Model-Driven Behavior Coaching Improves Cooperative Problem Solving

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■ *INTRODUCTION*

How do you get employee and management groups with different agendas, competing interests, and a history of hierarchical and even (in some cases) adversarial relations to solve problems *cooperatively*?

Increasing numbers of organizations in all employment sectors are trying to answer this important question, for reasons ranging from a desire to provide better quality products and services in order to build and sustain competitive advantage nationally or internationally, to the need to forestall plant closures and promote area economic development, to a genuine impulse to improve the quality of work life by involving employees and managers as equal partners in a truly cooperative undertaking.

It was also the question addressed by a large, diversified employer and one of its unions, in a program designed to improve the cooperative problem solving effectiveness of their joint labor/management (L/M) committees.

The labor organization is a 60,000 member white collar union that represents the employer's scientific, technical, and professional workers. The L/M committees had been established by a collective bargaining agreement which mandated that organization-wide, division level and work site L/M committees meet at least biannually to discuss and resolve matters of mutual concern.

Ten years after the agreement had been signed, the employing organization had approximately seven organization-wide, 39 division level, and 200 work site L/M committees. More than a million dollars annually was being spent on the operation of these L/M committees, but their performance varied dramatically across divisions and work units, was often inconsistent within individual L/M committees, and, in many cases, fell far short of their problem solving mandate. The employer and union agreed to address this shortfall through training for L/M committee members.

The resulting two-year L/M committee effectiveness program utilized an innovative behavioral approach designed by the employer and the union with outside professional help from the joint team of Sterling & Selesnick and Cambria Consulting. The program contained four phases.

Research -- Development of a high performance model based on systematic analysis of the behavior of the organization's most effective L/M committees.

Design -- Design and pilot testing of a two-stage process intervention program utilizing the high performance model to assess and improve the behavior of intact L/M committees with the aid of skilled and trained L/M facilitators or "coaches".

Delivery -- Delivery of the two-stage program to more than 500 members of 42 different L/M committees representing 20 divisions and 22 work sites.

Evaluation -- Evaluation of the impact of the program on the behavior, process, and accomplishments of the 42 L/M committees that participated in the program.

The purposes of this article are to describe both what we *did* and what we *learned* during each phase of the project, and to highlight the program's implications for maximizing the cooperative problem solving effectiveness of L/M committees and similar employee/management groups in other organizations.

■   *RESEARCH*

What We Did

The three-month research phase consisted of two major efforts. The first was an *environmental scan* which helped us understand how the overall L/M committee system worked. We reviewed documents (including regulations, policies, procedures, L/M committee meeting minutes) and we interviewed 50 key players in the system (including labor and management chairpersons representing all types and sizes of divisions and work sites across the organization).

The second effort was a *training needs assessment* which helped us understand how the most effective L/M committees worked. We interviewed the labor and management chairpersons of fifteen division and work site L/M committees considered by both labor and management representatives to be among the best in the employing organization. The three-hour interviews focused on detailed descriptions of situations in which the L/M committees effectively addressed an issue, solved a problem, or accomplished tangible results. The documents and interview data from both research efforts were systematically analyzed to identify the behavior patterns of the most effective L/M committees, as well as other factors that contributed to their success.

What We Learned

We learned from the environmental scan that the L/M committee process is divided into three segments: pre-meeting agenda-building and preparation, the joint meeting itself, and post-meeting follow-up, which included execution of action commitments and preparation of minutes. We also learned that individual L/M committees varied significantly in terms of the amount of time, communication, and formality they attached to each segment of the process.

We learned from both the environmental scan and the training needs assessment interviews that the L/M committees also varied significantly in the scope of their accomplishments, operating at four basic levels of effectiveness:

- Meets only

- Shares information and discusses issues

- Solves easy problems

- Solves hard problems

Many "less than effective" L/M committees were operating at the first two levels. The effective L/M committees that we studied in the training needs assessment were those that solved problems; the most effective L/M committees that we studied solved hard problems.

Several of the problem-solving L/M committees had recently gone through a transition from being ineffective and frustrated to being effective and satisfied. The transition began for them with a recognition that their old process simply did not work. They decided to change their process and start "doing what works" to attain better results.

Both the labor and management sides decided to approach the process more realistically, pragmatically, flexibly, and constructively, in order to "get results".

