Title
Choice vs. control : increasing organizational effectiveness in interdependent environments

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CHOICE VS. CONTROL: INCREASING ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS IN INTERDEPENDENT ENVIRONMENTS

Louise K. Comfort  Keun Namkoong

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ABSTRACT

The problem of increasing effectiveness in the design and delivery of public services poses the classic management dilemma of informed choice vs. external control. This article presents findings from a statewide assessment of perceived effectiveness in service delivery by the clientele/interest groups served by the Louisiana Office of Workers' Compensation. Achieving effectiveness in workers' compensation is especially difficult, as it involves the coordination of performance among multiple groups with conflicting economic and social interests to serve the goal of increased economic productivity for the state as a whole. The findings report a three construct model of effectiveness in performance, documenting the results from a strategy of informed choice.
THE PROBLEM:
BALANCING SPECIFIC INTERESTS AGAINST THE PUBLIC GOOD
IN AN INTERDEPENDENT ENVIRONMENT

Increasing effectiveness in the design and delivery of public services has long been a major concern of both practitioners and researchers. It is a difficult task in any area of public service, but it is especially difficult in workers' compensation. Effective workers' compensation services depend upon the coordinated performance of multiple organizations that have conflicting economic and social interests. Yet, failure to achieve effective performance in workers' compensation affects adversely the economic productivity and growth of the state as a whole. Creating the balance between serving specific needs of particular groups and advancing economic development for the state as a whole is both the challenge and the promise of workers' compensation.¹

The problem of effectiveness in workers' compensation services becomes even more important in times of economic constraint. The services directly affect the continuity of wages and job security for employees and the costs of business operations and productivity for employers. The issues involved draw controversy under conditions of strong economic performance. When the economy falters, the public debate over effectiveness in workers' compensation services escalates. This set of dual demands from employees and employers confronted the Louisiana Office of Workers' Compensation, as it began operations at the onset of severe economic dislocation in the state. Established as an impartial public agency on July 1, 1983, the Louisiana Office of Workers' Compensation sought to serve both employees and employers in managing the risk and costs of accidents at the worksite. Its stated goal is to provide prompt, equitable services to both employees and employers in the event of work-related injury, disease or death.² Yet, the crucial role of balancing needs of employees against costs to employers placed the nascent Office in a highly visible and sensitive position in the difficult economic, political and social environment of the state.³


²These services include: 1) minimizing risk at the worksite; 2) facilitating prompt provision of workers' compensation services to all parties involved when injuries or fatalities do occur; and 3) serving as the first level of review in the resolution of disputes arising out of work-related injuries or deaths.

³During this period, the state was suffering from a severe decline in economic revenues and the highest rate of unemployment (12.9% in November, 1986) of any state in the nation. Louisiana Department of Labor, (November, 1986).
This organizational learning strategy combines the technique of gathering systematic information regarding observed performance from the major clientele groups with that of raising questions based on this information to engage the key participants in a process of review and reflection directed towards the redesign and improvement of workers' compensation services. The process is undertaken to foster the continuing development of shared responsibility and trust among the multiple participants in the workers' compensation process in Louisiana.

Assessment of the effectiveness of this strategy was especially critical to the recently established Office, which experienced the usual difficulties of organizational initiation and growth in an unfavorable climate of economic dislocation. The perceived effectiveness of the Office depends upon the extent to which it has demonstrated capacity to achieve the stated goal of impartial delivery of services to the participating clientele/interest groups in the workers' compensation process. While professional analysts may differ on the meaning as well as the measures of organizational effectiveness, they generally agree that the perspectives of the major clientele groups served by a given organization are critical in assessing the effectiveness of that organization (Cameron and Whetten, 1983: 16). These perspectives inform the decisions of multiple clientele groups as they seek to coordinate their respective performances in order to achieve a common objective.

