

Running head: PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT BY DESIGN

Roosevelt University

Getting a Seat at the Table: Performance Improvement by Design

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Abstract

The role of a Workplace Learning Professional is rapidly transforming; specifically, the position of Training & Development or Learning Management Director. The executive position of Chief Learning Officer is a new opportunity to “get a seat at the table”, and be a part of top level decision-making. The acrobatic leap from Director to C-level is more than a change in position. It is a shift in perspective about how we think about business and performance. Development initiatives and programs must be strategically linked to performance improvement, they must show value through evaluation, and they must be sustainable through a systematic approach. Getting a seat at the table requires performance improvement by design.

Getting A Seat at the Table: Performance Improvement By Design

One morning, a traveling salesman named Gregor Samsa, woke up after a night of disturbing dreams and realized that his body had changed into a ‘brown belly divided into stiff arched segments, with numerous pitifully thin legs flailing around’ (as cited in Downes, 2001, p. 98). Although Gregor cognitively accepted that he had become an enormous insect, he never discovered the cause of his change and remained perpetually disillusioned. Interestingly, this analogy of transformation made famous in Franz Kafka’s novella “*The Metamorphosis*”, characterizes how many professionals have surfaced in the Training & Development arena after experiencing such significant changes—alive but unrecognizable (Downes, 2001).

Over the past five years the coveted role of Training Director or Learning Management Director has literally transformed. The high-octane world-class plate spinner, once able to serve up face-to-face training with a standing ovation, has suddenly become a serious business player. With the emergence of talent management, knowledge management, and performance drivers, executive teams are pulling up another chair to the C-level table. The newly transformed Chief Learning Officer is lean, strategic, and able to survive at high altitudes.

Making the move from Director to CLO is like acrobatics on the trapeze. In mid-air, you can’t let go one hand at a time. It takes a fast and deliberate double-release from one bar to ensure a secure grip onto the next. For ten years, I was a plate spinner. For the past two, I’ve been climbing the ladder rung by rung, to stand on the platform and take a proverbial leap. For those who are ready to step off and swing high over the net, which “bars” should they be reaching for? As I transform into the new role of Chief Learning Officer, I’m grabbing onto three: (1) Strategic performance improvement, (2) Return-on-investment evaluation of training, and (3) Systematic instructional design.

Literature Review

Strategic Performance Improvement

There are a variety of approaches for implementing strategic performance improvement initiatives at an enterprise level. Yoon and Lim (2007) target performance improvement through a conceptual framework of Strategic Blended-Learning and Performance Solutions (SBLPS). This approach identifies core HR services and key business strategies, then assesses internal versus external business environments. SBLPS distinguishes itself by surpassing knowledge supply and conducting a thorough work-systems analysis to examine organizational climates and structures. Due to the extensive use of technology in blended solutions, the framework takes into account the organization's technology readiness. Ultimately, this process uses multiple perspectives from different levels in the organization to examine performance problems.

Ma and Harmon (2006) offer a systemic approach to performance improvement interventions through the integration of three technologies under the framework of Human Performance Technology (HPT). From this perspective, enterprise-wide knowledge management, performance support, and learning technologies include touch points where common areas overlap. The integrated working/learning environment (IWLE) user interface allows interaction while employees perform, learn, and manage their knowledge. The IWLE includes three types of tools: performance support tools, an intelligent learning portal, as well as community building and knowledge sharing tools.

To be successful, IWLE requires the following four conditions: (1) Open technical architecture that supports information sharing and reusability (2) Collaboration between training professionals and other functional departments (3) Role changes for the training organization,

and (4) Support from senior management (Ma and Harmon, 2006). A key benefit of IWLE design is that it supports top-down and bottom-up data flow. While the top-down process captures data from the interface and sends it down to the bottom objects, the bottom-up process collects reusable objects from the data for use in other presentation formats. Ultimately, “integrating the three technologies can enhance our business cases for training and performance improvement and change the image of the field from a cost center to the status of a business partner” (Ma and Harmon, 2006, p.115).