What they did is summarized in the L/M committee High Performance Model shown in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1 -- L/M Committee High Performance Model

VIEWS THE ENVIRONMENT REALISTICALLY	SOLVES PROBLEMS PRAGMATICALLY	STRUCTURES THE PROCESS FLEXIBLY	DEALS WITH DIFFERENCES CONSTRUCTIVELY
1. Knows the organization division/work site	3. Focuses on results	7. Balances formal and informal activities	11. Keeps an open mind
2. Supports the L/M process	4. Applies systematic problem-solving techniques	8. Controls group dynamics	12. Projects and builds reliability
	5. Executes influence strategies	9. Leverages resources	13. Exercises self-control
	6. "Sells" solutions	10. Exhibits self-confidence	

The model contains thirteen "success" factors organized in four major groupings. Each of the thirteen "success" factors is further defined by a set of related behaviors that were exhibited by the more effective L/M committees. For example, the "success" factor labeled "Projects and Builds Reliability" is defined operationally by the following specific behaviors:

- Establishes agreements with other side that own side will not violate, even if other side does violate those agreements.

- Keeps other side informed of issues, events, positions or planned actions so that they will not be "tricked" or caught by surprise.

- Discusses issues informally with other side without "cutting deals" that betray one's own constituency.

- Shares own problems or constraints with other side and communicates openly without hidden agendas.

- Considers impact of current actions on long-term working relationships with other side and with people outside L/M committee.

The L/M committee High Performance Model contains a total of 64 such specific behaviors. L/M committees that exhibited these behaviors were effective; that is, they solved problems and got results. When these behaviors were infrequent or absent, the L/M committees were less than effective.

■ *DESIGN*

What We Did

During the research phase we gathered training suggestions from all the people we interviewed and used those suggestions to develop design specifications for the program. In response to those suggestions we shifted our overall approach away from designing "training" for individual L/M committee members towards designing a "process intervention" for entire L/M committees, who would go through a full cycle of their actual L/M committee process during the program. The key features of the program design are summarized below:

- The program contained two stages: Stage One was a three-day, off-site residential session and Stage Two was a one-day, on-site follow-up session held 60 to 90 days later.

- Entire L/M committees, both union and management sides, attended as intact groups.

- Typically, three intact L/M committees attended each Stage One residential session; Stage Two follow-up sessions were held separately for each L/M committee.

- The training design was built around the three major phases of the L/M committee process: pre-meeting preparation, the joint meeting, and post-meeting follow-up.

- The front end of the program concentrated on building recognition and understanding of the "high performance" L/M committee behaviors.

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- Each L/M committee assessed the behavior of its labor and management members against the high performance model.

- Each L/M committee practiced using the high performance behaviors during all three phases of their actual L/M process.

- L/M committees focused on real workplace issues during their L/M process.

- Each L/M committee was observed and "coached" by a skilled and experienced L/M facilitator who provided periodic feedback and suggestions on their use of the high performance behaviors during the L/M process.

- Each L/M committee produced three working documents by the end of Stage One:

  - An *action plan* specifying what would be done on each L/M issue, when, and by whom.

  - Official *minutes* of the joint meeting, signed off by both the labor and management chairpersons.

  - A *working agreement* containing concrete operating objectives, procedures and behavioral ground rules to guide and enhance the effectiveness of their future L/M working relationship.

What We Learned

Two pilot tests with six division level L/M committees clarified the strengths of the program design and enabled us to adjust problematic features. For example, we discovered that the three-day residential structure of the Stage One design helped to unfreeze adversarial L/M committee relationships by enabling both labor and management members to get to know each other informally and to appreciate each other's concerns, interests, and constraints in the L/M process. They began to see each other as people rather than as enemies from the other side. This built a foundation for more constructive L/M discussions.

The first pilot made it clear that our assessment procedures (analysis of bar graphs) were too complex and confusing, so we simplified them into straightforward discussions of how each side rated its own and the other sides' frequency of usage (high, medium, low) of the high performance L/M committee behaviors. This change transformed the assessment exercise into one of the strongest components of the program.

Both pilots revealed that having the L/M committees go through their actual L/M process and focus on "real" L/M issues was a major strength of the program design. It enabled L/M committee members to practice new behaviors and measure their impact on both the L/M *process* ("We defined the problem better and we explored more alternative solutions than ever before") and *results* ("We solved a major problem that had paralyzed our L/M committee for six months").

The pilots also made it clear that the coaches played a key role in the program's success, by helping the L/M committees understand their own process and behavior, by suggesting and facilitating changes, and by helping the committees to measure the results of those changes.

■ **DELIVERY**

What We Did

Once the design improvements had been completed, we delivered the program to an additional 36 L/M committees, representing 14 divisions and 22 work sites. Each L/M committee had its own dedicated coach for the initial residential session as well as for the on-site follow-up session.

Every L/M committee was different. They varied in size from small work site L/M committees with as few as five members to large division level L/M committees with as many as thirty members.

Some L/M committees were easy to work with—they had already established constructive working relationships and were looking for ways to improve their effectiveness as a joint committee.

Other L/M committees were problematic—in some cases the chairpersons and/or members were practically at war with each other and the coach acted more as a referee than a facilitator. The coaches adjusted their facilitation strategy and style to fit the needs and realities of each L/M committee.

