

How To Improve Performance

BY CLAY CARR

Training is not always the answer to performance problems. This step-by-step method offers a more holistic approach to performance improvement.

Businesses increasingly turn to trainers to solve a host of problems. Meanwhile, trainers increasingly recognize that training alone won't solve the problems they are being asked to fix.

Consider the following examples:

- ▶ A plant manager asks an in-house trainer to help boost production by offering some technical refresher courses. The trainer reviews the section's production reports and discovers that many workers frequently call in sick. The trainer suspects that the production problems reflect not a lack of technical expertise, but poor morale.
- ▶ A company that hastily implemented teams is unhappy with their performance. The company asks a trainer to run some team-training workshops. Interviews and observations confirm for the trainer that the teams would benefit from some grounding in group dynamics. But the trainer also discovers that teams have found their efforts repeatedly sabotaged by upper managers who still want to call the shots.
- ▶ A small business asks a consultant to smooth relations between warring sales reps and consultants by teach-

ing both groups some interpersonal skills. Based on several focus groups, the consultant traces the company's internal strife not to employees' lack of conflict-resolution skills, but to structures and policies that unwittingly pit the sales reps and consultants against each other.

In each of these cases, instead of automatically designing a course, trainers turned to human-performance-improvement techniques. Human-performance specialists first identify the root causes of poor performance. Then they try to eliminate the causes by altering one or more of the factors that govern how well people perform.

The key factors that determine how well we do our work are goals, standards, feedback, motivation, opportunity, means, and competence. Changes—also called interventions—aimed at these factors often include training, but they rarely are limited to training.

How can you apply the principles of human-performance improvement? Here is one method.

For starters, listen carefully to your internal and external clients. Make sure you understand the prob-

lem from the clients' point of view. Similarly, give ownership of the intervention to your clients. It should be their project—and if it succeeds, it is their success.

Guide your clients to present problems ("The error rate is too high.") rather than order solutions ("We need a training course.") Next, begin gathering data to identify the root causes of the problem.

Collect data

The method you choose for collecting data will depend on the amount of time you have available and the level of detail you seek. Here are some common methods for collecting data:

- ▶ Watch employees perform their jobs, and then examine the products of their work. This is a quick and easy approach.
- ▶ Review performance data available from such sources as production-quality reports, general organizational-performance reports, and performance appraisals. This method is popular because it is quick, but it is not always dependable.
- ▶ Conduct a formal written survey. This can be time-consuming, but it is

a helpful foundation for focus groups and interviews.

- ▶ Convene focus groups. This is probably the most efficient method of data collection, especially if you back it up with interviews.

- ▶ Conduct group and one-on-one interviews. They can be helpful at the outset for sketching an outline of the problem and for supplementing any of the other methods. Interviews also are a good way to obtain information.

Throughout the data-collection process, you will look for clues to root causes of the performance problem. Here are some tips for organizing and examining data:

Look for patterns. Does performance improve the month before the annual merit-pay reviews? Did performance figures change after a new supervisor took over? Why does product quality rise and fall predictably over the course of a quarter?

Look for the patterns behind the patterns. Ask what TQM disciples call "the five whys." (The report is always late. Why? Because the data arrive late. Why? Because it takes two weeks to retrieve the data from the system. Why?...)

"Chunk" the data. Do certain problems occur in tandem? Do problems arise only in certain areas, under certain conditions, or at certain times?

Diagram the processes. If holes appear in the diagram, they indicate holes in the data. Look closely at any point in the process where responsibility changes hands; these junctures are a common source of problems.

Remember that gathering data and identifying causes are mutually reinforcing processes. Data suggest causes, and potential causes suggest directions for gathering more data. In part, developing expertise in performance improvement means learning to strike a balance between collecting too little data and collecting too much.

Designing the intervention

After analyzing root causes and before designing an intervention, you have to determine the depth at which you will attack the problem. Most performance problems exist on several levels. The deeper you delve, the greater the potential benefit. But the closer to the core of an organiza-

tion that you attack a problem, the more trauma you create.

Health professionals describe medical interventions that produce trauma as invasive. To change performance, interventions interrupt existing practices, processes, and activities. The greater the interruption, the more invasive the intervention. Change is

- ▶ least invasive when it does not require performers to change what they are doing

- ▶ more invasive when it requires them to learn to do a current task better or to start doing something new

- ▶ most invasive when it requires performers to unlearn something that they have been doing so they can learn to do it differently.

