



CHAPTER ONE



Shifting from Training to Performance

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In the 1990s, many training functions shifted from a focus on training to one on performance improvement. This shift required some trainers to partner with line managers for the purpose of improving on-the-job performance in support of business goals. For trainers to make this transition, they had to reallocate their time and become proficient at conducting performance analyses and implementing solutions. At the same time, training departments were (1) redesigning the process that they used when supporting line managers; (2) clarifying roles of performance consultants and others in the department; (3) providing tools and techniques required for performance improvement; and (4) developing the skills required of those in the departments. Thoughtful planning and commitment to the transition enables the performance consultant and the performance department to be viewed as a strategic business partner to management.

INTRODUCTION

Smart trainers know that they must continuously be alert to the winds of change that are blowing within their field of expertise and the organizations that they support. They are quick to identify:

- The forces that impact their profession;
- The trends initiated by those forces;

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- The future state toward which they must transition; and
- The road to travel to reach that future state.

Let us now take a look at how smart trainers manage the journey from training to performance improvement. First, we must clarify that this journey is really a shift from providing primarily training as the solution to problems in the organization to providing a carefully selected set of appropriate solutions that address the performance problem. The rationale for this new way of thinking is the realization that no single solution, whether in the area of training, human resources, process redesign, or any other area, will produce a significant improvement in a performance problem, because rarely is a performance problem the result of a single cause. Therefore, single solutions are woefully inadequate.

THE SHIFT

As early as the 1960s, Tom Gilbert, author of *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance* (1978), recognized the inadequacy of single solutions. While some within training were involved in performance improvement activities in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that the shift picked up momentum. Two somewhat different, but parallel, forces propelled this shift, which continues today.

Change in Business

One of these forces is the dramatic change taking place in the business community. The globalization of business generates intense competition and results in organizations utilizing their human resources much more effectively to compete. Thus management is more willing to examine various avenues for unleashing the potential of the organization's workforce. In other words, people are becoming the competitive edge in many organizations (Robinson & Robinson, 1998).

In addition, the skill requirements of the workforce are increasing in response to rapid technological changes. More sophisticated equipment and more complicated work processes require more competent workers. In the period between 1981 and 1993, the number of workers receiving formal training increased 45 percent (Bassi, Benson, & Cheney, 1996).

Dissatisfaction with Training

The other main force driving change in the field today is the growing dissatisfaction with training activities and the lack of results from training. Several factors drive this growing dissatisfaction.

First, management's interest in workforce development results in considerably more financial resources being expended. In the United States alone, over

sixty billion dollars in direct costs were being spent each year by business organizations at the end of the 1990s. If the costs associated with employees' time off the job to attend training courses were added to this figure, the amount would grow to over two hundred billion dollars per year (Robinson & Robinson, 1998).

Second, while training costs continue to rise, there has been little or no discernible improvement in the results from training. Most of the investment in organizational training and development has been wasted because much of the knowledge and many of the skills gained in training (well over 80 percent by some estimates) is not being fully applied by those employees on the job (Broad & Newstrom, 1992).

Finally, line managers in most organizations see the training function as an expense rather than added value. In addition, those in the training community have been unable to demonstrate clear value because the results of training activities have had little impact on job behavior.

These major forces have prompted the innovators within the training community to shift to a focus on performance improvement. This shift goes far beyond improvement in the technology of training (for example, improvement in needs assessments, gap and cause analysis, and the selection of solutions). Instead, a shift in how the training function works with line managers is required. The elements of this shift are described in Table 1.1.

Partnership with Management

The most dramatic change associated with the shift to performance has been the manner in which trainers—now often called performance consultants—work with line managers.

Previously, trainers had operated either as “experts,” or as “pairs of hands.” The “expert” approach resulted in training functions determining what courses they would offer, the content of those courses, and how the courses would be delivered. As “pairs of hands,” trainers implemented requests from management for specific topics and courses, whether or not training was really needed.