The majority of the Stage One program time was spent in "working sessions" with individual L/M committees rather than in "plenary" sessions with all three L/M committees. What happened in and after those working sessions varied from one L/M committee to the next, as the following examples illustrate:

- One large division level L/M committee hammered out the details of an official "working agreement" that had been a stumbling block for six months.

- A work site L/M committee agreed to eliminate a long-standing backlog of overdue performance evaluations (that were holding up salary increases) and achieved this goal by the date of the follow-up session.

- A division level L/M committee resolved three major unfair labor practice cases that had been a "boulder in the road" of its L/M process for more than a year.

- The members of one large division-level L/M committee stood up to a dominating and disruptive chairperson and established some behavioral ground rules that permitted constructive problem solving on issues of mutual concern.

- By developing an agreement to resolve some agenda items informally between meetings, a division level L/M committee had more time to explore alternative solutions to its most important problems during the formal joint meeting, and more problems got solved.

- The labor and management sides of two work site L/M committees used the informal communication and problem solving skills practiced during Stage One to minimize the adverse effects of layoffs that occurred between Stages One and Two of the program.

- The labor chair of a division level L/M committee asked the management chair to be his newborn daughter's godmother.

What We Learned

The experience of coaching 36 more L/M committees reinforced what we learned from the two pilot programs. We also learned that most L/M committees were not really interested in the other L/M committees that attended the Stage One program. They preferred the "working" sessions over the "plenary" sessions, and they socialized with members of their own L/M committees during meals and evening breaks. In fact, these "social sessions" played a critical role in the improvement of labor/management "relationships" during the program. The L/M committees that made the most progress in the working sessions also made conscientious use of the social sessions.

The coaches' experience working with a total of 42 different L/M committees also revealed wide variations in L/M committee "readiness" for the program. We discovered a few L/M committees were not ready because one or more key members (including chairpersons) either did not really want to participate or they were unwilling to analyze or change their problematic behavior. These L/M committees experienced little or no improvement in their process and achieved no positive results throughout the program.

Not surprisingly, the L/M committees that made the most progress clearly wanted to be there, were open to feedback and suggestions, and worked hard to change their behaviors or process. A large majority of the participating L/M committees were in this category.

We also learned that a key challenge for the coaches during the program was to facilitate their L/M committee's process without making the committee members dependent upon them for continued effectiveness. Success in this delicate balancing act was greatest when the coaches worked closely with the two chairpersons to develop *their* role and skills as facilitators of the L/M process. If the coach became too active, the L/M committee members expressed a concern that they would be "lost" without the coach's continued assistance.

■ **EVALUATION**

What We Did

We evaluated the program based on three sources of data. The first two provided quantitative data and the third provided qualitative data.

1. **Participant evaluation questionnaire**: At the end of the initial three-day session, each participant completed a written survey in which they rated their degree of satisfaction with various aspects of the program.

2. **Pre-training and post-training questionnaire:** Pre-training questionnaires were completed before the initial three-day session and post-training questionnaires were completed at the end of the one-day follow-up session. On both questionnaires participants were asked to rate various aspects of their L/M committee's behaviors and process.

3. **Coaches' observations and program debriefs:** Coaches summarized their observations of each L/M committee's behavior, process, and accomplishments at the end of both the initial three-day session and the one-day follow-up session. The coaches also conducted debriefing sessions with each L/M committee during both stages of the program and recorded their "key learnings" on flip charts.

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We conducted a computerized statistical analysis of the quantitative questionnaire data and a manual thematic analysis of the qualitative observation data.

What We Learned

Participant evaluations of the training were extremely positive. The vast majority of both labor and management participants said they would "strongly recommend" the program to colleagues serving on other L/M committees. Key program strengths included the following:

- The off-site residential structure of the program helped improve relationships across labor/management lines within the committees.

- Providing the High Performance Model of effective behaviors gave the L/M committees a practical framework for analyzing and improving their individual practices and group processes.

- Having the L/M committees go through their actual L/M process (rather than a simulation game or role reversal exercise) during the program enabled them to apply immediately what they had learned, rather than have to struggle with the abstract nature of "cross-contextual" learning.

- Assigning individual coaches to each L/M committee facilitated and intensified understanding, behavior and process changes, as well as concrete action planning within the L/M committees.

- Conducting a one-day follow-up session two to three months after the initial three-day program helped ensure follow-through on the actions and changes planned during the initial three-day session, and reinforced committee members' use of the High Performance Model effective behaviors.

The program contributed to positive changes in the L/M committee process as perceived by *both* sides of the participating L/M committees. The positive changes occurred around the pragmatic activities emphasized in both the program design and the coaches' facilitation assistance:

- Agenda Building
- Leveraging Resources
- Meeting Preparation
- Focusing on Results
- Systematic Problem-solving
- Selling Solutions

The program contributed to substantial shifts (across all 42 committees) in *both* sides' views of the L/M climate within their committees and work units, ranging from "occasional cooperation" to "active cooperation."