This study reports the findings from a survey of the groups participating in the workers' compensation process in Louisiana.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Four basic theoretical assumptions underlie this research. First is that the workers' compensation process is fundamentally interdependent. This assumption reflects the fact that multiple clientele groups with diverse social and economic interests are involved
1984; Mason and Mitroff, 1981), problems and needs are not objective entities "out there" to be detected as such, but mental constructs perceived by diverse clientele groups. The constructivist perspective affirms that problems are actively constructed by diverse groups who interpret the same situation in different ways. Thus, perceived needs for services from, and perceptions regarding effectiveness of, the Office may vary among clientele groups who have different ways of construing the same situation. Some empirical studies have found that different clientele groups hold different perceptions for the effectiveness of an organization (see, Cameron and Whetten, 1983; 16). Only after systematic inquiry into diverse perceptions of problems, needs, and performance of the existing situation, are underlying norms and patterns of behavior among the participant groups likely to be understood. Further, identification of the points of difference and similarity in their perceptions contributes to building the basis of agreement among the participant groups requisite to the successful conduct of the workers' compensation process.

Third, this research is based upon the tenets of action research (Argyris, 1982). That is, it assumes that valid information, coupled with informed choice, leads to commitment to action. This research is designed to collect valid data regarding the perceived performance and effectiveness of the Office. This information will be shared with the Office as well as with relevant clientele groups. Shared information leads to mutual understanding, mutual agreement, and collective action (Rogers and Kincaid, 1981; Habermas, 1979). Through informed choice, it is expected that responsible participants in the workers' compensation process will act to review and improve their performance to produce an effective program of services. It follows that unless the diverse clientele groups develop a common understanding of what the underlying problem in workers' compensation is, they are unlikely to work together in a coordinated effort to solve it.

Finally, the research rests upon the proposition that effectiveness in workers' compensation policy and practice depends upon two sets of factors - information characteristics and performance functions. Information characteristics include clarity in communication of the goals of workers' compensation to both employees and employers and degree of information about workers' compensation services attained by both employees and employers. Performance functions include a set of five basic activities (Comfort, 1985) involved in the actual delivery of workers' compensation services. These are: 1) communication of information to the relevant parties in the workers' compensation process; 2) coordination of action between the relevant parties in the
physicians were oversampled, seeking to obtain the desired number of cases. The categories of insurers, attorneys and professionals were only slightly oversampled, anticipating a stronger response rate from groups who likely had frequent contact with the Office and therefore more information. The objective of the sampling design was to obtain a sample of the citizen groups served by the Office that was as balanced and non-biased as possible.

The total number of responses for the survey was 294, of which 268 proved valid, in comparison to the desired sample of 500 cases. This represents 58.8% of the desired sample, with 53.6% valid cases. Calculating the percentages in terms of the number of cases selected with oversampling, the return rate drops to 27.7% of the total number of the questionnaires mailed, of which 25.3% proved valid. A summary of the sample design, results and return rates by clientele groups is presented in Appendix Table I. Although the return rate falls below the desired sample design, it does represent proportionally the clientele groups included in the sample. Appendix Table II presents the distribution of respondents by demographic groups of age, sex, race, and education.

THE FINDINGS

Assessment of Information Characteristics

Effective functioning of the workers' compensation program depends upon clear understanding of its goals and specific knowledge of services offered through the program by the relevant parties in the process. How well the goal is communicated to both employees and employers, and how adequate is the level of information of the two groups, respectively, regarding services available through the workers' compensation program are factors critical to the overall performance of the program.

The survey results showed significantly differing perceptions of the status of employees and employers on these two important factors, findings that likely have a substantial effect on the operation of the workers' compensation process.

Table 1 reports the frequency distributions and mean assessments to these four questions. Table 2 presents the findings from a difference of means test in perceived
appropriateness of priorities. However, Table 3 also shows that a persistent negative minority emerges on all five functions. This negative response ranges from 22.9% to 27% on four of the five functions and registers 34.7% on the most demanding function, adjustment of conflicting demands. Further, given the large variations of the responses to these five measures (standard deviations of approximately 1.15), these findings warrant inquiry into the source of variance.

Table 4 presents the results of analysis of variance for the five measures that report variance by type of clientele group, age, sex, race and education. Table 4 shows that variance in four of the five performance functions - appropriateness of priorities, coordination of services, efficiency of resource allocation, and adjustment of conflicting demands - is explained by the set of demographic characteristics - type of clientele group, age, sex, race and education - with levels of significance ranging from .009 to .083. As a major source of variation, type of clientele group explains a significant proportion of the variance in the functions of coordination of services (F=2.166, p<.049) and allocation of resources (F=2.915, p<.010). In reference to appropriateness of priorities, race was the principle source of variation (F=3.511, p<.032), with blacks and non-whites reporting lower evaluations. These documented sources of variance in perceived organizational performance indicate likely points of stress in the workers’ compensation environment.

