

*The barrier between us, training professionals, and performance consulting is inside our own heads. Here's how we can break through to become the performance consultants we need to be.*

# The Invisible Wall

**I** WAS SITTING IN A HOTEL ROOM CONTEMPLATING A SPEECH I HAD JUST GIVEN TO A GROUP OF TRAINING PROFESSIONALS.

The topic: what the HRD function could do to elevate the overall productivity of any organization. I had presented that same message several times before, but this time the response was puzzling. Previously, a few people would be extremely enthusiastic. Everyone would be polite and gracious. But this time, a lot of the audience was obviously uncomfortable about some of the content and the underlying, basic message.

What was it that made many of my colleagues so uneasy?

Much is being written and talked about regarding the need for training professionals to redefine their role to become performance consultants. Though that is not an entirely new idea, it has gained much momentum in recent years. Dana Gaines Robinson and Jim Robinson, for instance, are articulate spokespersons for that change. But the message began long ago

with Tom Gilbert and others who tried to get those of us in the training arena to see that our objective was really performance and that training was only one of many ways to achieve it.

I decided that message had a great deal in common with my talk. Both ideas—that HRD should improve productivity, and that performance is our objective and training is only one way to achieve it—are wonderfully logical, but they haven't

BY JOHN H. ZENGER

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**A MESSAGE TO COLLEAGUES:** This article is not intended as a criticism or indictment of our profession. Much of what I describe I see in myself and many of my esteemed colleagues. But if we are ever going to remake the profession, we have to rethink our attitudes and re-examine our values.



been accepted and adapted, for many of the same reasons. There is a huge barrier to overcome.

### The invisible wall

The barrier of which I speak is not imposed externally. It has nothing to do with the lack of technology or with government regulation. It has nothing to do with money or other resource constraints. It does not stem from the lack of support from people above us in our organizations.

The barrier is far more subtle and difficult to see, because it lies entirely within ourselves. Much of it is unwritten and unspoken—like the air we breathe. We seldom stop to think about air. Nevertheless, it is a pervasive, essential element in our lives.

Suddenly, it dawned on me. My message was disquieting because, though it was logical and defensible, it collided with many people's deeply rooted values and the culture of their chosen profession. The barrier is a values and culture conflict, with professional consequences.

Here are some factors that make up the invisible wall.

**Kindly helpers.** We are, by nature, kindly helpers. Our primary motivation is to help people, develop them, and make them better people. We are not aggressive drivers who enjoy pushing people to higher levels of performance. That seems cruel and counter to our culture.

We are egalitarian, not elitist. We care about everyone, especially underdogs and the oppressed. To some degree, as part of the HRD structure, we have been tacitly charged by upper management to be the defenders of people in our organizations. In many cases, we're the ones teaching managers about affirmative action and diversity. We defend the weak against the strong. Leaders are made, not born. We are uncomfortable with anything undemocratic.

We admire most the people who demonstrate interpersonal skills and contribute to their organizations' smooth functioning. Traditionally, we haven't put on a pedestal people who produce the most. So, how comfortable will it ever be for our group to seek peak performers and hold them up as examples to emulate? How like-



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ly is it that we will identify poor performers, and communicate their lack of performance and need to change?

**Resident guerrillas.** In many situations, we have been resident guerrillas working to change an organization and its practices. Often, that meant doing things we believed to be correct but that were not totally in harmony with current executives' thinking. I recall a training director of a major insurance company telling me, “Top management would be aghast if it knew what we're teaching in our training sessions.”

Many senior managers haven't espoused the principles of employee participation and involvement, which we knew were best for an organization. So, are *we* the ones now to push individuals and work teams to higher levels of performance and productivity?

**Vocal critics.** We have often been the most vocal critics of top management. Criticism also comes from such groups as marketing and manufacturing. Yet, senior executives are often

chosen for their marketing expertise or knowledge of operations. When they show weak people-management skills, we have found ourselves in opposition to them. We have seen our job as protecting people from arbitrary, capricious top managers.

How easy will it be to switch to being concerned chiefly with performance and productivity? Especially when those are issues that upper management has used as excuses for not treating people fairly.

**People people.** We are not quantitative by nature and instinct. Though exceptions exist, most people in our profession are not drawn to numbers and measurements. We are “people people,” not quantitative jocks.

How many trainers do any real evaluation of training? Particularly, how many do level 4 evaluation, which involves some rigorous determination of the effect of training on a company's bottom line? The answer: Very few. Yet, performance consulting rests on the disciplines of measurement and metrics.

Though research has never confirmed it, a great many of us believe down deep that a happy, well-treated workforce *is* more productive. So, our focus has been helping organizations do things that would make workers feel more satisfied. Intellectually, we may know that the reverse is true: More productive workers are more satisfied. But that's not the direction we have taken traditionally.

**Interactors.** We enjoy human interaction. If we see a performance problem and it might be remedied by a job aid, an electronic performance support mechanism, or a training intervention, we have tended to choose training.

In the past, we looked for the best in everyone and trusted that their intrinsic motivations could be unleashed to achieve organizational goals. It has been troubling to believe that people do things just for the monetary rewards. To us, using compensation as a solution to a performance problem seems crass or inferior.

Those are just a few elements of the value system and culture that surrounds us and that stand in the way of our becoming effective performance consultants.

## Breaking through the comfort zone

One necessary step to break through any invisible wall is to make it visible. That has been my intention in this article—to call attention to the existence of the wall created by our personal values and the expectations organizations have put on us.

I believe that we are uncomfortable with some of the technology of performance improvement, largely because we haven't been involved enough in using it. It's the old "you're down on things you're not up on" syndrome. As we become more accustomed to designing job aids, changing compensation systems, restructuring work processes, redesigning jobs, seeking top performers—and other proven approaches—our values and culture will begin to shift.

We must begin experimenting outside of our traditional comfort zones. Initially, we may have to work with partners we are not used to working

with. But as one who believes that you can change people's attitudes and beliefs best by changing their behavior, I think we must find ways to initiate new ways of behaving.

We can choose from these options:

- ▶ Elect to live inside our old invisible wall.
- ▶ Push the wall back several yards.
- ▶ Dismantle all or part of the wall.

Personally, I believe that the training profession must remake itself. The move to becoming performance consultants is exactly the right one. But the transition will be hard because of the beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and values locked inside our heads. Overcoming them will be far more difficult than learning the necessary technical skills for performance consulting. But handsome rewards await those who make the change. ■



**John H. Zenger** recently retired as chairman of the Times Mirror Training Group—made up of Kaset, Learning International, and Zenger Miller, and co-founded by Zenger in 1977. An HRD Hall of Fame member, Zenger is the author of two books, *Making 2 +*

*2 = 5: 22 Action Steps Leaders Take to Boost Productivity and Not Just for CEOs: Sure-Fire Success Secrets for the Leader in Each of Us.* He has also co-written several books, including the best-selling *Self-Directed Work Teams: The New American Challenge.* Currently, Zenger is an officer of *Enterprise Mentors*, an international foundation providing business loans, training, and consulting to micro-business owners in third-world countries. Zenger lives in Midway, Utah.

To respond to Zenger's article, email [mailbox@astd.org](mailto:mailbox@astd.org).

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