Viewpoint

Practice Fields: Powerful Tools for Enhancing Performance

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For individuals and teams who want to master complex skills, practice is essential. Practice enables athletes to excel at sports, musicians to master music, and actors to enchant audiences. Practice works by allowing people to use skills in multiple low-risk experiences in special settings known as „practice fields." Here demands for superb performance, credibility, and confidence are temporarily suspended, exploratory inquiry is allowed, and „not knowing" is permitted.

Curiously, despite the proven efficacy of practice, few executives use it to hone their own – or their staff's – managerial competencies. *Yet,* organizational competencies involve highly complex skills that can be vastly improved with practice. In this article, we describe various kinds of practice fields and how they can help organizations enhance the performance of individuals and teams.

How Practice Fields Work

Typically, people in organizations interact with colleagues, evaluate issues, and make decisions without much time to reflect and without much, if any, advance practice for each situation. Practice fields dramatically change this traditional way of managing by providing a time and a place to explore options before taking action.

A practice field is as an opportunity to act „off-line" without the intent to perform a business task. Practice fields range from simple conversations that test ideas (e.g., „Hi, may I just run this idea by you and get some feedback?") to highly sophisticated computer simulation models that support strategy creation and management development. They provide dynamic settings in which people can understand current behaviors and test new ones, try out new skills, experiment with new assumptions and approaches, and develop scenarios to test decisions and actions in virtual reality – all without jeopardizing real-life positions, roles, or budgets. Practice fields help participants model their circumstances as well as their responses to those circumstances, then quickly explore the consequences of their actions over a range of variables.

Practice fields work by creating settings of „safe risk," in which the business risk is low (although participants may feel some personal risk in trying out new behaviors and being learners). When people are free to take risks with low perceived consequences, they enhance their abilities to address issues with substantial consequences. This improvement can happen over the long-term or almost immediately. Sometimes just by reducing risk, groups find they can act in fundamentally new ways. As soon as we say, „This is practice; we're here just to learn, and performance doesn't matter," performance can improve. Once a group realizes the performance level it is capable of, the „bar has been raised." This is why the transformational impact of practice fields is so high.

Types of Practice Fields

Practice fields help to build three kinds of capabilities:

• *Individual and team skills.* Practice fields such as role-plays, games, and reflective debriefs help people acquire new skills and improve them until they are ready to use them in their work.

• *Organizational capacity for problem exploration.* Practice fields using systems thinking, structured learning experiences, and dialogue help people explore the sources of complex problems involving multiple stakeholders.

• *Organizational ability to test alternative futures.* Practice fields such as thought experiments, scenario building, and computer simulation models explore how various decisions might affect or be affected by a range of possible futures.

Some common practice fields are described below, together with ways they are used to develop skills in individuals, groups, and organizations.

Role-Playing. Role-playing gives people an opportunity to practice a scene based on actual or hypothetical circumstances, with no negative consequences for „mistakes." Once engaged in role-playing, participants can usually see a situation with new eyes and experience it differently, thus broadening their range of responses to real-life situations. Role-playing is excellent for improving interpersonal skills, trying out new situations, and heightening self-awareness.

Role-plays can be used to practice sales and negotiation situations, performance management reviews, and potentially difficult presentations and conversations. In one large company, the Executive Vice President was perceived to be abrasive and belittling, making it difficult for others to challenge his views. The Senior Vice

President of Marketing wished to raise substantial issues about Marketing's role in the company in a forthcoming performance review, but worried (as did his team) that he would be ineffectual. A practice field was created in which the SVP role-played the upcoming conversation, someone else took on the role of the EVP, and the team coached. The team then used the tools of „productive conversation" to analyze the role-play and clarify how the SVP's thinking led to his way of interacting and thus contributed to the end result.

For the first time, the SVP had objective feedback about how his own defensiveness with the EVP was likely exacerbating the EVP's tendency to be hardhitting. By the end of the role-play, the SVP was much more effective in the practice conversation – a result that was reproduced in the actual performance review. In fact, that conversation between the EVP and the SVP marked a turning point in their relationship and in Marketing's ability to be „heard" within the organization.

Games. Games are often used to simulate managerial situations and highlight interactive challenges. There are many games available. At Innovation Associates, we use one called The Maze. The Maze is an eight-by-ten-foot checkerboard representing a terrain. A team of people must cross this terrain as quickly as possible and with the fewest possible missteps. Some of the squares can be occupied, while others „beep" when they are stepped on, signaling that they cannot be occupied. The game was designed to represent the challenges of meeting a shared goal through teamwork. Like real-life projects, The Maze has a beginning and an end. Certain rules must be followed, individuals have particular responsibilities, and the entire team has the shared responsibility of getting itself across The Maze. Teams typically move through The Maze in much the same way they tackle projects in real-life. Some teams make plans, assign responsibilities, and execute the plans quickly and effectively. Other teams are disorganized and lacking in trust; they find the process difficult and dispiriting. By debriefing the experience, participants gain learning that is easily transferred to work.

