To kick off the tabletop analysis with the participants, focus on building consensus about the problem to be tackled and the desired outcomes from the tabletop analysis. Introduce the problem to the participants (for example, community frustration with sanitation services), and engage them in a brainstorming discussion as they explore questions and issues such as the following:

    a. Effect of the problem on the community

    - Garbage is piling up in some communities. Residents complain of rodents, smells, and other related problems to the mayor's office.

    b. Factors potentially contributing to the problem

    - The community has increased urbanization, inadequate housing, garbage truck breakdowns, inadequate inspections, and shortages of sanitation workers.

    c. Questions that should be answered to analyze the problem

    - How does the community plan to address housing shortages?
    - What can be done in the short and long term to address increases in garbage quantity?
    - What are options for recycling and reducing community consumption?

    d. Expected outcomes of the tabletop analysis

    - Recommendations will be made to the sanitation department to address the different causes of the sanitation complaints.

    e. Strategy for using the results from the tabletop analysis

    - The organizers of the tabletop analysis will follow up with community leaders on recommendations and will bring back this group in six months to discuss changes that have and have not occurred.

2. Work with the participants to generate a specific problem statement. Write the problem statement and the expected outcomes of the tabletop analysis in a prominent place, so that both the participants and the facilitator can refer to the list during the remainder of the activity.

3. Facilitate a discussion to develop a strategy for analyzing the problem. Begin the discussion by asking participants to identify the following:

a. Describe the specific types of information required to answer the key unknowns about the problem. These types of information should be structured in general categories such as (a) ideal performance, (b) current (actual) performance, (c) performance gaps, (d) causes of performance gaps, and (e) solutions to performance gaps.

b. Name the sources that can be consulted to gather each type of information that participants identify as part of the analysis. Sources of information may include documents, individuals, performance observations, work products, and so on. Ask participants to identify, to the extent possible, the specific source of information (for example, the specific documents that provide information on ideal performance).

c. As the participants identify the information necessary, verify that the information requirements are aligned with the purpose statement. Ask, "Will this information help you find answers to your original problem and to the outcomes you wish to achieve?"

4. After the list of sources has been identified, make the arrangements necessary for locating any document sources that participants identified and that have not been located yet. In addition, schedule the interviews and meetings that are required to gather information described in the analysis plan. Assign interview responsibilities to participants as required.

Conducting the Tabletop Analysis: Second Session

1. Ask the participants to reconvene and to work through the data that were identified during the first session so they clearly formulate the current and ideal performance for the problem area explicated in the purpose statement.
2. Guide the participants in creating a systematic listing of the conditions, procedures, and tasks that would, under ideal circumstances, take place. Encourage participants to refer to the document sources and collected data as this list is created. Create the list on a flip chart or whiteboard so that it can be seen by all participants.
3. Ask the participants to review the list of ideal tasks, procedures, and conditions and to verify its completeness and accuracy.
4. Next, ask participants to refer to the documents and data that were collected so they identify specific gaps in the performance area. Emphasize that gaps, rather than causes, should be identified. Also verify regularly that the gaps that are being identified are directly related to the purpose

statement for the tabletop analysis. If appropriate, work with the participants to group together gaps that have common attributes. Write the list of gaps on the flip chart or whiteboard.

5. After the gaps have been identified, ask participants for insight about potential causes of each of the gaps, as well as for potential solution strategies. Work through the list of gaps in a systematic manner, and write possible solutions for each gap (or group of gaps) on the flip chart or whiteboard. Solutions should be aligned with the original purpose statement and should be evaluated for feasibility.
6. To conclude the tabletop analysis, evaluate the results from the analysis against the expected outcomes that were listed during the first tabletop analysis session. If there is consensus that the expected outcomes have been achieved, then conclude the discussion by working with the participants to determine what to do with the results from the analysis. For example, a debriefing session could be conducted with key stakeholders to report on the results of the analysis and to discuss the solution strategies that were identified. Alternatively, the decision could be made to use additional data collection techniques to validate the results from the tabletop analysis.

Tips for Success

- Carefully select the participants for the tabletop analysis. Consider including experts, decision makers, supervisors, and current employees in the activity. The specific participants in the tabletop analysis should be aligned with the specific goal of the activity.
- Because facilitation is an essential ingredient for the success of the tabletop analysis, select an experienced facilitator for implementing this technique.[3] The facilitator should be well informed about the topics of discussion, including potential areas of sensitivity among tabletop participants.
- Develop and distribute materials about the goal, focus, and purpose ahead for the scheduled activity of the tabletop analysis. These materials will ensure that the tabletop analysis can get under way most efficiently.
- Limit the length of each tabletop analysis session. Each session should generally not last more than 3–4 hours.
- Consider recording the actual tabletop analysis, thereby giving you the option at a later date to revisit the information shared during the activity.

If you decide to record the session, make sure that you inform all of the participants and that you identify a secure way of storing the recorded data so that participants do not have to be concerned about their participation in the tabletop analysis negatively affecting them professionally.

- Control the size of the group for the tabletop analysis. To be effective and manageable, the size of the group of participants should generally range from between 5 and 15 participants.

Notes

1. See http://www.hss.doe.gov/nuclearsafety/ns/techstds/docs/handbook/hdbk1103.pdf.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

Websites

An example of the technique applied in instructional design context can be found at http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/needsalt.html#various2.

The U.S. Department of Energy handbook on tabletop needs analysis is located at http://www.osti.gov/bridge/servlets/purl/459762-JeQi3h/webviewable/459762.pdf.