Now, however, trainers operate as performance consultants. They initiate and develop relationships with the key managers within the organization over a period of time. The consultants become knowledgeable about the “business of the business” and, when interfacing with management, use business language. Performance consultants are quick to respond to requests, and they alert management when training alone is not appropriate. In fact, research by Partners in Change, Inc., indicates that effective performance consultants spend 18 percent of their time forming, building, and maintaining relationships with key managers within their organizations.

Previously, both the training function and line managers saw training as a “nice to have.” For example, managers might feel that interpersonal communications training would enhance the way people worked together, but they would

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Table 1.1. Elements Required to Shift from a Traditional Training Approach to a Performance Approach

Traditional Approach	Performance Approach
Focuses on the solution that is implemented; the solution (training) is the end	Focuses on what people need to do; the solution is a means to an end
Can work independently of client partnerships	Must be partnered to a client (that is, owner of the business need)
Linked to <i>training</i> need	Linked to <i>business</i> need
Event-oriented	Process-oriented
Reactive	Proactive and reactive
Biased to a solution	Bias-free of solutions
Relies on single solution (generally the consultant's specialty)	Relies on multiple solutions
Front-end assessment is optional; identifying work environment barriers to desired performance rarely done	Front-end assessment is mandatory; performance gaps and causes for gaps are identified
Evaluation of solution typically occurs	Evaluation of the performance and operational results is done

expect little or no impact on business results. However, performance consultants use a performance improvement approach. They first clarify the business need and how management measures the achievement of that need. Once this business goal has been defined, the performance consultants work with line management to answer the question, "What must people do more, better, or differently if this business goal is to be achieved?" This ensures that the performance improvement effort is linked specifically to the achievement of identified business goals.

MAKING THE TRANSITION

Once trainers determine that a shift is required and clarify what a performance approach would look like, then the question becomes how to make the transition. Within the training and development field, there are two parallel, but separate, paths for making the shift—one as an individual contributor and the other as a performance department. As an individual contributor, the consultant reports directly to line management and usually operates independently of a training department.

The Performance Consultant As an Individual Contributor

Some situations are ideal for moving experienced training practitioners into roles of individual performance consultants. The situations that we most frequently observe include:

- A line manager knowledgeable of some of the benefits of performance improvement discusses these possibilities with training practitioners and is receptive to supporting a performance consultant on his/her team;
- The concept of performance improvement excites an individual trainer, who initiates discussions with a line manager; or
- Training leadership, comfortable with a traditional approach, hesitates to move the entire function toward a performance improvement focus, but is supportive of the individual moving to a performance improvement approach.

This change is iterative, rather than occurring overnight. Fred Nickols of The Distance Consulting Company described it as follows: “The transition from trainer to performance consultant isn’t a sudden state change (even if you change your job title, unit or employer). Instead, the transition is a matter of extending your reach over time. It boils down to being able to successfully tackle a broader array of problems in the workplace and, based on that success, building your credibility in ways that extends your reach even farther” (Nickols, 2000).

Over a period of time, the performance consultant works with the line manager on increasingly more complex performance problems. It requires more and more of the performance consultant’s time. Research by Partners in Change, Inc., indicates that competent, full-time performance consultants spend approximately 78 percent of their time focused on performance improvement activities. See Table 1.2 for a description of those activities.

Often, the line manager has the performance consultant move to the business unit and report directly to the leadership team. Business unit management is usually happy to fund the position when it can have the performance consultant on a full-time basis.

Individual performance consultants find themselves engaged in a variety of activities, ranging from performance improvement projects to coaching business unit managers on workplace performance and issues. It is an open-ended job in which the performance consultant cannot predict what will be the next challenge. Individuals who thrive in this environment are comfortable with ambiguity and are stimulated by problems with solutions that are not initially apparent. Not only do the consultants work effectively with management, but they also form a network of specialists who can be called on to provide specific solutions and work collaboratively with others to improve performance.

