The Critical Incident Technique (CIT)

Background

The monitoring and analysing of critical incidents also known as the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is an action-oriented assessment method that was developed during World War II by John Flanagan[1], then head of the Aviation Psychology Programme of the U.S. Air Forces. He analysed actual incidents of success and failure in training and worked backward to find out about the specific behaviours that led to a positive or negative result.

Within the organisational context the CIT is a common management tool for analysing and monitoring behaviour that contributes to success or failure of organisations in specific situations. Applying the CIT, we look closely at incidents in the work environment which had a meaningful (negative or positive) impact on the final outcome of a given programme / project.

An incident is defined as **critical** when the action taken contributed to an *effective outcome* (helped to solve a problem or resolve a situation; or led to development of a unique, creative project). An incident may also qualify as **critical** when the action taken resulted in an *ineffective outcome* (e.g., a case when a partially resolved problem created new problems or the need for further action).

Critical incidents document the work context, the specific situation that arose, the persons involved, their actions, and the results.

The CIT is a qualitative monitoring method that focuses on the employees personal perspective and perception of specific incidents within their work environment. It thus can provide a rich, in-depth perspective of life in an organisation that is usually not apparent through more quantitative methods of data collection.

Objectives

Ultimately the CIT aims

- to improve our understanding of the issues and obstacles people face within their personal work environment, as well as
- to illuminate potential avenues for improvement of the organisational and personal performance

The CIT can be applied in various forms and in different organisational settings:

Organisational Development
Critical incidents are a primary focus of data collection in appreciative inquiry. This approach to organisational development identifies what has been working well in an organisation and then determines how to routinely repeat and expand on those successes.

[1] Flanagan, J.C.: The critical incident technique. Psychological Review, Vol. 51, No. 4, July 1954.

Knowledge Management
Another application of the CIT is in knowledge sharing processes across an organisation. Critical incidents from the daily work experiences of the employees are gathered and shared within the organisation. These incidents then become part of the organisational knowledge so successes can be repeated and future mistakes can be avoided.

Evaluation
The CIT is an effective means for understanding the personal impact of an intervention that may not be apparent through quantitative methods of data collection.

Performance management
A key responsibility of management personnel is to routinely document the performance of their employees for use in performance appraisals. Recording critical (positive and negative) incidents in which their employees are involved enable a fair and balanced performance evaluation at the end of a period.

Employee development and feedback
The CIT provides specific examples of an employee's actual behaviour. Employees are much more likely to accept and apply the feedback if it is based on concrete examples than if the feedback is general and abstract.

- ✓ The CIT encourages people to tell their own personal story about a specific incident. Therefore, employees feel that they are heard and that their experiences are deemed important.
- ✓ The CIT provides rich, in-depth data at much lower cost than observations
- ✓ The CIT can measure abstract constructs such as motivation through their demonstration in reported behaviour.

But:

- ⚠ Using the CIT, reports of behaviour are filtered through the lenses of individuals' perceptions, memory, honesty, and biases, and therefore may not be entirely accurate
- ⚠ It can be difficult to convince people to share their critical incidents through a survey because they are reluctant to expend the effort required to write their own stories.
- ⚠ The CIT provides a personal perspective of organisational issues. It has to be combined with other methods of data collection for a more comprehensive understanding of the situation

Process

There is various ways of gathering and analysing critical incidents. To make the CIT easy to apply we suggest a very basic procedure that can be adapted to various organisational settings:

Step 1: Gathering the facts

Information about critical incidents in an organisation can be collected through several different vehicles:

(i) Focus groups
In focus groups, a facilitator leads a small group of people in a structured discussion to identify and describe specific examples of past performances.

(ii) Interviews
A common method of collecting critical incidents is through individual interviews. The interviewer will ask the interviewee to orally recount an example of a time the interviewee faced a particular situation.

(iii) Surveys
Surveys are another common approach to gathering critical incidents. The surveys can be administered in print or online; the employees completing the surveys may be assembled together in a room, or they may be complete the survey on their own.
The critical incidents are obtained by providing a series of structured questions.

(iv) Performance records
Another source of critical incidents is existing performance records where one can find valuable insights into problems the organisation faces.

Step 2: Categorising and analysing the content

Subsequent steps in the CIT consist of identifying the content or themes of the critical incidents mentioned by the respondents and then conducting "retranslation" exercises during which the analyst or other respondents sort the incidents into content dimensions or categories.
This process can be done by using a pin board. Every incident is written on a card and looked at separately to start with, and then clusters (categories) of similar cards are developed on the pin board.

When all the cards are assigned to a cluster, each cluster is given a name representing the sort of critical incidents mentioned on the cards of this cluster.
The different categories can then be discussed / analysed.

Step 3: Creating feedback

When creating feedback to the respondents, it is important to consider not only the critical incidents that had negative effects but also the ones which represented good practices. This way, we ensure not to undo good work and only focus on 'bad' experiences.

Step 4: Recording and disseminating / sharing of results

To improve the knowledge of the whole organisation and to foster organisational learning, it is crucial to record the findings of the exercise and make it accessible for other members of the organisation.

Guidelines for applying the CIT

A) The key to collecting useful critical incidents is to ask the right questions. Be sure to provide a structured set of questions to guide your respondents through the process of telling their stories. Keep the questions simple and direct.

B) People are often much more willing to provide candid accounts of their experiences if they are assured of anonymity, or at least confidentiality. In a survey, do not ask them to attach their names to their incidents unless you think you will need to follow up with them. In a focus group, do not record the names of those who share incidents.

C) As with any other data collection method, it is essential to pilot test and then refine your approach.

odcp.2011/2016/2019