

## Karl Heckman Leadership Development

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# Case Study:

## Leadership Coaching Program for a First- Line Supervisor

*A report on the effectiveness of performance coaching to alleviate problems with first line managers and enhance the performance of their departments.*

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# Case Study:

## Leadership Coaching Program for a First-Line Supervisor

*A report on the effectiveness of performance coaching to alleviate problems with first line managers and enhance the performance of their departments.*

*This case study is offered as an example of the scope of the coaching engagement; the process; and solutions actually attained. Certain specific information regarding the client, the client company and the engagement are intentionally left out in the interest of furthering our interests and understanding without compromising the confidentiality of the coach/client and the coach/client company relationships.*

*This coaching engagement involved working with more than one client within the company. For clarity only one client program is studied in this report.*

### **Background: The Company**

The subject Company is a leading manufacturer and worldwide distributor of explosives used primarily in the mining industry. It also manufactures fertilizer and materials used in the manufacture of plastic products. The Company has manufacturing facilities, distribution centers and business offices throughout America, Canada and Australia.

Although there have been numerous changes in the management and ownership of the company, The Company has been in business for 170 years.

Portland, Oregon, USA is home to a manufacturing plant opened in 1973. It is this facility that is the basis for this report.

## **Background: The Problem**

At a manufacturing facility in Portland, Oregon, USA the Plant Manager was concerned about a low morale situation among employees. The internal strife made for less than cooperative working conditions and occasionally manifested itself as outright hostility between departments and individuals. In one instance two 20+ year company members, both Senior Technicians nearly came to blows over a minor dispute. Each member in question was more valuable as a current employee than as a fired employee. The Plant Manager realized that this incident was a symptom of a more fundamental problem and decided to take actions to alleviate the root causes in addition to dealing with the immediate disciplinary situation.

Executive Coach, Karl Heckman, was engaged to coach some of the senior supervisory employees for the purpose of reducing the strife and tension in the workplace and increase cooperation among the employee's direct reports.

This report summarizes one of those coaching relationships.

## **Background: The Client**

The client was a 30 year veteran of the company and had lived through several changes in management and company ownership. In each instance of ownership change the client perceived that the new policies placed in effect regarding retirement funds, pay raises and nearly every benefit were diminished. In addition the new management made policy changes the veteran employee deemed as senseless and in some cases foolish. The coach did not investigate the validity of these claims. They were taken at face value as a cause of mistrust and resentment of the company by the employee independent of the accuracy or import of the individual issues. This feeling of resentment was common throughout the operations and maintenance departments among the senior people who had been present for the changes over the last three owners. Apparently the claims were basically sound in that they caused resentment and contempt for many of these changes and the managers whose duty it was to support them.

The client was 59 years old, male, with high school education. He had been working in the industry all his life and had worked up from apprentice positions to a senior technician position and the lead man of the maintenance group. He had been the maintenance supervisor for 7 years. The historic length of stay in the position prior to him was 2 years maximum. His position as senior tech made him responsible for the scheduling of corrective and preventive maintenance of plant equipment and scheduling an overseeing the work load of 7 direct reports (DRs). Of his DRs, the two most senior had been with the company as long as the client, which in one case caused tension between the DR and Supervisor.

He had attended a five day supervision training course facilitated by a local community college and felt that to be of little value. He believed that the principles of leadership taught in the course had value in some application somewhere but not in the world and workplace he occupied.

## **The Problem: Management's POV**

The Plant Manager stated that a recurring theme in the plant when there was some unhappy issue to be resolved could be summarized as; "it's always Maintenance". He understood that such sweeping generalities are rarely true; however there is usually some foundation for the statement.

The situation became urgent when a disagreement among the Maintenance Supervisor and one of his senior direct reports became violent, nearly coming to blows. The Plant Manager chose to forego automatic dismissal of the parties. Instead he chose to take actions to change attitudes rather than the more common approach of changing out the personnel. These were both experienced and valuable employees and were worth more to the company working that being dismissed. The resulting search and hiring process would be costly as well as any legal costs resulting from potential lawsuits sure to be initiated from the recently unemployed. The plant was already light on personnel and people ready for supervisory roles.