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Table 1.2. How Performance Consultants Spend Their Time

	Percent of Performance Consultant's Time Spent on Job Output/Accountability
<i>Form and Build Partnerships with Clients</i>	
Identify and develop relationships with key individuals in the organization independent of any project work	18 percent
<i>Complete Performance Analyses</i>	
Identify and report performance requirements, performance gaps, and causes of gaps through the use of reliable data collection methods and sources	25 percent
<i>Manage Performance Change Projects</i>	
Plan, organize, and monitor work done by others in support of projects that have performance improvement within the organization as their purpose	30 percent
<i>Measure Impact of Change Initiatives</i>	
Evaluate the change in business results, job performance, and work environment factors resulting from the interventions	5 percent

The most successful performance consultants are those who can sense the organizational dynamics and the forces impacting the implementation of performance improvement projects. There is a saying that, "Good pilots fly fifteen minutes ahead of their aircraft." In the same way, "Good performance consultants see problems thirty days before they occur."

Transitioning the Training Department to a Performance Focus

Often, the needs of the organization and the vision of training leadership call for a transition of the training function to one of performance improvement. This typically occurs when training leadership is dissatisfied with the manner by which it works with line management, perhaps working as pairs of hands or as experts. Thus the training department manager, training director, or corporate university president initiates the move toward performance improvement.

Those training leaders who have been successful in shifting their focus to performance improvement realize that they must use performance consulting to transition their own departments. There are documented cases in which the

training manager has sponsored a consulting skills workshop for key trainers, only to find that successful transition requires more than a workshop. As we indicated earlier, a single solution to performance change rarely produces the desired results. Therefore, the effective training director realizes that there must be an alignment between the performance improvement process, the organizational structure, and the performance consultant's job design.

Process Alignment

The shift to performance brings about many changes in the way trainers work. Not only are they partnering with line managers, but they also are conducting different types of front-end assessments, implementing multiple solutions, and measuring on-the-job performance and business results. Therefore, the manager of a newly created performance department must rethink how the work will be done. In other words, the manager works with the performance consultant to engineer the workflow. Performance consultants indicate the steps that they will use when partnering with line managers, such as completing performance analysis, managing performance change projects, and measuring the impact of the change initiatives. The very effective performance department managers outline the flow of work in the form of a process model that describes each phase of performance improvement. In many instances, the process model consists of the following phases:

Partnering Phase. In this phase, consultants form strategic business relationships with line managers. This requires a knowledgeable, business-savvy person who consults with line managers without being biased toward a single solution. This person becomes intimately familiar with the goals, strategies, and challenges of the business unit. As a consultant, this person helps the business unit leadership see the performance implications of decisions that it makes. Each consultant supports specific line managers, building sustained relationships—even when a project is not being implemented. Once a project has been identified, the activities move into the next phase of the process.

Assessment Phase. This is a data-collection phase in which the consultant or a project team collects data so they can diagnose the situation and eventually report on the business and performance requirements, gaps, and causes of those gaps. During this phase, the consultant and project team members collect a variety of information regarding the problem and causes of the problem. They must have sufficient technical expertise to analyze the information being collected, so in many instances, the Assessment Phase is handled by a small group of consultants with expertise in the areas being studied. It is this group that provides feedback to the client and helps the client arrive at a combination of appropriate solutions.

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Implementation Phase. Because the solutions could require an almost limitless number of specialties, depending on the nature of the causes, this phase requires a variety of individuals with unique technical expertise. The performance consultant often helps to select the individuals who will work on the various solutions. The consultant works with the intervention specialists, who design and implement the change while maintaining contact and communication with the clients.

Measurement Phase. In most projects, results to be measured are determined during the Assessment Phase. In this phase, the data-collection strategy and data-collection tools are formed. Often a specialist in measurement and evaluation becomes part of the team to provide the objectivity and rigor needed. The performance consultant provides the link to the business need and access to the client.