Interventions aimed at improving

Five Steps to Performance Improvement

1. Clearly define the problem as the client sees it.

2. Gather data to pinpoint the root causes of the problem.

3. Devise a remedy that addresses the causes, not the symptoms.

4. Decide on the quickest, most cost-effective way to apply the remedy.

5. After implementation, assess the remedy's success and side effects, and use the results to refine the improvement strategy.

performance must address one or more of the seven elements of performance. These elements are competence, goals, standards, feedback, means, opportunity, and motivation.

In general, interventions designed to increase competence are the least invasive. They include, from least to most invasive:

- ▶ job aids, reference manuals, guidelines, and other methods designed to store information for easy retrieval

- ▶ formal training of all kinds, which is more invasive the longer it lasts and the greater the change it attempts to produce

- ▶ development programs, such as career, managerial, or leadership development.

Interventions designed to develop or clarify goals and standards and

establish feedback systems are more invasive. These interventions, from least to most invasive, include

- ▶ indoctrination (communicating the organization's goals and standards)

- ▶ design of performance standards

- ▶ design of feedback systems

- ▶ design of performance-appraisal systems

- ▶ development or facilitation of visioning, strategic-planning, or goal-setting processes.

Interventions that try to improve the means supporting performance, such as policies, processes, and technology, range from simple to complex, and include

- ▶ minor changes in scheduling, or modification of procedures in existing processes (such as making it easier to get supplies or equipment)

- ▶ improving the flow of any job-required information

- ▶ improving processes limited to one or two functions that involve clerical or other relatively simple tasks

- ▶ redesigning processes—especially those that affect several functions—and changing complex work relationships

- ▶ implementing technology on a large scale.

Interventions designed to offer people more opportunities to perform well tend to invade the culture of an organization. These highly invasive interventions include

- ▶ implementation of quality teams

- ▶ programs designed to enrich jobs

- ▶ development of self-managing teams.

Interventions designed to motivate people to perform better by changing their incentives run the gamut from relatively non-invasive to highly invasive. From least to most invasive, these interventions include

- ▶ launching or changing recognition programs

- ▶ revising criteria for promotions

- ▶ changing compensation systems

- ▶ designing or redesigning jobs to offer employees more challenges, autonomy, and social support

The most invasive interventions try to change all seven elements of performance. These interventions can take years to implement and require the full support of top management. Frequently, all-encompassing interventions fail to bring about

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the desired improvement. Such efforts include

- ▶ conversion of an organization from a traditional hierarchy to one governed by self-managing teams
- ▶ organization-wide implementation of TQM
- ▶ large-scale cultural or transformational change programs.

Minimizing resistance

The more invasive the change, the more anxious, confused, and incompetent people will feel. The key to successfully intervening in an organization is anticipating and minimizing negative feelings.

The following seven principles enable you to estimate how strongly people will resist change. Each principle is presented with a suggestion of what you can do to minimize resistance.

- ▶ Performers resist changes they perceive as burdensome. Minimize resistance by presenting the change as a challenge.
- ▶ Performers resist changes that offer no payoffs. Clearly demonstrate the benefits that the change will bring.
- ▶ The longer it takes to implement a change, the more resistance it will inspire. Implement the change in stages so that it begins producing positive results quickly.
- ▶ If the change involves multiple functions or departments, it will prompt resistance. Limit the initial change to a few functions or departments—one if possible.
- ▶ People resist changes that alter their status, power, or relationships. Give people something to gain from giving up old advantages.
- ▶ People resist changes that conflict with individual and organizational values. Design the intervention so that it affirms existing values as much as possible without compromising the intervention.
- ▶ If performers doubt the change will take hold, they will resist it. Demonstrate that top managers sup-

port the change. Assign a sponsor with the clout and the staying power to ensure that the change will be implemented.

Assessment and assimilation

In theory, assessment and assimilation are two distinct steps. In practice, many organizations assess their efforts well, but fail to assimilate what they have learned.

Lay the groundwork for assessment and assimilation during the design phase.

- ▶ Get agreement up front on objectives and criteria.
- ▶ Establish the baseline data and the method you will use to evaluate the success of the intervention.
- ▶ Wrap up the evaluation with a report that describes the lessons learned from the intervention. Spell out how these lessons will be used to refine the intervention.

Above all, remember that a small and successful intervention is better than a grandiose failure. Take to heart this entreaty from the Hippocratic oath administered to physicians—"first, do no harm." Failed interventions can leave organizations weaker than they were to start with.

Gain your organization's trust by staking out a well-defined territory and compiling high-quality data on which to base a sound intervention. A series of limited but meaningful interventions that build on one another is more likely to bring about deep and lasting change than a single major intervention that flops. ■

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