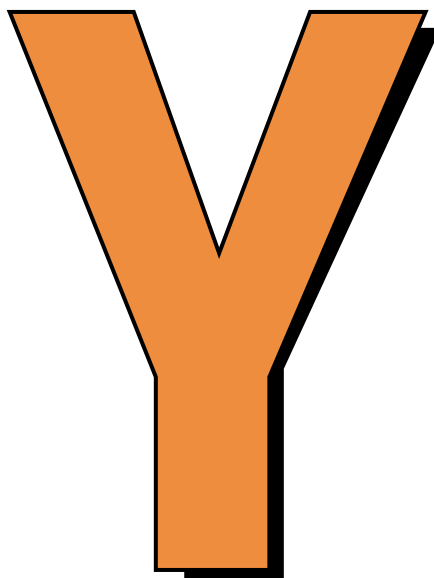


This conclusion
to article 1 (May)
spells out how to
build confidence
and credibility.

Demystifying Performance:

Getting Started

By Dennis L. Gay and Thomas J. LaBonte



You've come back to your office after lunch. The phone rings. It's Janet, the training manager (your boss), who must join a leadership meeting later.

"I've heard there are going to be cost-reduction discussions stemming from current revenue shortfalls," she says. "I'd like you to begin thinking about what in your budget you can eliminate." She promises to send the

meeting agenda in an email for your review. As you sit in front of your monitor reflecting on the agenda, you feel a sense of *déjà vu*.

You remember the enthusiasm expressed by the leaders in last year's budgeting process. The items in the t&d budget were well thought out and clearly important to the plan. Yet, you were asked to eliminate all of the "extras" in the budget, such as the learning management system the company so desperately needed. You can't believe that this is happening again after all of the planning and thought you've put in.

Much of the recurring snipping of t&d budgets is self-inflicted. We aren't doing enough to relate our activities to business results. The leadership perception is that training is a cost rather than a contribution. The trick is to change that perception through a new emphasis on performance and demonstrated results. In our May article, "Demystifying Performance: A Roadmap," we talked about the mechanics of human performance improvement and adding new value in improved business results. That article described a comprehensive view and process of performance improvement required to make strong performance a reality. We presented the case for making the transition from a trainer in the role of helping hands to providing internal clients with support for individual and

organizational results as a performance consultant—accomplished by taking the initial request for training and, in a performance discussion, clarifying the performance problem, identifying specific gaps, and obtaining client agreement to gather cause analysis data.

Building confidence

How do we as trainers gain the confidence, skills, and credibility needed to help our clients identify performance problems and gaps, and make them willing to work with us in diagnosing the root causes of the gaps? This article provides more specifics on how you, personally, can begin to get started with performance to make a difference for your company and in your career.

One way to build your confidence as a performance consultant is to focus your preparation on learning enough about the business to have a stake in the current and future success of the organization, and to develop performance consulting competencies. It's critical for your success as a performance consultant to establish credibility with clients by learning the business. Learn the fundamentals that include a basic understanding of the strategies, structure, goals, and terminology. Know how to interpret financial re-

ports and identify the current status of business units against plans. Learn how success is measured in the organization, and understand the pressures that line managers face in achieving aggressive goals.

Learning the business is a long-term process, but there are immediate actions you can take. Request to be put on the distribution list for reports from finance, audit, and marketing. Continuously scan the organization's intranet for data. Demonstrate an interest in learning the business by attending client business meetings. Contact line and staff managers to discuss current initiatives and issues. Take the time to review industry and business journals.

Learning the fundamentals of performance consulting is also a long-term commitment. In addition to learning and customizing an HPI process, there are six competencies that need immediate attention when getting started as a performance consultant. We recommend building upon existing competencies by doing a self-assessment of strengths and development opportunities. Work with your manager to prepare a development plan on these performance improvement competencies:

- consultative questioning
- problem solving and analysis listening
- interviewing and data collection
- relationship building (partnering)
- systems (holistic) thinking.

What are ways for busy trainers to learn the HPI process and those competencies? We recommend a blended approach of formal preparation and on-the-

job application and learning. The formal approach could involve completing the five courses of ASTD's HPI Certificate Program WWW.ASTD.ORG; internal workshops conducted by an external consultant; university programs in HPI, organizational development, and quality; and professional reading. This formal preparation must be balanced with workplace application. Consulting assignments on HPI cross-functional teams, coaching by a manager or mentor, and learning by doing are essential steps in learning and applying HPI competencies.

Choosing the right client

As with marriage, picking the right partner is pretty darned important. For an HPI professional, it may be the single most important success criteria. Finding the right client to partner with on performance improvement isn't as tough as you might think.

The client is the ultimate decision maker with accountability for a performance problem. That definition is important because we tend to want to partner with people we know and are comfortable working with. Usually, that's a first-line supervisor or middle manager. Unfortunately, such managers may lack the decision-making ability required to help a new performance consultant be successful. Other characteristics to look for are subtle but often easy to spot. The right client generally

- is a good listener
- is known for being "employee sensitive"
- is the leader of a high-functioning work team

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You're not required to push.

