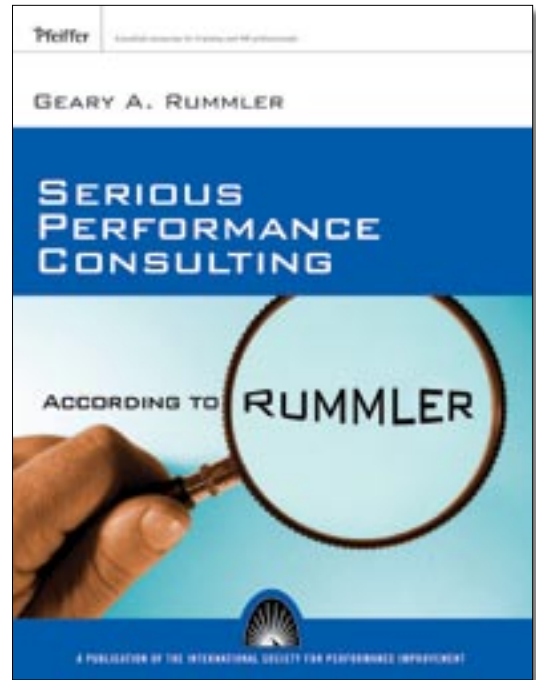## PRACTICAL COUNSEL FOR CONSULTANTS

SERIOUS PERFORMANCE CONSULTING ACCORDING TO RUMMLER

**By Geary A. Rummler
(Pfeiffer, 192 pp., $40)**

Reviewed by Jarralynne Agee

Forty years ago, performance consultant Geary Rummler made a revelation: "Put a good performer in a bad system and the system will win every time." His new book, *Serious Performance Consulting According to Rummler*, is a consultant's manifesto for liberating staff from faulty systems that stall productivity in the workplace.

Rummler boldly states that the book imparts everything he has learned from decades of performance consulting, research, and experience. All of that knowledge translates into a dense but practical resource. He explains step-by-step how to move beyond using training as a blanket prescription to cure any workplace ailment.

A quick flip through the book confirms Rummler's preference for using pictures more than words: He embeds flow charts, decision trees, and matrix diagrams into his straightforward consulting wisdom and wit. This approach makes his book a powerful reference and training tool for consultants at any level.

What Rummler calls "performance lite" many new trainers will recognize as the half-full feeling that comes from conducting a good training session, and then sending participants back into the environment that necessitated the training in the first place. While the book functions as an introduction to performance consulting, it also is a solid resource for mid-career professionals. They can use its case studies and sample reports as a substitute for a personal coaching session with the author. Seasoned professionals will benefit from its straightforward "According to Rummler" sidebars and succinct chapter summaries that will guide

them to incorporate fresh ideas into their practices.

In addition to his practical consulting suggestions, Rummler offers readers a paradigmatic shift in thinking with his approach to diagnosing a performance problem. Through what he calls the "anatomy of the problem," he implores consultants to avoid the knee-jerk reaction of responding to a manager's requested training solution by first assessing whether that solution addresses the critical business issue. If the consultant is certain that there is no opportunity to add value to the system, Rummler advises that she plans a gracious exit from the project.

By recognizing that there may be critical business flaws surrounding a performance system, consultants can alleviate some of the pressure on workers whose performance may not be the cause but rather symptoms of the problem. Although these performance deficiencies may be traced to other parts of the organization, Rummler says the trail usually starts with the worker. To illustrate that point, he allows readers to look over his shoulder as he navigates through a complex case study that runs throughout the book. Through that study, he eases the discussion from theory into practice and expands the reader's performance consulting tool kit with each successive page.

It is fair to note that readers who prefer narrative to graphics may find themselves reviewing Rummler's visually complex diagrams more than once. (They are included in the book because they are a mainstay in his client analyses and presentations.) However, Rummler gives his readers considerable incentive to track the many diagrams and follow along. He expertly uses each diagram to progressively build upon the performance improvement concepts he introduces as the case study example unfolds.