Organizational Alignment

Once the process has been identified, the performance department manager faces the challenge of organizing the function in a manner that supports that process. No one person should do all phases of the process. Most frequently, some consultants are responsible for the Partnership Phase and for being the primary advisor to line management during the other phases. Other specialists are accountable for conducting performance assessments, completing gap and cause analyses, and implementing solutions. Still others have responsibility for designing learning activities and creating learning materials. The manager organizes the department in a manner that meets the needs of the line managers and optimizes the capabilities of the people in the department. In addition, the manager networks with other departments and external resources to ensure that a broad array of intervention specialists will be available as needed during the Implementation Phase.

Performer Alignment

Now that the process has been defined and roles within the department have been clarified, the department manager designs jobs that ensure the process can be implemented effectively and projects can be managed successfully. Intervention specialists within the training department and other functions have technical skills that are unique to their areas of expertise. In addition, there are skills that are common for all who interface with clients. Tools, job aids, and templates have to be created for these common situations, such as partnering with line managers and identifying performance improvement projects. Workshops have to be created and facilitated to bring skills to a proficient level. A coaching system has to be established so that consultants and specialists have someone to rely on for whatever situation occurs. The challenge here is to bring every-

one in the department to a proficient skill level so that the performance consulting process will operate effectively and efficiently.

Making It Happen

For this transition to be successful, the department manager must keep the big picture in mind and be an advocate of the performance improvement process. Implementation of this process often consists of the following steps, as outlined by Tom LaBonte and Jim Robinson (1999, p. 37):

Step 1: Getting Started. First, a client who has a business need and strong credibility in the organization is sought to sponsor a performance improvement project. This first initiative becomes a learning laboratory for the process.

Step 2: Orchestrating the Transition. The amount of time, energy, and expense required to make a successful transition to the performance improvement process cannot be underestimated. It is important to be sensitive to the individual efforts required of each department in handling the day-to-day training requirements, while also learning and implementing the new process.

Step 3: Building Department Commitment. The department manager must model a commitment to the performance consulting process and the new roles by actively embracing the change. The manager must also anticipate and prepare for resistance. Not everyone will want to go along. The leader can overcome some resistance by clarifying the vision and reinforcing it through supportive actions.

Step 4: Gaining Senior Management Support. It is crucial to position the transition as an important product or service start-up. Identifying critical clients and communicating the benefits help to manage expectations early in the process; this is vital to later success. The consultant under-promises and over-delivers with timely support that delights the client.

Step 5: Measuring Impact. When implementing the transition, a variety of performance and process improvement metrics appropriate for measuring the full impact of performance interventions must be examined. Experienced measurement practitioners should be identified and assigned the role of evaluators. These evaluators become internal consultants, building the measurement model and establishing a baseline of skills required for measurement.

Smart trainers know that a shift to performance is essential if they are to add value to the organization. Although this journey from training to performance improvement is challenging, it is achievable. Many trainers have already made the transition; others are involved in the process, which requires thoughtful consideration and a commitment to execute the plan over time. A successful

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transition, however, enables the performance consultant to be viewed as a strategic business partner to management and the performance department and as a true asset to the entire organization.

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Recommended Reading

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About the Authors

James C. and Dana Gaines Robinson are recognized leaders in the area of performance consulting, assisting organizations in defining performance as it needs to be for the organization to attain its business goals. Additionally, they assist HR and HRD functions in transitioning from a traditional focus to a performance focus. They have consulted with numerous Fortune 500 organizations, including Bank One, Bell South, First Union Corporation, Duracell Inc., Steelcase, and Eli Lilly and Company. Both Jim and Dana are frequent speakers at national conferences, including ASTD (formerly American Society for Training and Development), and International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) conferences.

Together the Robinsons have co-authored the books Training for Impact: How to Link Training to Business Needs and Measure the Results (1989) and Performance Consulting: Moving Beyond Training (1995). They co-edited a third book, Moving from Training to Performance: A Practical Guidebook (1998), which contains the contributions of more than fifteen authors who share information regarding their own experience in transitioning to a performance focus.

In May 1999, ASTD presented the Robinsons with the 1998 Distinguished Contribution Award for Workplace Learning and Performance. This award recognizes their landmark work in performance improvement and the sustained impact they have had in the training and human resource industry.

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