- is considered a “results-oriented” leader
- asks important questions in meetings regarding people and the impact of strategies on the workforce
- won’t hesitate to commit resources to projects
- isn’t afraid to invest in workforce initiatives
- is a process thinker
- has an important itch to scratch—a perplexing performance problem as described in our previous article.

This is the key: The client has a natural pull for a new way to consider the strategy. You’re not required to push a new process on a system that seems to be working well.

Another point to consider in picking the right client is that some potential clients will never “get it.” Some leaders have risen to success through an intense focus on financial results and a bit of good luck. That success is often achieved in spite of their lack of emphasis on HPI concepts.

Some indicators of clients who won’t get it:

- Their first question when discussing performance is, How much does it cost?
- They traditionally haven’t been a visible sponsor for investing in employee development programs.
- They let their HR generalist handle all performance issues, including incentives, hiring, and training.
- They seem to check out when the topic of workforce performance comes up in meetings; they’re distracted and disinterested.

If a line manager has requested your help and you find that he or she doesn’t meet the definition and criteria for being the right client, our best advice is to discuss the scope of the problem, need for resources, potential access to the workplace, and other considerations that dictate escalating the performance problem up a level or two to the appropriate senior manager. Keep the middle manager as a member of the team, but do everything in your power to get the business owner actively involved as the real client.

When picking your sweet spot for implementing a performance improvement initiative, the client is absolutely critical for success. We recommend that you spend adequate time considering and choosing the client with whom you wish to make your performance consulting debut.

Choosing the right project

Once you’ve identified the right client or clients, it’s critical to align the right client with the right potential HPI project. We strongly recommend that you don’t

start with an enterprise-wide initiative. That’s nearly always an equation for failure. When multiple clients exist, the project dollars are huge, aggressive timelines and schedules drive decisions, and you’re working across silos and political power bases, you probably won’t be successful introducing an HPI process.

Look for a performance problem that will allow you to start small. Ideal is a manageable project of reasonably short duration that’s within the capabilities of you and your department. Spend some time studying the organization’s business results. Identify performance improvement opportunities by networking with colleagues in finance, audit, marketing, and line management. Look closely at sales and revenue results month over month, trends with net income, and spikes in expenses. Compare people’s results with those of their peers. Most of the time, something will jump off the financial statements that may be your best opportunity. For example, if you see a steady decline in sales (even when the economy is weak and there are external contributory factors), that may point to a performance opportunity worth pursuing. Trends are critical, so make sure you look back at least six months.

When you think you’ve identified an opportunity, you’ll want to focus next on these areas:

- Does good data exist? For example, can you get your hands on the specific detail required to identify performance gaps and set realistic targets for your potential HPI project?
- The opportunity you identified can be influenced in three to six months or less. Most leaders can’t tolerate a longer timeframe for demonstrating some results.
- The opportunity is closely aligned with company strategy; in other words, the improvement you wish to pursue is central to making the plan.
- The opportunity isn’t overly tied to external factors that may be out of the client’s control.
- A business unit or team has knowledgeable exemplary performers and subject matter experts who are available, and you feel you can get your client to commit the time of some of those resources.

Sometimes, a bone is tossed directly onto your plate, but you have to be quick to recognize it. As we pointed out in the first article, oftentimes a leader will come bearing the opportunity; you just need to be fast enough on your feet to recognize it and influence the client to take a performance improvement approach rather than prescribe a training solution. Ask the right questions, and probe to see if the training re-

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quest is really tied to a broader performance problem. Remember and consider the performance questions posed by Gilbert:

- Are associates adequately motivated to perform?
- Are the organization's incentive systems aligned to the expected performance?
- Are tools and resources in place?
- Does the workforce have adequate information and information systems to perform at high levels?
- Are adequate t&d systems in place?
- Is the workload (employee capacity) enabling performance, or are so many things going on that employees are overwhelmed?

Spending some time evaluating your prospective client's business and studying the financial data will help you find a ripe target to bring to the attention of your client. But don't underestimate the opportunities laid in your lap through a training request. Almost every training project we've seen in dozens of organizations has broader workplace performance and process implications.

Staking your claim

Remember Janet's budget issue at the beginning of this article? In that hypothetical case, the training budget was one of the first targets in a cost-reduction exercise. It's a situation that most training professionals see in their careers.

To avoid that recurring dilemma, begin introducing your training programs in the context of the dri-

vers of performance. Broaden the dialogue with clients to weave a comprehensive approach to performance solutions rather than just training programs. With one or more successes, your training team will become indispensable and further last-minute budget reductions may be avoided.

It's all about confidence and preparation. You'll find that the effort is worth it for both the business and your career. As you identify a client and project and have one performance success, you'll be viewed differently in the organization. Leaders will start to look to you for counsel and you can begin to educate the organization on the HPI process. Once leaders have seen it all come together, they'll immediately begin calling you into more strategic meetings to get input on the workforce performance issues.

Performance improvement isn't mysterious; it's about preparation and the organizational courage to get started. You must develop that courage, gained through your preparation, to break out of self-imposed training silos and become a performance consultant. When you do, the rewards will be significant—from a business and career standpoint. TD

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