If using an executive coach to remedy the immediate issue and make progress in relieving the long term problem of unhelpful attitudes within the facility was successful, the financial investment would be much less than the potential costs of lawsuits, etc. Additionally, in the event of a lawsuit over the issue the company could show how they in good faith did their due diligence in bringing in outside experts at the companies expense, in a spirit of partnership to solve the situation amicably. In the case of legal action against the company, the coaching expense was a small investment as insurance to demonstrate lack of negligence.

## **The Problem: The Client's POV**

The client readily acknowledged that his communication style was brusque and his frequent attempts at humor were often interpreted as insensitive if not occasionally outright insulting. These communication gaffs were a regular source of tension in the department. DRs often believed their abilities and contribution to the company to be marginalized by the supervisor's lack of respect shown them or confidence in their abilities.

The client spoke of the incident as well as the long standing tension and animosity between himself and the DR in question as a conflict of personalities. He believed that both he and the DR were too old to change and would just have to live with the situation and try to stay out of each others way. The client saw no real possibility for anything more than mutual tolerance. As long as everyone did their jobs two people could coexist in spite of a strong dislike for each other.

The client was not enthusiastic about the possibility of coaching. He was open to the coaching as a curiosity and with a desire to do what the company asked of him. He was aware that all was not well in his department and he was willing to try something new even though he was openly apprehensive that positive results would result.

## **The Problem: Other Influences**

The maintenance department by nature is a group of strong individual personalities who once receiving their day's orders act autonomously to carry out their duties. They often work alone in remote areas of the plant with no supervision or oversight. The Maintenance Supervisor is ultimately accountable for the quality of the work however his leadership style was to send them on their way without personally observing the work done. He placed a great deal of trust in the individual to do the job correctly, although this high level of trust was often interpreted by the DRs as apathy.

## **The Problem: Initial Observations**

With the client's years on the job and in his current position, he felt that he was doing all that was possible already. By agreeing to being coached he was humoring the company and the coach more than being hopeful of improving any aspect of the workplace.

He was good natured and outgoing. He had a dry sense of humor and delivery that could easily be mistaken for sarcasm. He was mildly suspicious of coaching as something to be embarrassed about, somewhat like a child sent to the principle's office.

When asked he stated that he was not "a reader" and giving him reading assignments would be a waste of time.

The client was strongly opinionated about many things; mostly leaning toward cynicism and derision. Any brand of altruism was not likely to be a viable motivation, at least initially.

The client regularly used self-limiting language when referring to himself and others (e.g. - can't, impossible, I'll try, I tried, it won't work, no way, I'll forget, he won't, he can't).

The Plant Manager (PM) had a characteristically dominant personality (characteristic for a person in the Number One position in a manufacturing facility) and was frustrated by his inability to obtain a more cooperative attitude in the Maintenance Department to date.

Between the PM and the client organizationally there was a Maintenance Superintendent whom the client reported to directly. The Maintenance Superintendent's management style appeared to be rigorously non-aggressive and non-confrontational to the extreme. He wished that things would change and he informed the coach that he had instructed the client to change them on several occasions. Results on that edict were not in evidence.

The Maintenance Superintendent seemed to have no sense of accountability or ownership of the trouble in his department. Everyone knew who the troublemakers were and he being not one of them seemed to absolve him of any responsibility for the situation, even though it was indeed his department. He believed the problem to be his subordinate; the client.

## **Course of Action: Defining the Coaching Relationship**

Meetings were held between the coach and the Plant Manager to set performance benchmarks and determine in advance what would constitute a successful coaching engagement. The background of the work environment over the past months and years; training programs; job descriptions and performance requirements of the position of the client were examined as well.

The Plant Manager and coach agreed on an initial course of action that included the coach interviewing the clients' direct supervisor (the Maintenance Superintendent) and then the client to discover if a coaching relationship was likely to produce positive results. That done, the coach agreed to take the engagement. The coaching relationship was agreed upon by the Plant Manager, the Maintenance Superintendent, the client and the coach in a joint meeting.

The coach emphasized that the coaching relationship and ensuing conversations would be in a spirit of enhancing performance of the client and his department rather than a remedial or punitive activity.

A series of specific outcomes for the client and his department were determined to measure the effectiveness of the coaching.

## **Course of Action: Coaching Considerations**

The job description for the client was a very general document containing mostly requirements to do the job. Terms like "mechanical ability"; "able to supervise others"; "direct the work of others"; were not useful as performance standards. There was no written performance standard for the position, any qualification or advancement standards.