„Debriefs" or „After-Action Reviews." In the middle of, or following, a business session, teams can take a „time out" to review the following questions: What results did we want? What actions did we take to try to achieve the desired results? What results did we actually get? What might we do differently to achieve better results next time? Supporting questions include: What went well? What could have gone better? Did we communicate effectively? Did we involve all the right stakeholders? Did we gather sufficient information and interpret it clearly? What are we learning about how to create the results we want?

Organizations are using debriefs after a wide range of activities, from in-house training sessions to major multinational projects. While the debrief is designed to help people produce better decisions, actions, and results in the future, not every debrief fulfills its intended purpose. Many debriefs degenerate into blaming sessions aimed at finding scapegoats for whatever didn't go according to plan. Properly managed, however, a debrief can serve as a valuable opportunity for people to learn more about what they are doing, what they are thinking, how they interact with each other, and the actions they choose. At its best, a debrief allows the team to move into a more reflective and more productive mode of interaction, which can be carried back into the business assignment.

Systems Thinking. Systems thinking tools, which allow groups to develop a shared understanding of cause and effect, can form the basis of powerful practice fields. In one notable example, a systems thinking workshop transformed the relationship of members of a new strategic alliance.

During the mid-1980s, many consumer products manufacturers were locked in an adversarial cycle of deteriorating relations with their customers. Procter & Gamble (P&G) was particularly concerned about its relationship with its very large customer, the North American retailing giant, Wal-Mart.

P&G came to market with an array of promotions. Power-buying Wal-Mart, with its policy of everyday low prices, used the advantageous pricing of P&G's promotions to stock up at discount, compensating for the added cost of handling promotions. Wal-Mart's buying skewed P&G's production schedules, cash flow, and, ultimately, bottom line. P&G responded with more promotions. Wal-Mart countered with more forward buying. Faced with an unacceptable level of rising costs, P&G decided to meet the challenge head-on and turn an „enemy" into an ally, by forging a strategic alliance with Wal-Mart.

Once the decision had been made at senior levels to forge an alliance, there was the challenge of the critical first meeting between members of the actual alliance team. The members representing both organizations viewed each other with distrust. Rather than conduct a formal business meeting, they met in a practice field – a multiday systems thinking workshop facilitated by Innovation Associates. The objective was to build a shared understanding of the effects of each other's actions.

The systems thinking approach and facilitation provided an orderly examination of the structure each company had built around its promotion and buying process. Managers from both P&G and Wal-Mart saw how each other's actions could be understood in explicable and reasonable patterns, rather than as self-interested maneuvers. By focusing on each organization's unwritten rules and by linking business rules and common-sense personal rules in a now-shared perspective, the companies started what became a powerful strategic alliance and

the model for many others in the industry. The insights they developed about promotions from that workshop formed the basis for an unprecedented set of actions by P&G. The strategic alliance team was able to arrange a first – a nonpromotion arrangement for all P&G products to Wal-Mart. The results were so favorable that the policy spread – until P&G broke with the industry by instituting everyday low pricing across the company. P&G has reported significant increase in profitability after deemphasizing its promotions.

Structured Learning Experiences. Structured learning experiences are useful practice fields for identifying and changing a team's dysfunction, since they offer a setting in which the team can consciously change its behaviors and practice new ones. For example, a dysfunctional team doing an Outward Bound course tends to exhibit the same habits and patterns of behavior that lead members into trouble at work. Once out of the office, participants can't blame external factors for their own inability to work together.

In one case, the CEO was an ex-Marine colonel hired from outside the organization. Charged with leading his „troops" into a new era, he did not take time to understand the culture. Increasingly frustrated with the passivity of his top team in relation to his command-and-control style, he decided to take them on an outdoor exercise to help change the group dynamics. The team was assigned a task that was structurally similar to projects faced at work: they were required to retrieve the cure for cancer from a small island in the middle of a lake by suspending someone out on a bridge.

The CEO quickly envisioned the right solution and tried to promote it several times, only to have it regularly rejected by his staff. The team ended up dropping people into the lake three times. As a result of this experience, the CEO and his team became reflective enough to review what was happening. People were finally able to say, „Half of us don't understand what you want, and the other half are afraid that they don't. And we can never talk about it." Humor and frustration greased the wheels for a new approach, the dynamics did change, and a more consultative approach emerged, which produced better results for the organization.

Structured learning experiences are also useful for new start-up teams. Putting a new team of people in a structured learning situation helps them to quickly discover how they work well and where they break down. For example, a chemicals group in Hong Kong that had just been assigned to a major start-up project, spent two weeks going through different types of training, including three days together in an outdoor exercise. „We have learned more about each other in three days than we normally would have in three months," members reported. Significantly, the team believes that its project came in weeks ahead of schedule and 30 percent below budget because it went through a structured learning experience, which enabled members to align themselves as a team.