The training also contributed to actual as well as perceived process improvements and concrete accomplishments in the majority of L/M committees. Most of the *concrete accomplishments* occurr[ed] work site L/M committees. Examples include:

- Improvements in the physical working environment.
- Improvements in the administration of personnel policies and procedures.
- Formation of joint health and safety L/M committees where none had previously existed.
- Initiation of new procedures for monitoring the parties' compliance with L/M agreements.
- Preparation of joint proposals for professional development programs or quality of work life studies.
- Issuance or endorsement of joint L/M policy statements.
- New approaches to sharing information between management and the union.
- Public signing of joint L/M agreements and understandings.
- Resolution (or deferral of filings) of unfair labor practices/ notices of discipline/grievances.
- Acquisition of training or technical assistance for work site L/M committees.
- Granting of additional release time for L/M activities.

Most of the *process improvements* occurred in division level L/M committees. Examples includ

- Joint agenda preparation and fact finding.
- Establishment of new joint subcommittees or better use of existing ones.
- Increased frequency of L/M committee meetings.
- Assignment of more appropriate persons to L/M committee chair or co-chair positions.
- Greater use of off-the-record exchanges between the two sides or key individuals to probe for underlying interests and test receptivity to potential solutions.
- More manageable agendas with fewer, clearer and more specific items.
- Initiation of pre-planned self-assessments of L/M committee performance against "high performance" L/M behaviors.
- More self-control in meetings and greater uses of breaks, time-outs and caucuses to moderate reactions, ventilate feelings or formulate more measured responses.
- Documentation and enforcement of behavioral and procedural ground rules to structure L/M committee proceedings and ensure balanced and active participation.

The coaches' experiences facilitating 42 committees indicate that there are four stages of development that L/M committees typically go through on the way to becoming fully effective. These stages, and the "success factors" that committees are mastering at each stage, are shown in Exhibit 2.

Most of the L/M committees that participated in the program were in Stage Two at the start and progressed further within that stage or moved to Stage Three by the end of the program. Some L/M committees were in Stage One and had key members, including chairpersons, who resisted the program and behaved disruptively. These L/M committees were not "ready" for the program and needed a different form of intervention to help them progress to Stage Two.

Exhibit 2 -- Stages of L/M Committee Development

Stage One: Moderating Behavior	Stage Two: Building Relationships	Stage Three: Integrating Interests	Stage Four: Institutionalizing Cooperation
Exercises self-control	Supports the L/M process	Balances formal and informal activities	Executes influence strategies
Controls group dynamics	Knows the organization/ division/work site	Sells solutions	Leverages resources
Exhibits self-confidence	Projects and builds reliability	Applies systematic problem-solving techniques	Focuses on results
Keeps an open mind			

None of the L/M committees reached Stage Four either before or during the program. Many L/M committees went through the motions of Stage Four (e.g., developing action plans and following through to ensure they were carried out) before effectively completing Stage Three and ended up feeling that they had addressed and resolved inconsequential or one-sided issues.

What Next?

The overall program is considered by its joint labor and management sponsors to be one of the most successful activities they have ever undertaken together, and they are planning to implement the following recommendations to reinforce and extend the program's impact:

1. Continue to offer the full program to other L/M committees that wish to participate.

2. Establish a selection procedure for the program which ensures that L/M committees attend only if they are "ready" (e.g., they have reached at least developmental Stage Two).

3. Use the L/M committee Stages of Development as a framework for diagnosing L/M committees' needs for assistance, and provide process interventions appropriate to their stage of development. For example:

    ➢ Special coaching/consultation to the chairpersons of L/M committees in developmental Stage One.

- ➢ The High Performance program described in this article for L/M committees in developmental Stages Two and Three.

- ➢ An Institutionalization of Cooperation program -- which emphasizes the implementation, monitoring, adjustment, and continuous improvement of interest-based joint solutions to significant issues of mutual concern -- for L/M committees in (or close to) developmental Stage Four.

4. Provide specific skill-building programs and problem-solving tools which key off the current program's assessment and development of L/M committees against the High Performance Model.

■ *Conclusion*

Assessment and development against a research-based model of high performance enabled us to identify the *smallest* amount of change in individual behaviors and group processes that would produce the *largest* amount of performance improvement in 42 extremely diverse joint L/M committees. We therefore conclude that this behavioral approach, supported by skilled coaches or facilitators, is a reliable and cost effective way to move L/M committees in all employment sectors toward sustained higher levels of responsible and productive cooperation.

References

[1] Stephen Neubert is a founding partner and senior officer of Boston-Based Cambria Consulting.