The Plant Manager and the Maintenance Superintendent had some specific outcomes and issues to be addressed in the coaching. Some terms used by the Plant Manager and the Maintenance Superintendent to describe both the problems and desired outcomes for the client's department were vague and non-specific. "It doesn't run very smooth"; "they spend a lot of energy fighting policies that will not change"; for example. The coach was compelled to find ways to quantify these exceptions to be able to measure progress.

The lack of performance standards and the reinforcement of 30 years of operating without any made for a challenge to suddenly introduce the concept of conforming to a performance standard that was intuitive to senior management but not communicated accurately to those it applied to. Therefore, using an established performance standard as a coaching strategy was of low value. (Ultimately the client generated his own unofficial performance standard through the coaching process).

The client was 6 years from retirement and believed his career had advanced as far as it was going to. Considering the positions possible for him and the career paths of those currently holding those positions, this was a realistic view. He would retire before those whose positions he might move into.

Since ambition and probability of advancing into the next higher position were at a minimum, having the client prepare himself for advancement was a coaching strategy of no value.

Pay raises were given annually using an arbitrary ranking process. No one explained to the coach's understanding how the process worked. Essentially the department heads had a meeting where they lobbied for the merits of their people and ranked them according to preference of the department head and his articulation of why Employee A should be ranked above or below Employee B. This ranking was across departmental boundaries; Operations was in the same ranking as Shipping as was Maintenance and Administration, etc. Therefore, using a meritorious pay increase as motivation for the client was of no value. (In fact this system generated frustration and anger among the employees. The difference in the pay increase between the #37<sup>th</sup> ranking and the #38<sup>th</sup> ranking was miniscule; the status factor was the sticking point.)

## **Course of Action: Coaching Underway**

Coaching meetings were held weekly in the client's office. The duration of the meetings was typically one to two hours. After sufficient progress (four months), the schedule was shifted to meeting every other week.

Issues of confidentiality were made clear to the client and the relationships of coach/client/client's company were understood. (What the client says to the coach is confidential unless it endangers the plant or other people. The company will receive updates as to the progress and direction of the coaching program they are paying for without divulging the client's personal specifics)

The client and the coach worked out a series of benchmarks by which the success of the work together would be measured. These specific goals mirrored the goals set by the coach and senior management for the client. The coach did not say, "Here is what the boss wants to see from you". Instead the conversation was "What does the company need from the person in your position?"

Due to the nature of the client's supervisory position and the continuously running machinery of the plant, there were occasional interruptions. At the appropriate time in the coaching relationship these "urgencies" were used as teachable moments for the client to observe the environment he helped to establish and maintain.

When an interruption caused the client to go to the location of a situation in the plant he would often invite the coach to attend. These observations of the client interacting with others were valuable. Observing a five minute interaction typically gave more insight into the client's attitudes and behaviors than hours of conversation. Sometimes the crux of a particular issue would be instantly clear to the coach even though invisible to the client in the moment.

Finding motivation that inspired the client to make shifts was a challenge. As mentioned previously the client's career outlook was limited therefore finding a motivation *toward* career advancement seemed to be a dead end. What did initially interest the client was motivation to alleviate his immediate pain, i.e. - get senior management off his back. (Motivation *away from*)

## Course of Action: Client Shifts

Ultimately the client made many attitude and behavioral shifts. Some of these shifts are easy to write as a sentence or two yet represent weeks or months of work and a major shift in thinking for the client. This list is not in order of importance or significance.