Watkins’ (2007) view of performance improvement also includes a perspective of Human Performance Technology; however, there is a greater focus on the alignment of “strategic ambitions” regarding performance (p. 8). Once organizational performance expectations are identified, performance interventions are selected in a systematic way. Performance assessments are helpful for evaluating performance capacity of technologies and the accomplishments of improvement efforts. The four steps for decoding strategic direction include: (1) Review strategic plans and related documents (2) Review needs assessment results (3) Review SWOT analysis results, and (4) Set priorities. The identification of diverse strategic goals and objectives for both internal and external partners in improvement projects helps to ensure that performance technologies accomplish valuable results (Watkins, 2007).

In the article, *Investing in Learning and Performance*, the ASTD State of the Industry illustrates how the strategic link between learning and performance is steadily increasing through executive recognition and support. To compete in a global environment, leaders must leverage a highly trained workforce to drive business results. “A growing number of top executives now recognize learning as a fundamental driver of organizational performance, and that helps learning executives run the learning function like a business” (Ketter, 2006, p. 33).

Return on Investment Evaluation for Training

According to Guerra-Lopez (2007), the fundamental purpose of training evaluation is not to determine the merit of a program or solution. Rather, it is to make “data driven decisions that lead to improved performance. It is from here that all evaluation efforts stem” (p. 33). At the most basic level, evaluation is simply comparing results against expectations. However, evaluation becomes complicated when it is put into the context of the situation for which it is applied. A clear approach to plan and align evaluation “includes the following seven-step process: (1) Identify stake holders and expectations (2) Determine key decisions and objectives (3) Drive measurable indicators (4) Identify data sources (5) Select data collection (6) Select data analysis tools, and (7) communicate results and recommendations” (Guerra-Lopez, 2007, pp. 36).

Bernthal (2005) states “Measurement is far more than a set of methods. It's an integrated part of how WLP professionals partner with stakeholders and implement their strategies. Without the strategic perspective, measurement tools tend to define rather than facilitate our solutions” (p. 53). Workplace Learning Professionals (WLP) better manage expectations and realistic approaches to measurement when they exercise the role of business partner. When feasible, performance improvement solutions should target a specific, measurable change. The following three questions help determine whether a potential learning solution qualifies for a “measurement contract: (1) What is the solution intended to change? (2) Is it realistic to assume that the solution can produce the change? (3) Can we objectively isolate and measure the impact of the solution?” (Bernthal, 2005, p. 54) Essentially, a measurement contract outlines what will be measured and how. Using a targeted questioning process ensures that measures are realistic and accountabilities for impact are clear.

Phillips and Phillips (2007) present various steps for Return on Investment methodology, including the concepts necessary to understand how ROI works. Today's value definition is about results versus activity and monetary benefits compared with costs. In order to account for program value, stakeholders want to see actual data. In addition to financial results, a clear connection between performance improvement and value needs to be evident. Converting data to money is not enough. The effects of the project must be isolated in order to "Show the Real Money". Once money is compared to the cost of the project, "Make Me Believe It" fully evolves (2007, p. 9).

According to Phillips and Phillips (2007), ROI data types and evaluation levels are characterized in specific ways. Level 0 represents the inputs to a project; and details the number of people, hours, and efficiencies. Although this is accomplished at 100%, the organization is not gaining value. Level 1, Reaction and Perceived Value, is the beginning of medium reaction, where program leaders receive information to respond and adjust for success. The target for effectiveness is between 80% – 100% coverage. Level 2, Learning and Confidence, focuses on skills, knowledge, and competencies. The goal is to accomplish 50% – 60% of coverage for simple learning objectives. Level 3, Application and Implementation, measures one of the most important categories where follow through typically does not occur. Although 15% - 25% is the target, organizational barriers can impede job performance transfer. Level 4, Impact and Consequences, captures output, quality, time, and cost at an estimate of 10%. This is the level that attracts executive attention and sponsorship. Finally, at Level 5, ROI compares the monetary benefits of business impact to the program costs. This value is usually expressed as a cost-benefit ratio, ROI percentage, or payback period. Although intangible benefits are not included in the levels, they comprise an important part of program value.

