LESSON 2: LEADER THOUGHT PROCESS

In this course, you will learn how to apply behavioral science approaches and theories to analyze leadership situations, explain problems, and develop actions to reinforce what is going well and address what is not. The figure below outlines four steps to help achieve this:

1. Identify What is Happening
2. Account for What is Happening
3. Formulate Leader Actions
4. Evaluate/Assess

In the first step, identify situational factors that compel you to act. These are called Areas of Interest. In the second, step, account for what is happening from your own experience, combined with the behavioral sciences, to analyze and explain why an area of interest exists. In the third step, apply your knowledge to formulate a leader action plan to address the areas of interest. Finally, in the fourth step, evaluate to determine if the actions you took successfully addressed the areas of interest.

**The Leader Thought Process**



Step I. – Identify What is Happening

Identify **Areas of Interest.** An area of interest is any factor or situation that compels you as a leader to act. Is this a factor or a situation that compels you to set your coffee cup down and respond?

Examine each situation and gather information to determine if the goals of the organization can be met while also meeting the needs of individual members.

Areas of interest can be generally grouped into two broad categories:

1. A current problem the leader needs to address
2. Maintaining or improving motivation, satisfaction, and/or performance of the followers in your organization

Areas of interest should be specific observations about:

* A problem
* An opportunity
* A decision

At this step in the leader thought process, avoid generalizing or pre-judging the nature of the area of interest. It can be challenging to not pre-judge the nature of the area of interest; however, it is essential at this point in the process to avoid assigning causes to behavior or to begin developing a plan. Simply identify your specific observations. Also, each area of interest should be a stand-alone observation.

When writing areas of interest:

1. **Be as specific as possible, without over-generalizing or jumping ahead to a solution.**
2. **State areas of interest so that they stand alone.** The need for leader action should be apparent, without reading further into the situation. There must be at least one identifiable, tangible action the leader will take for each area of interest.
3. **State areas of interest from the focal leader’s perspective.** Areas of interest are factors that the leader can act upon, though some will require action and some will be at the discretion of the leader. Areas of interest always impact the goals of the organizational leader.

In this course, you will identify areas of interest through the use of case studies. These case studies involve situations where the focal leader needs to take action. However, in your organization, you can be proactive about identifying areas of interest to prevent problems from occurring and/or to enhance motivation, satisfaction, or performance.

Step II. – Account for What Is Happening

After identifying areas of interest, and rather than rushing into action, leaders seek to account for what is happening. In order to account for what is happening, leaders will:

1. Relate areas of interest to one another by constructing a **logical chain of events**
2. Identify and apply relevant theories to **analyze** the situation and **explain** the behaviors
3. Identify the **root cause**

This process should help provide a coherent and unified understanding of the situation upon which to base the leader’s actions.

**Logical Chain of Events**

The first step to account for what is happening is to relate areas of interest to one another, either by time or causal relationships, and ideally, both. Therefore, a logical chain of events will arrange the events in a time sequence that illuminates the cause-effect relationships. Once this step is complete, take a moment to look for patterns of behavior.

**Application of Relevant Theories**

Theories provide frameworks for making sense of leader observations. The second step is to analyze by searching the situation for information that can be understood using the leadership theories and concepts to understand motivation, satisfaction, and/or performance. In using the theory, you will perform two steps – analyze and explain.

* Analyze. To use a theory to understand a situation, first determine if the particular theory applies to the factors at hand. Search for familiar patterns and relationships. Look for relevant variables for how the theory applies to the situation.
* Explain. Use the selected theory to explain why specific areas of interest are occurring. What problems or issues can be explained by using the theory to analyze the situation? You are not explaining the theory; you are using the theory to explain why one or more area of interst is happening.

**Root Cause**

The root cause identifies and accounts for the bottom line of the problems prescribed in the case. Complex situations ofen have many parts that are accounted for by a wide number of theories. However, there is often a central or underlying problem that causes others to happen.

Step III. – Formulate Leader Actions

There are two distinct steps in formulating a leader action:

1. Reflect on your analysis and explanation to select the best theoretical action
2. Design a leader action plan

**Select**

On the basis of your analysis and explanation in Step II, choose the best possible theoretical leader action(s) for the situation. Theories serve to inform your actions by presenting various options. In this step, select the best option(s) to address the areas of interest. This is a statement of ***what*** you will do not ***how*** you will do it.

**Design a Leader Plan**

Take the selected theoretical action from above, and organize it/them into actions in the form of specific behaviors that address the areas of interest. In this step, you properly apply the theoretical leader action to the situation. In other words, you are translating theory to action by stating precisely how you would act in this situation. Your leader plan, and the leader actions included in the plan should:

* Be realistic
* Not create new problems or allow major problems to go uncorrected
* Not contradict one another or cancel them out
* Resolve the root cause
* Address all areas of interest
* Support overall organizational goals

Step IV. – Assess Your Leader Plan

In this step, you address what you have done to assess the impact of your plan on the situation and make adjustments, or begin again, if necessary. Even the best plans need assessment and revision. This reflective portion of the leader thought process is critical, but often overlooked. In this step, you must develop a plan to review the success or failure of your leader plan to see if it is resolving the issues you set out to resolve. If the areas of interest are not being addressed or if the leader plan has created other issues, you must go back through the leader thought process with a new set of areas of interest.

**References**

Associates of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. (1981). *Leadership in Organizations*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Associates of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. (1999). *Course Guide for PL 300: Military Leadership (AY 99-00)*. West Point, NY: Authors.

**The First Case Study**

Complete the first step of the Leader Thought Process (Identify What is Happening) by scanning for Areas of Interest in the following case study:

You have been the day watch lieutenant for three weeks now, and you are gradually adjusting to your new responsibilities. You are generally pleased with the performance of your watch. There is, however, a potential problem with one of your Sergeants. The day before you reported to duty the Captain selected Sergeant Hedgerow to be one of your Sergeants. Unfortunately, he was not someone you knew well. Because you knew he would be one of your key subordinates, one of the first things you did after you took over was to go talk with Sergeant Hedgerow. You were immediately impressed with his self-reported ability and experience.

Since that time, however, the picture looks a little different. Although Sgt. Hedgerow gets his basic job done, he seems to be missing the spark of a strong leader. Hedgerow does a good job approving reports, monitoring the arrests, and even responding to requests for a field supervisor. However, he does not seem to be actively involved in training the watch and his roll calls are limited to reciting mandatory notices. He does not involve himself in any problem-solving efforts. Hedgerow does as he is told, but he never displays initiative or suggests improvements to procedures.

Wanting to discuss these issues with Sgt. Hedgerow, you find him alone in the break room and strike up a conversation. When you asked him if there were any problems, he said everything was going fine.

Use the first step in the Leader Thought Process.

I. (Step I) ***Identify*** the **Areas of Interest**.

1.

2.

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7.

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10.

(If necessary, continue listing **Areas of Interest** on another page.)