- **Time Management Improvements** – Of the chronic complaints about the client a monthly report was consistently late and senior management wanted scheduling done farther in advance. The client was aware of these requests, however felt powerless to gain enough extra time to do anything other than put out the fires in front of him and worry about tomorrow's fires tomorrow. Part of his lack of having a supervisory presence in the plant was constantly dealing with "emergencies" kept him from managing himself effectively through the workday. He regularly stayed 2 hours after working hours doing the administrative tasks that didn't get done during the course of the normal workday. Annually he turned in more overtime than the rest of the department combined. Through the coaching process he made marked improvements in these areas:
  - His is the first department to turn in the monthly report as a routine.
  - He now takes plant tours twice daily to check in on the work progress and connect with DRs. This conveyed the importance of the task and validated the DR's effort.
  - Tours aide his ability to schedule proactively by having more knowledge of the job status vice only getting an end of day report.
  - Increasing delegated responsibility in key places reduced some redundancy of effort and reduced his direct involvement in several time consuming routine activities.
  - His own overtime was reduced to approximately 40% of previous levels initially and continues to decrease as he becomes more masterful with his time/workload continuum.
- **Communication, Verbal** – The client's face to face communications with Direct Reports and vendors at the beginning of the coaching relationship were often observed to be unclear. The same instruction had to be repeated with additional information several times before the listener was comfortable with the intent of the message. The client was not unaware of this phenomenon and believed the communication difficulty to be that of the listener. The client used unfortunate humor selections in a well meaning attempt to build rapport and camaraderie among his department. These gaffs usually caused someone to react negatively. Additionally:
  - The client is aware of how his verbal communications sometimes caused confusion and apprehension in others. Through the coaching he became adept at clear concise language and learned to convey messages quickly and accurately. This relieved stress in the work

environment and improved DR confidence in the supervisor and in what they were doing.

- The client learned to observe listeners reactions to his communications and adjust appropriately to convey the message he intended with no adverse consequences.
  - The client learned to curb his humor attempts understanding that "I thought it was funny" didn't justify the damage done (developing an appropriate sense of humor and comic timing is beyond the scope of this coaching relationship).
  - The client is more able to distinguish DR's random comments from disguised requests for assistance.
- **Interactions Down the Organization** – Initially The client had minimal interaction with DRs. His leadership style was predominantly "Telling", as in "go and do this and that". He would instruct DRs to call for him if they needed help. They interpreted this to mean 'call me before you screw up' and the last thing a DR wanted to do was call him. This played out so that the most confident DRs never talked to him about anything and the less confident DRs would not make a move without consulting him for fear they would make a mistake.
    - The client found ways to regularly communicate both positive and negative messages to DRs.
    - The client became observant of the types of assistance requested to ascertain whether these requests were symptoms of other issues, as well as indicating possible candidates for succession.
- **Interactions Up the Organization** – Initially the client had little respect for Senior Management (SM) and actually carried a measure of contempt for SM. He admired a Plant Manager many years ago and measured everyone according to the memory of that PM. He resisted changes in policy or procedures. He routinely communicated these changes in a negative fashion to his department. Rarely confrontational he maintained a passive aggressive stance that undermined company and senior management's credibility. Through the coaching he made several major shifts in attitude.
    - The client developed some empathy for senior management which allowed him to have respect for the company and superiors.
    - He is more willing to view changes in policy and procedures as a normal event in business and understood that there may be compelling reasons for the specifics of those changes that he may not be privy to.
    - He has more respect for senior management as well as more understanding of their responsibilities and the fact that he may not have all the information.
    - He understands how the environment of business and leadership needs have changed during his career and that comparing past leaders to present leaders is not necessarily a fair or accurate comparison.

- He has less resistance to actions and decisions of seniors due to increased understanding that he does not have all the information and those senior to him are capable people who were not given their responsibilities because they are fools.
- **Company Loyalty** – The client had a strong distrust of the company that he made clear to all. Through the coaching he made positive shifts to:
  - Understanding the value of doing the best he could with what he had to work with instead of constantly moaning about the way it used to be or the way it ought to be.
  - He was encouraged to act in ways to benefit the people around him rather than dragging everyone down.
  - He understands the value in promoting company programs with positive intent, even when he thinks the program is stupid.
  - He was challenged to make his voice heard appropriately in constructive ways to bring about positive changes rather than simply denouncing the efforts of others.
  - He views his department as part of the greater whole and is able to cooperate more readily with other departments instead of competing with them in nonproductive ways.
- **Creating Environment** – Initially the environment in the Maintenance Department was one of 'I'll do what is directly asked of me, but no more'. Ultimately the client as supervisor came to understand how to observe the work environment and how he could effect that environment. Specifically:
  - The client is working toward creating a cooperative environment rather than the existing hostile one.
  - Having a standard of excellence vice 'good enough'
  - He understands how excellence pays in the long term.
  - Leading the department to value positive attributes like thinking ahead and doing the best possible instead of minimal effort.
  - Demonstrating appreciation of DRs as a regular occurrence.
  - Consciously mentoring people before they require assistance.
- **Personal Effectiveness**
  - The client developed his personal value proposition to the company.
  - The client's increased time management and delegating abilities make him more personally more effective in the duties he alone must perform.