Systematic Instructional Design

A common criticism of systematic instructional design is its lack of interest and appeal to the learner. Keller's answer to this challenge is the ARCS model of instruction based on a review of psychological literature on motivation. To create instruction that motivates the learner, all four parts of the model (1) Attention (2) Relevance (3) Confidence and (4) Satisfaction, must be considered throughout the design process. Asking and aligning the following three questions during design can keep learner attention focused on instruction: (1) Is this material relevant to my personal needs and interests? (2) Am I confident that I can do this by expending reasonable effort? (3) Did this satisfy my needs and interest? Ultimately, there must be "congruence between the learners' expectations and the instruction they encounter" (Dick, Carey, and Carey, 2005, p. 192).

Hardré and Miller (2006) present a conceptual framework for the development of a new motivational model of instructional design. Although a step-by-step process or illustration has not yet been published, the philosophical ideas for the Motivating Opportunities Model (MOD) are as follows:

- (1) Motivation should be infused throughout the design process, rather than tacked on as a minor event
- (2) Motivation is not assumable but should be an explicit consideration in the design of every instructional event and environment
- (3) If afforded the appropriate motivating opportunities most learners and performers will succeed better (p. 50).

The potential strength of MOD is in its flexibility to be integrated across multiple ID methods and human performance interventions.

Whatever general design model is used, there are at least four interrelated actions that instructional designers typically take when designing instruction that meets the needs of the

learners and intended performance. The actions are: (1) Assess the learners' characteristics; (2) Identify the desired learning outcome; (3) Determine which cognitive and behavioral activities learners should engage in; and (4) Design instructional materials and contexts. Design that is “inherently attentive to motivation, offers a range of opportunity to enable and enhance both capability and choice” (Hardré and Miller, 2006, pp. 27).

Harmon and Hirumi (1996) combine systematic, systemic, and student-centered learning to create a “distance technologies approach to the design and delivery of instruction” (p. 267). From this perspective, the following strategic alignment functions are kept in the foreground: (a) Define the mission, functional goals, and individual objectives for the system and its stakeholders; (b) Ensure the alignment of objectives, goals, and mission within the system; and (c) Ensure the matching of the system's missions, goals, and objectives with the mission, goals, and objectives of the students.

Philosophy

30,000 Foot View

When gearing up for a long night of learning design or conference preparation, I have a ritual of treating myself to a decadent coffee drink. Each and every time, I place the following order: “big daddy, non-fat, decaf, sugar-free, extra hot cinnamon dolce latte.” The barista jokingly refers to my order as the “why bother”. Without a performance end-in-mind, learning solutions are susceptible to the same fate. To get a seat at the strategic level, learning has to impact performance, and show measurable progress.

Learning solutions are expanding to embrace the broader perspective of performance improvement. From an enterprise perspective, learning becomes solution-based when there is

seamless integration with performance improvement processes. As performance outcomes are directly impacted, the true organizational value of learning becomes evident. In Rosenberg's (2006) Smart Enterprise Framework, learning adds value to the business, and the four components that support it: (1) learning and performance architecture, (2) change management and communications, (3) learning and performance leadership, and (4) the environment for learning and performance to succeed.

Through the performance lens, learning is a strategy—it can be analyzed, planned, and implemented for change. The development of a Strategic Performance Plan positions the learning function to be included on the front-end of top level leadership collaboration. For sustainability, the vision for strategic learning must be "...enabled by technology, to grow and flow freely across departmental, geographical, or hierarchical boundaries, where it is shared and made actionable for the use and benefit of all." (Rosenberg, 2006 p. 39)

Earning the Right to Exist

In 2003, I was attending my first Strategic Planning instructor certification for "*Aligning Goals for Results*". Jim Stuart, a Senior Franklin Covey Consultant, bluntly stated, "Your organization doesn't have the right to exist". Coming from a government perspective, I remember thinking that he just didn't "get it". As public servants, we were institutionally entrusted to be good stewards. As long as the auditors could account for everything, there wasn't a need to earn a right to exist! Things change.