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Insert Table 4 about here

Assessment of Effectiveness of Workers’ Compensation Services

After reviewing the primary functions of organizational performance, respondents were asked to assess the overall effectiveness of the services provided by the Office of Workers’ Compensation. Three measures of effectiveness were included in the survey. They are: 1) effectiveness of services in meeting needs regarding work-related injury or disease; 2) achievement of objectives for both employees and employers; and 3) benefit of workers’ compensation services in meeting needs for a safe, productive work-environment. These measures are assumed to be indicators of overall effectiveness of organizational performance offered by the Office of Workers’ Compensation.

Table 5 presents frequency distributions and mean responses for the three measures of effectiveness. Table 6 presents results of analysis of variance regarding these three
organizational performance.

In Figure 3, we propose a simple three construct model in which information characteristics ($\xi$) and performance functions ($\eta_1$) are seen as the major determinants of effectiveness in organizational performance in workers' compensation services ($\eta_2$). The path diagram also shows that performance functions are assumed to play a pivotal role linking information characteristics and perceived effectiveness. That is, the influence of information characteristics on perceived effectiveness is hypothesized to be transmitted by performance functions in addition to the direct path. The paths $\gamma_1$ and $\gamma_2$ represent the direct linkages from information characteristics to performance functions and effectiveness, respectively. The linkage $\beta$ captures the influence of performance functions on effectiveness of organizational performance.

Insert Figure 3 about here

In this model, the relations between three underlying constructs (or latent factors) and their respective sets of observed variables are represented by the conventional notations $\lambda_{ij}$. As mentioned in the previous sections, information characteristics are measured by four observed variables which are denoted as CGEE, CGER, INEE, and INER. Five indicators of performance functions are denoted as CICP, APFS, CSCG, EORA, and AOCD. Three measures of effectiveness of organizational performance are EFSR, ACOB, and BNSR. It should be noted that only those loadings germane to the hypothesized latent factors (constructs) are specified by arrows in the model; and the remaining loadings are constrained to be zero.

To test the model, we used LISREL which permits the simultaneous estimations of structural relations among a set of latent factors and the relationships among a set of latent factors to their observed variables (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1986).

Table 7 about here.

Since all the observed variables are measured in a five point ordinal scale, polychoric correlations$^8$ are computed by LISREL VI in addition to ordinary Pearson correlations.

---

$^8$An ordinal variable $z$ may be regarded as a crude measurement of an underlying unobserved or unobservable continuous variable $z^*$. Suppose $z_1$ and $z_2$ are two ordinal variables with underlying continuous variables $z_{1}^*$ and $z_{2}^*$, respectively. Assuming that $z_{1}^*$ and $z_{2}^*$ have a bivariate normal distribution, their correlation is called a polychoric correlation.
384.14, at df=59, is highly significant. The $R^2$ for performance functions ($\eta_1$) is .54 indicating that 54% of the variance in the construct of the performance functions can be explained by information characteristics. The $R^2$ for effectiveness of organizational performance ($\eta_2$) is .87 suggesting that 87% of the variance in this factor can be explained by information characteristics and performance functions together.

Based upon these findings, what recommendations can be made for improving effectiveness in organizational performance in workers' compensation services? They follow directly from the model. With confidence, actions taken to increase the four information characteristics in the model are likely to increase performance functions, and these functions, in turn, will increase effectiveness in organizational performance, as evidenced by the $R^2$ value of .87.

THE CONCLUSION:
INCREASING CAPACITY IN ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Returning to the theoretical assumptions stated above (pp. 3-6), the findings from this research illustrate the fundamental interdependence of service delivery in the workers' compensation process. The Louisiana Office of Workers' Compensation initiated a strategy of informed, voluntary commitment to responsible action by both employees and employers to manage risk of accidents in the workplace, thereby seeking to prevent wage loss for employees and to contain costs for employers. Significantly, the findings from this study show that the concept of workers' compensation as a service to both employees and employers is largely accepted by the two groups for whom the services are primarily intended. Reducing risk is perceived as beneficial by both employees and employers. As the information on costs is produced and disseminated, the large majority of participants in workers' compensation process is likely to adjust behavior accordingly. Consequently, the cost of compliance is substantially reduced.