- **Supervisory Effectiveness** – The client improved his effectiveness through all of the above and below listed issues. In addition his influence was positively developed through:
  - More effective morning meetings. These meetings used to regularly initiate a wave of discontent. Through more aware communications he began to view this meeting as an opportunity rather than an unpleasant chore.
  - He began to demonstrate the importance of the job through more involved supervision without micromanaging.
  - He fosters a spirit of partnership with DRs instead of 'every man for himself'.
  - He increased the amount and scope of delegation in the interest of his personal time management, spreading the information base and developing others.
  
- **Succession Planning** – Initially the client had no one identified to replace him or substitute for him in case of illness or etc. Currently the client is:
  - Grooming two DRs as likely successors;
  - Systematizing office and many activities so that someone else can fill in for him. (Many admin activities were uniquely his and anyone trying to jump into the job would be hopelessly lost until they reinvented everything);
  - Operating as he would want the Maintenance Supervisor to operate if he were advanced to the next level, Maintenance Superintendent.

### **Course of Action: Coaching Dead Ends**

Finding motivation that inspired the client to make shifts was a challenge. The client's career outlook was limited therefore finding a motivation toward personal ambitions seemed to be a dead end.

Self study and extracurricular assignments and suggestions achieved little or no results. Whether the client's motivation was insufficient or more pressing matters occupied his time or whether he was unfamiliar with self study techniques, the coach did not reach a conclusion for the lack of progress in that area.

## **Solutions & Recommendations: Root Causes**

Many of the issues faced by the client in his role as Maintenance Supervisor were observed to be indicative of issues shared by others in the company. This applied particularly to the veteran staff that started up the plant in 1973 and are still on the job today.

The following list catalogues causes specific to the challenges with this employee and his department. This list also demonstrates company wide issues that, left unchecked, are likely to cause repeats of the same type of situations in the most obvious cases. In the less obvious and probably more common cases, these issues represent a loss of productive capacity for the company. Performance of the company in every measurable characteristic would likely increase with the eradication of these issues.

Understanding that some issues are more easily resolved than others, this report makes no assessment of the complexity of the issue. This list is not in order of importance or significance.

- Lack of consistent productive training – The company culture is one of minimal knowledge. People know just enough to get the job done without understanding “the why”. This leads to poor decisions in abnormal or forward thinking situations. Lack of knowledge leads to lack of ownership and concern.
- Lack of Qualification standards – Having no standard level of required knowledge, individual level of knowledge varied greatly in scope and accuracy within the same job classification.
- Lack of clear advancement procedures – Employees have little or no motivation to work toward advancement since there is no defined path for advancement.
- Low standards of excellence – “Good enough” is good enough, “that should keep [Operations] happy for a while” were common mantras. ‘Keep the plant running’ and ‘keep your head down’ seemed to be a standard mode of operation.
- Lack of clear concise verbal communications – Information was often passed in short ambiguous verbal exchanges that led to people coming back later for clarification. The impact of this was a constant state of functional confusion and hesitation. It also caused missteps that caused frustration and a high percentage of rework. The department ran at a lower efficiency level in response to this routine of ‘one step forward, two steps back’.
- Lack of compelling company vision – Regardless of what market slogan the company printed on its memos, the status quo is king.
- Lack of qualified mentoring – Any mentoring done is ad hoc by personnel who may or may not be qualified to do the mentoring. This contributes to poor attitudes being passed down to the most junior employees as well as questionable skill sets.
- Outdated systems – For example; scheduling of work was done on an Excel spreadsheet and was cumbersome and slow. There were constant management complaints about the slowness of scheduling, lack of advance scheduling and the difficulty in making schedule changes. Off the shelf project management

software would be a great help in scheduling as well as the machinery history and manpower reports that were compiled manually.

- Regime changes that cause resentment – Changes in ownership and management are common and will continue to be so. While employees everywhere tend to resent change at some level, employees' feeling they have been done wrong by the company is a recipe for chronic employee resistance issues.
- Lack of or underutilized Leadership Skills – Within the Maintenance Department there was no display of strong leadership observed. The department head was a minimally present manager who relied on the supervisor and the supervisor was a capable individual contributor uncomfortable in the role of supervisor. This relationship had been in place for seven years.