The systematic process of comprehensive evaluation is becoming important for determining the worth, value, and meaning of learning programs. With today's business focus on the bottom line, there is an increasing expectation for learning and development programs to

show evidence of cost-effectiveness. This type of evaluation compares the cost of a program to its usefulness or value, measured by monetary benefits.

Return on investment is the most common measure for providing management with information to determine whether a program is productive, yielding payoff, needing support, or able to be eliminated. The Phillips (1997) Five-Level ROI Framework adds a fifth level to the four levels of evaluation developed by Kirkpatrick. Level 1 includes Reaction and Planned Action, which is usually measured with a generic end-of-program questionnaire. At Level 2 Learning, participants are measured using tests, skill practices, role-playing, simulations, and other assessment tools. In Level 3 Job Application, follow-up methods are used to determine what was transferred back to the workplace. Frequency and use of skills are important to the success of application. At Level 4 Business Results, actual program results are measured as participants apply program material (output, quality, costs, time, customer satisfaction, etc.). Level 5 Return on Investment, compares monetary program benefits with program costs. ROI is usually expressed as a percent or cost/benefit ratio.

Anchored and Sustainable

During my ten year tenure at the Labor Department, I was a “working” training manager. Like many training professionals, I served in a variety of roles ranging from instructional design to delivery. In a typical year, I facilitated an average of 175 course, conference, and workshop sessions. Sixty percent of the sessions I delivered were customized by special request and developed through real time rapid instructional design. By all appearances, business was great—demand was high, production was keeping pace, and the culture of learning was contagious! Of course, things change.

My personal aspirations for career growth began to exceed my capacity for sustainment. I

needed a solid and repeatable “footprint” to replace myself. Ultimately, the instructional design solution I found was rooted in a systematic approach.

When designing formal learning, a systems approach to instructional design allows for the creation of measurable and repeatable processes. A systems approach begins with front-end performance analysis to ensure that an organizational performance problem can be solved with instruction. If appropriate, a needs assessment and job analysis may be conducted to prior to identifying what the learners are to know or be able to do when the instruction is concluded. The identification of a precise learning objective allows planning and implementation steps to be clear and effective. As a result, there is careful linkage between the instructional strategy and desired learning outcomes. Specific skills and knowledge are targeted with activities that directly relate to what is to be learned.

This generic planning process can be used to fit the requirements of any medium of instruction, and still be responsive to the needs of learners. The Dick Carey & Cary (2005) Model includes the following actions:

- (1) Identify instructional goal, (2) Conduct instructional analysis, (3) Analyze learners and contexts, (4) Write performance objectives, (5) Develop assessment instruments, (6) Develop instructional strategy, (7) Develop and select instructional materials, (8) Design and conduct formative evaluation of instruction, (9) Revise instruction, and (10) Design and conduct summative evaluation (p. 15).

For development initiatives and learning programs to be anchored, they must be formulated from empirical and replicable processes. Whether formal or informal, it is worth the time and effort to systematically evaluate and revise instruction when it is repeatable. Sustainability requires both efficiency of instruction and quality of learner performance.

Description of Exhibits

[Exhibit 1: Strategic Performance Plan—E-Learning Strategy \(TRDV 432\)](#)

The SSP includes the following 5 Parts: *Analysis of Current Situation; Desired Situation and Vision; Gap Analysis; SWOT Analysis; Learning and Performance Architecture; and Change Management Plan*. The final plan was presented to Senior Management at the Department of Labor. The recommendations directly impacted state-wide collaboration toward the integration of Learning & Performance Architecture. Prior to leaving the department, my statewide project team completed full-scale enterprise implementation of the SumTotal LMS. As a result of the Strategic Performance Plan, employee learning paths were directly linked to the performance management process through individual development plans.

