Wednesday, September 08, 2004

Needs Assessment Interview Protocol

To identify performance needs, there are three basic steps:

- 30 second elevator discussion, which offers an invitation to discuss opportunities
- 10 minute follow-up, which is a conversation that establishes FSAU as resource
- 2 hour needs assessment, which enables FSAU to research issues and propose solutions

This document provides basic questions and suggestions for completing these steps.

Step 1: 30-second elevator discussion (need not occur on or near an elevator)

Inquire about performance needs:

- How are you doing on ___?
- What new things are you doing?

Provide basic information about how FSAU can help:

- Validate need - Acknowledge the performance need as stated
- Establish credibility - Explain what FSAU does, particularly in that area
- Define / Broaden scope - Apply FSAU's offering to the stated need

Step 2: 10-minute follow-up

This update could be offered in a variety of formats, including a phone call, e-mail, or walk-by meeting. Its purpose is to gather more information about the customer's needs, encourage customers to think about the ongoing work of the organization, and solidify FSAU's role as the appropriate solution provider.

Probe for more information

- Begin by restating the information gathered in the earlier conversation
- "As I was thinking about what we discussed…"

Develop a better understanding of the issues and goals

- What's on the team's agenda?
- What's the situation?
- What are the primary concerns?

Ask high-level interview questions (Answers to be considered for next discussion)

- What is the team's target performance?
- What is the team's current performance?
- What are the gaps/needs?

At this stage, the goal is to encourage the customer to consider these ideas and concepts, to push the customer's thinking about the performance needs. Importantly, the resulting assessment may address issues other than those discussed here; set expectations accordingly. At the end of this discussion, suggest a longer conversation to pursue the topic more closely and thoroughly.

Step 3: 2-hour needs assessment interview

Before proceeding to this phase, it is important to understand FSA University's core services and offerings as well as to know the customer's business. After collecting initial data in steps 1 and 2, conduct an interview with the customer to assemble more detailed information. After this interview, FSAU will propose potential solutions to assist with identified needs.

Planning the interview

- Schedule 2 hours for the interview, but structure it for 90 minutes to allow for some extra time or to end early
- Select a meeting room where neither the interviewee or interviewer will be distracted or interrupted
- Send an agenda in advance with an overview of discussion topics (but not detailed questions)
- Limit the interview(s) to one-on-one if possible (or to a maximum of 3 individuals)

Conducting the interview

- Record the interview with a tape recorder OR ask a second person to take notes, since it is difficult to take good notes, ask follow-up questions, and engage the content at the same time
- Sit in the room facing the clock (or take your watch off and place on the table) so you can check the time without being distracted
- Ask open-ended questions when gathering information
- Ask closed questions when confirming information
- Ask questions to ascertain the root cause of the issue
    - Examples include: Why? How so? What does it mean that…?
- Ask clarifying questions to understand the customer's perspective
    - Example: What does that mean to you? What would be an example?
- Keep the discussion efficient and on topic -- don't hesitate to steer the conversation or table extraneous topics, if needed

After the interview

- Transcribe the interview or organize your notes as soon as possible after the interview
- Send a thank you email after the interview, including a summary of the main points discussed and asking the interviewee to confirm the information as it has been documented
- When formulating a hypothesis regarding performance needs, consider information that may be inconsistent with the hypothesis to assure its accuracy as the root cause of the issue
- Keep your interviewee informed throughout the project, as he/she is now a stakeholder and a likely champion for the project once it is completed

The needs assessment interview covers, in greater detail, the following areas:

- Target performance
- Current performance
- Gaps between target and current performance, thus identifying areas of need
- Information to identify potential solutions to address performance gaps/needs

What's on the team's agenda?

- Identify the hot-button issues or concerns for the team, organization, or business unit
- Consider the Performance Plan, MIT report, modernization plan, etc.

What is the target performance (of the work unit / project team)?

- How do you determine the target performance?
    - What factors contribute to target performance? (Are they externally imposed?)
    - What are the measurements?
- What tasks are most:
    - Critical
    - Frequent
    - Complex
- What are the priorities?
    - How do you determine the priorities?
- What are the expected outcomes?
- What are your assumptions?
- Who is the target audience?
    - Number of individuals
    - Location
    - Organization
- What are the audience needs?
    - To be aware of the information
    - Apply the information
    - Make business decisions with the information

What is the current performance (of the work unit / project team)?

- Who is responsible for completing these tasks?
    - Who else has a critical role?
- What indicates that these tasks are accomplished correctly and efficiently?
    - How is this measured?
- What interferes with these tasks?
- What are the consequences of completing the tasks incorrectly?
- What performance data currently exists?
    - Performance Plan, customer satisfaction ratings, competency assessments, staffing

After the interview:

What are the gaps / needs? (If any)

- What gaps exist between how the task should be completed and how it is currently done?
- What is likely to change in the near future (and how extensively)?
    - Information, process, tools
- What are the performance solution options?

What are the best means to achieve the target performance/goals?

- What is currently being done or planned to fill these gaps?
- What are the existing training or performance support materials? Does it need to be changed?
- What else might make a difference? What might enhance performance?