## **Solutions & Recommendations: Solutions Achieved**

The advancements made by the client as listed in the section Course of Action: Client Shifts represent direct solutions achieved for the individual client. Also realized by the client company include long term benefits through:

- Increased efficiency of the maintenance department
- Reduced cost of maintenance function
- Reduced employee complaints
- Reduced interdepartmental tension
- Reduced intradepartmental strife
- Reduced time spent by senior management on nonproductive issues
- Removed one lawsuit for wrongful disciplinary action (the other employee involved in the original incident, and not coached, filed suit)
- In the event of a suit being filed or the employee being terminated, the company demonstrated due diligence by bringing in an objective third party
- Kept and improved an experienced employee
- Gained respect from employees for an innovative approach to a problem
- Gained objective insight to opportunities for improvement
- Efficiency of development through the coaching. The skill set developed by the employee was specifically applicable to his workplace in real time rather than attempting to convert generalized classroom learning.

## **Solutions & Recommendations: Remaining Obstacles**

Progress was made in all areas of the desired outcomes of the coaching program with this client. Some areas made more progress than others. There came a point of diminishing returns when the coach proposed to end the engagement. The client had received a full measure and if further improvements were to be made it would fall on the client to make that happen.

It is understood that the client is best served by a coaching relationship that is not perpetual. Even in a coaching relationship spanning many years' regular breaks from coaching are recommended.

A key element of the success of the coaching done is that the progress made by the client be sustainable and self-perpetuating. Clients' not only learn specific things about themselves and the way they work, they also learn how to observe themselves and self-correct. One show of evidence that this is occurring is often more regular voluntary interaction with mentors and seniors seeking feedback.

For this client, resistance to change, even positive and personally beneficial change has been reinforced for decades. Expect bouts of push-back for even the simplest things as this man retrains his system to operate differently.

The coach will periodically check in on the client to assist when it is advisable.

## Solutions & Recommendations: Company Development

Specific items that will benefit The Company Maintenance Department and [proposed gains to company]. (As requested by Plant Manager as terms of the engagement)

This list is based on the coach's observations and reflects his perceptions as observed in a limited number of employees.

As a company specializing in Leadership Development, we support investment in the people as an investment in the success of the company, both in the present and the future.

- Performance review process- Pay determination feels to some like a popularity contest, they resent it
  - ▶ [Impact; employees gain clear expectations, increased self managing]
- Skills development program, e.g. - welding, compressor school, etc. Could be internal or external
  - ▶ [Impact; increase in personal pride, involvement, raise the standard of knowledge]
- Preventative Maintenance program for equipment
  - ▶ [Impact; reduced costs, less breakdowns, less strain on maintenance manpower allotment, more accurate scheduling]
- Career Development- people feel "on their own" to advance themselves and therefore feel isolated and stuck where they are.
  - ▶ [Impact; higher level of engagement of individual contributors and builds bench strength for future supervision and management positions]
- Qualification Standards- have minimum levels of required knowledge for position.
  - ▶ [Impact; makes individual contribution clear, gives standards for advancement]
- System expert program
  - ▶ [Impact; develops people in specific areas, increases individual investment in machinery, ultimately reducing breakdowns]
- Continuous training- Training to increase knowledge level, more than a safety meeting. Topics like; Motor theory, Hydraulics, Fluid Flow and other tech topics.
  - ▶ [Impact; increased abilities, less trial and error, quicker and longer lasting repairs, better decision making skills]
- Continuous training - General topics such as: Accurate communication, sociology topics.
  - ▶ [Impact; more cooperation, more awareness, less disciplinary and unhappiness issues along with associated costs and lost capacity]
- Company pride- Sense of pride in job well done for the entire company
  - ▶ [Impact; reduced costs in every department, increased sense of belonging and cooperation, increased profitability]
- Maintenance department effectiveness benchmarks- something to give them a clear picture of improvement of the status quo. For example; measuring "Average Days to Complete a Work Order", and etc. Possibly use the Monthly Op Summary as a performance indicator.
  - ▶ [Impact; improves individual and team performance, increased self regulation]