[Exhibit 2: ROI Comparative Analysis—Evaluation Research \(TRDV 434\)](#)

The Return on Investment Comparative Analysis includes the following sections: *Project Overview, Data Collection Plan, ROI Analysis Plan, Evaluation Results, and Final Project Recommendations*. This goal of this analysis was to utilize empirically-driven feedback to evaluate and calculate the ROI of two outsourced training program providers. The results were used to determine final recommendations for distribution of outsourced management training. The actual training dollars for the two outsourced vendors were divided as follows: Vendor A, provider of “*Developing Your People*” training session, received 40%; and Vendor B, provider of “*Coaching Your Staff for Success*” training session, received 60%.

The outcome supported two key “win-win” benefits which took into account quality and quantity of training delivery. The quality-based benefit was derived from awarding the majority of the budget to the provider who demonstrated a stronger probability of delivering positive ROI. The second quantity-based benefit still allowed the organization to maximize funding for the

total number of sessions provided (due to the significantly lower contractor fee).

[Exhibit 3: Instructional Design Plan Addressing a Key Performance Problem—Instructional Systems Design \(TRDV 451\)](#)

The Instructional Design Plan includes the following components: *Instructional Goal, Entry Behaviors, Course Layout, Objectives, Instructor Guide, Participant Handouts, and Evaluation Form*. A two-hour module titled “*Coaching for Results*” was designed and developed to improve the coaching skills of mid-level managers. In my role as Associate Director, I personally facilitated the session for more than 250 participants, and used the plan to conduct a Train-the-Trainer for two Senior Training Consultants. Both trainers were internally certified and able to facilitate the session.

The training was added to the core curriculum as a “Rapid Performance Module” to supplement the GA Performance Management Process. The Senior Trainer pilot sessions received overall “excellent” Level 1 evaluation feedback, and over the course of six months, were requested by other several other state agencies.

Reflection

Each of the portfolio exhibits reflects how foundational models and theories translate to the real world of Training and Development within the framework of performance. The design of performance improvement at an enterprise-level requires an in-depth analysis of the “current state”; as well as sound recommendations for virtual performance architecture and broad change management. As demonstrated in *Exhibit 1*, a Strategic Performance Plan (SSP) was conducted for the GA Department of Labor in order to map the implementation of organization wide performance alignment.

The ability to apply comprehensive levels of evaluation to make business decisions about

development initiatives is critical for earning executive-level support. When utilized with a focused and pre-determined objective, the results can have predictive (or formative) value. As evidenced in *Exhibit 2*, Level 5 evaluation can be utilized to compare the return on investment between two performance-related learning programs. The ROI Comparative Analysis conducted for the GA Department of Labor, Office of Staff Development translates all five evaluation levels into a clear and beneficial business recommendation.

Exhibit 3 illustrates the development of a Systematic Instructional Design plan which addresses a key performance problem for the GA Department of Labor. This instructor-led coaching module is an integrated and value-added component of the GA Performance Management training process. The design plan demonstrates how methodical and repeatable instruction can be anchored for sustainability.

Several years ago, I attended a Walt Disney “behind the scenes” train-the-trainer conference on World-class Service Excellence. I remember seeing a simple PowerPoint slide in the background that said “Culture by Design”. Every detail they shared during those three days was intricately linked to a master strategy for creating the culture of Customer Experience. There is a big difference between shooting for an end-in-mind, and really mapping it out. One is hit or miss, and even when it does occur, the best case scenario is achieved by default. Unfortunately, a lot of my previous experiences in the training arena have been just that, a mixed bag of results. Now that I have a seat at the table and a different vantage point, I am being very purposeful about what I bring. Learning and development must be strategically connected to performance improvement; able to prove worth and value; and systematically sustainable. Otherwise, it just can’t stay. The acrobatics of a CLO is performance improvement by design—not default.

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