Readers who finish *Serious Performance Consulting* will expand their comprehension of the performance consulting process greatly, and more importantly, will have a template to put that knowledge to work in their new or expanded performance consulting roles. Consequently, I give the book 3.5 cups of coffee.
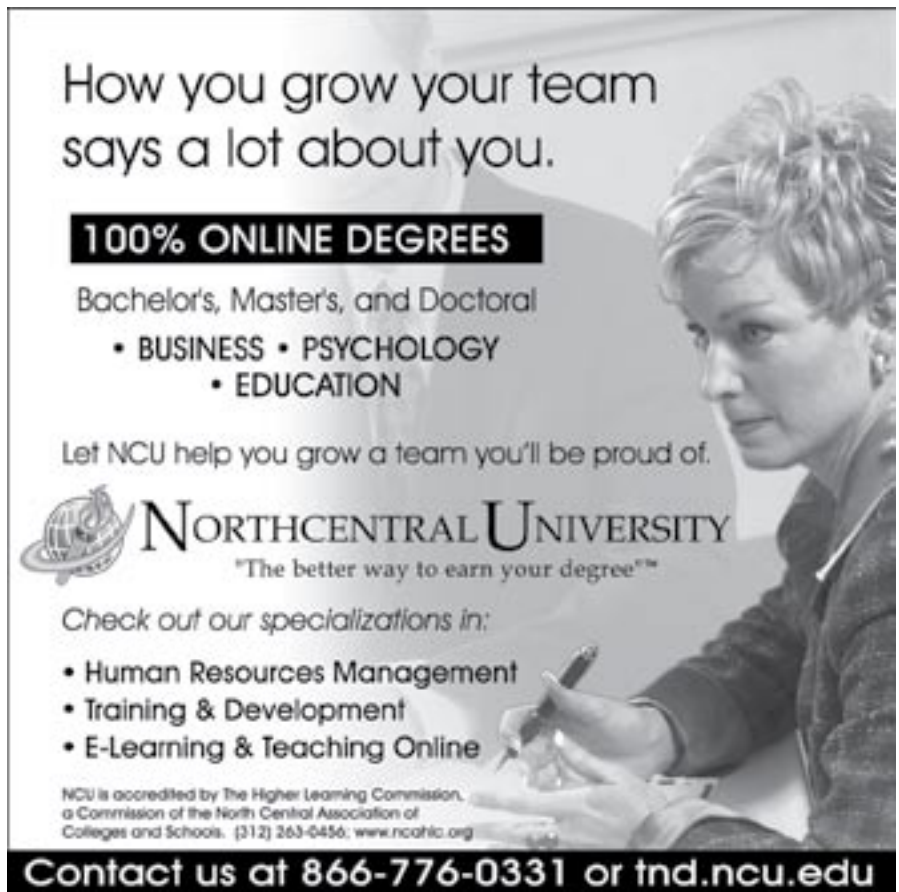
Jarralynne Agee is an organizational psychologist and principal trainer in the Center for Workforce Development at the University of California at Berkeley. She also is an executive coach and performance consultant; jagee@berkeley.edu.

Through what he calls the "anatomy of the problem," he implores consultants to avoid the knee-jerk reaction of responding to a manager's training solution.

BOOKS //

30 Days to a More Powerful Memory

By Gini Graham Scott
(AMACOM, 224 pp., $14.95 paperback*)

Author Gini Graham Scott says having a good memory is more important than ever, and is especially critical for aging baby boomers. In her newest publication, *30 Days to a More Powerful Memory,* she aims to help any aged reader improve his memory in one month.

While the book delves into memory-boosting techniques such as mnemonic
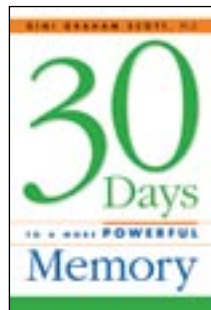
devices, visualization, chunking and clustering, and mental triggers, it also offers information from cognitive experts and psychologists and shows readers basic ways they can prepare their minds and bodies to remember more.

Chock-full of self-assessments, the first section discusses how memory works in terms of scientific research and physical structure; the second reveals how overall health and lifestyle factor in. The remaining sections detail numerous tips and techniques to boost mental agility. Some—creating tickler files, paying attention to surroundings, and repeating information over and over—you've likely heard before. But the new ones, combined with comprehensive explanations, make this a complete and useful guide.

Josephine Rossi

Editor's Note: This book will be released in June.

Coaching, Counseling & Mentoring: How to Choose & Use the Right Technique to Boost Employee Performance

By Florence M. Stone
(AMACOM, 230 pp., $24.95)

There are plenty of managers who tolerate substandard performance, believing that if they treat poor performers with kid gloves the problem will go away. Stone rebuts the common complaint that managers cannot coach their employees because it takes too much time. She counters that not coaching employees will require even more time to correct poor performance.

Managers need to address performance issues early and directly by identifying the problem and warning an employee about the consequences of poor performance. An effective manager
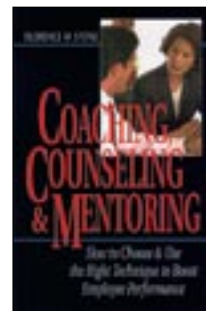
will be an active listener, thereby encouraging the employee to speak honestly about any difficulties she encounters. As a result, the manager and employee can work together to correct performance.

Stone defines counseling as the means by which a manager achieves a meeting of the minds with an employee about the difference between actual and expected performance. Many performance problems arise from poor time management or unclear job definitions. In such cases, managers need to prioritize each assignment.

Michael Laff

The Online Learning Idea Book:
95 Proven Ways to Enhance
Technology-Based and Blended
Learning
Edited by Patti Shank
(Pfeiffer, 354 pp., $50)

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This book's concept is simple yet educational. It compiles the best tried-and-true ideas from online learning and instructional design experts—trainers, designers, programmers, media developers, and artists—on how to make online learning less soporific and more stimulating. The pointers range from technical, such as how to set up an RSS feed or a chatbot, to conceptual, such as how to build team spirit between distance learners.
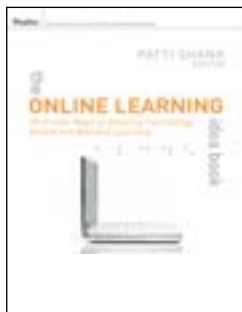
Unlike many other online design guides, the book proves that even if the desired goal is abstract, the instructions need not be. The tips include short explanations on why the idea in question is valuable, how it may be adopted or adapted, and how it was originally implemented. Screenshots illustrate the set-up, content, media, and graphics used in the original design.

Although some of the ideas are more cutesy than groundbreaking—such as sending audio- and video-based greeting cards to make students feel more appreciated—most of them are innovative enough to spark at least a few ambitious ideas in the minds of online designers and creators of instructional content.

Jenni Jarventaus