Dialogue. By „dialogue" we mean not ordinary conversation, but a highly productive exchange of views by people skilled in examining their own and each other's assumptions and inferences. This kind of dialogue is described by Peter Senge in *The -Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization* as a place to practice team-learning skills and the quintessential place to practice suspending assumptions. Dialogue enables people to observe their individual thoughts and the way thought operates in groups.

Managerial teams who become adept at dialogue find that not only does their ability to track discrepancies in thinking improve, but they are better able to make sense out of conflict. As teams learn how to learn together, they become more adept at moving rapidly through managerial challenges.

For example, an information systems group was facing significant challenges in its organization. Rather than have yet another frustrating and inconclusive discussion, members allowed themselves to „dialogue," each reflecting on the situation without attempting to resolve it. Interestingly, as each member momentarily gave up his or her solution, the group created an opportunity for a much more profound understanding of its issues, leading eventually to a better approach than had been suggested before.

Thought Experiments. The simplest and most straightforward practice fields are „thought experiments," in which people test an idea by sharing it and imagining how it might develop. „What if we did it this way?" is a thought-experiment question. For example, one leadership group considering the merits of separate vs. interacting business units, considered the question „Suppose we acted independently, each responsible for maximizing its own bottom line?" Quickly they painted a picture of businesses optimizing their results in a way that sub-optimized the firm's total performance, and became convinced of the need for cross-business coordination.

It's surprising how rarely people in organizations use thought experiments in a playful or nonjudgmental way to explore possibilities for action. Most likely this is because organizations value knowing answers more than exploring questions.

Scenario Building. Inquiry to explore future possibilities further enhances thought experimentation and leads into the construction of scenarios. These scenarios do not require the rigorous analysis of market futures, but can be created from managers' current knowledge. For example, one Fortune 500 senior management team was in the process of formulating a radically new strategy based on strategic alliances with independent dealers.

Members of the team privately expressed concerns about the strategy, but the CEO (who had thought up the strategy) was firm in his stance that the strategy would be successful. In a workshop, the team was invited to create a „worse case" scenario, responding to the question „What would happen if all of our worst tendencies as an organization were manifested as we tried to implement the strategy?" Gleefully the managers invented the future scenario, poking fun at themselves and raising issues that were too controversial for normal discussions. The CEO soon joined in, and concluded at the end: „Is there anyone who doesn't think we have a lot of work to do to improve the strategy ?!" Following that meeting, the team put in many months of hard work, which resulted in a much more robust strategy than had been originally conceived.

Computer Simulation Models. Perhaps the most sophisticated practice field is a computer simulation model that forms the basis for a „microworld." Often called „management flight simulators," these computer models enable users to explore „real life" situations without „crashing and burning" their organizations. Within the context of a particular microworld, users can identify specific results they want to achieve, then develop and test different strategies to achieve those results. Users get to see the results of their strategies and actions almost immediately and can therefore make changes in their strategies and actions to improve the results of their efforts. Very powerful computerized „war games" and strategy simulations can be both involving and shocking, causing participants to test deeply held assumptions.

Computer simulation models offer several advantages as practice fields. They enable participants to:

• Engage in shared reflection and experimentation about a particular situation

• View and understand a complex system and the key variables within it

• Identify and understand interdependencies among key variables and forces at play

• Identify and track causal factors throughout the system to determine why a particular action may (or may not) produce a particular result

• Understand that not all variables and not all actions have equal impact

• Reveal, explore, and modify mental models

• Focus attention on short-term and long-term results

• Understand the intended and unintended consequences of actions

• Recognize the influence of structures within the system on performance

The same Fortune 500 team mentioned earlier commissioned a small computer simulation with which it could test out various aspects of its strategy. Prior to the workshop with the simulation, the team espoused its belief in equitable relationships with its independent dealers and the need for a total-system perspective. However, in the course of the simulation, managers' actual tendencies emerged. Set up into teams representing the management and dealers, and then presented with challenging market conditions, the managers immediately squeezed dealer margins to protect short-term company profits. Dealers finding themselves (in the simulation) without adequate financial resources were unable to invest in the innovative marketing strategies desired by the parent company. Eventually, sales and profits – for everyone – suffered. Debriefing the actions taken during the simulation led to fundamental changes in the company's policy on dealer relations.

Conclusion

In these high-pressured days, when few senior people have time to mentor even the most promising of their subordinates, executives and managers at all stages of their careers are now in charge of their own development. One of the best ways to build competence is by practicing. We have seen firsthand how highly competent professionals have benefited from many kinds of practice. In creating their own practice fields, they have become better learners. As a result, they have become more effective not only at work, but in the rest of their lives as well.

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