With an organizational learning strategy, the role of the Office changes to one of providing timely, valid information and prompt response to all participating groups. It is possible to reduce resistance to safety through systematic feedback of evidence documenting reduction in wage loss and cost containment to both employees and employers. To provide that service, however, the Office needs continuity and professionally trained staff.

With its concept of interdependent workers' compensation process, Louisiana is
REFERENCES


Figure 2: A Comparison of Measures of Effectiveness in Performance, Clientele Groups Served by the Louisiana Office of Workers' Compensation, 1987
Figure 4: Standardized Solution to Path Diagram of Figure 3 from polychoric correlations of Table 7

Chi-Square with 59 d.f. = 384.14 (p <.01)
Goodness of Fit index = .820
R square for Performance function = .54
R square for Effectiveness = .87
Table 2: Difference of Means Analysis of Information Characteristics, Employees and Employers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Communication of Goals to</th>
<th>Perceived Degree of Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employees</td>
<td>Employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference Between Means</td>
<td>-0.299</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T value</td>
<td>-4.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probability</td>
<td>&lt; .000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Sample</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a) Values of means and standard deviations in this Table differ slightly from those reported in Table 1 due to the differences in sample size entered in the analyses.
Table 4: Results of Analysis of Variance in Performance Functions by Type of Clientele Group, Race, Sex, Age, Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Clarity of Communication in Claims Process</th>
<th>Appropriateness of Priorities for Services</th>
<th>Coordination of Services among Clientele Groups</th>
<th>Efficiency of Resource Allocation</th>
<th>Adjustment of Conflicting Demands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Variation DF</td>
<td>F ratio</td>
<td>a)</td>
<td>F ratio</td>
<td>a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.962</td>
<td>(.160)</td>
<td>1.861</td>
<td>(.091)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.107</td>
<td>(.991)</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>(.880)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>(.948)</td>
<td>0.898</td>
<td>(.345)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.034</td>
<td>(.966)</td>
<td>3.511</td>
<td>(.032)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.782</td>
<td>(.107)</td>
<td>1.163</td>
<td>(.329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained Variance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.061</td>
<td>(.396)</td>
<td>2.032</td>
<td>(.099)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R</td>
<td>.357</td>
<td>.468</td>
<td>.465</td>
<td>.465</td>
<td>.416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R²</td>
<td>.128</td>
<td>.219</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>.216</td>
<td>.173</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:
a) Significance level for corresponding F ratio is reported in parentheses;
* probability < .10,
** probability < .05,
*** probability < .01.
Table 6: Results of Analysis of Variance in Three Measures of Effectiveness by Type, Age, Sex, Race and Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Variation</th>
<th>Degree of Freedom</th>
<th>Perceived Effectiveness of Services a) F ratio</th>
<th>Perceived Achievement of Objectives a) F ratio</th>
<th>Perceived Benefits of Services a) F ratio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.315 (0.004)***</td>
<td>3.214 (0.005)***</td>
<td>2.003 (.067)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.706 (.619)</td>
<td>0.407 (.843)</td>
<td>0.682 (.637)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.086 (.150)</td>
<td>2.134 (.146)</td>
<td>1.956 (.164)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.684 (.506)</td>
<td>0.027 (.973)</td>
<td>0.412 (.663)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.984 (.437)</td>
<td>0.896 (.498)</td>
<td>1.627 (.142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained Variance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.154 (0.000)***</td>
<td>2.428 (0.001)***</td>
<td>3.015 (.000)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R</td>
<td></td>
<td>.500 (.452)</td>
<td>.204 (.492)</td>
<td>.242 (.492)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple R²</td>
<td></td>
<td>.250 (.204)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N of Sample</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Note:
a) Significance level for corresponding F ratio is reported in parentheses; * probability <.10, ** probability <.05, *** probability <.01.
Table 8: Direct and Indirect Effects of Information Characteristics and Performance Functions on Effectiveness of Organizational Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Direct Effect</th>
<th>Indirect Effects</th>
<th>Total Effects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information Characteristics</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>.694</td>
<td>.686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Functions</td>
<td>.941</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>.941</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix Table II:
Frequency Distribution of Respondents by Age, Sex, Race and Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18-25 years</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26-35 years</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36-45 years</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46-55 years</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56-65 years</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>66 and older</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Missing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Some primary school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completed primary school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completed high school</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>24.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completed college/university</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>27.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>25.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No answer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Missing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
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