

Introduction to
Performance Consulting Skills

Michael Beitler, Ph.D.

www.mikebeitler.com

Organizational effectiveness (OE) consultants and trainers should be aware of the performance consulting movement. Performance consulting has been widely embraced by trainers and the ASTD (American Society for Training & Development) since the 1990s. Many ASTD members are also members of the ISPI (International Society for Performance Improvement).

Performance consultants advocate a change of focus from training to performance improvement. An ASTD survey of more than 300 senior managers and executives in 1998 identified ten probable trends in training. A “shift from providing training to improving performance” was ranked the most probable trend within the next few years. That prediction seems to be right on target.

Robinson and Robinson (1998) summarized the “new” goal of the training or HRD (human resource development) departments as follows: “to enhance human performance in support of business goals” (p.3). They went on to say, “This

© 2005 All Rights Reserved - Michael Beitler

No part of this report may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder.

requires that the department work with clients to define and align four types of needs:

- business needs
- performance needs
- learning needs
- work environment needs (Robinson & Robinson, 1998, p.3)

Judith Robb (1998) expounds on these four needs. She defines business needs as the operational or strategic goals of the unit, department, or organization.

“Performance needs describe what people need to do to meet the operational goals” (p.232). She sees learning needs as the required skills and knowledge to perform successfully. Robb describes work environment needs as “the systems, tools, and processes required if the performance needs are to be achieved” (p.232).

Robb (1998) goes on to say, “The client’s business goals should be part of every decision” (p.233). She is in complete agreement with my belief that everything in the organization should be driven by the strategic plan. Success or

failure of any initiative should be determined by desired business results.

The Performance Consulting Model

Performance consultants follow a four-phase model strikingly similar to the four-phase model of traditional training (see below).

Four-Phase Models

Performance Consulting

Partnering

Assessing

Implementing

Measuring

Traditional Training

Assessing (TNA)

Designing

Conducting

Evaluating

The difference is a philosophical one. Performance consultants reject the order-taking role to which traditional trainers are relegated.

When the traditional trainer receives a client call, he/she begins the assessing phase by conducting a training needs analysis (TNA). The problem with this approach, according to the performance consultants, is that it presumes a training problem and a training solution. I agree; this could be a bad presumption.

1. Partnering Phase

Partnering, according to Geoffrey Bellman (1998), is essential to success whenever people are working together. It is important during this first phase to define “success.” What would successful results look like?

Contracting between the client and consultant is a critical part of the partnering phase. Bellman (1998) states, “A contract is ‘the deal’ within which people play out their relationship. It is about what we each are willing to give and what we want in return” (p.43). It is worth the time it takes to make these expectations explicit.

Bellman (1998) insightfully adds, “Some form of contract is always there, whether discussed or not, whether mutually understood or not...” (p.43).

The literature on partnering for performance consultants is similar to, and in agreement with, the relationship building advocated by Schein (1999) in his Process Consulting Model. For more on this, see Beitler, 2003, chapter 3.

2. Assessing Phase

The assessing phase in performance consulting is different from the assessing phase in traditional training. In the traditional training model a training need is assumed. Not so in the performance consulting model.

Similar to the traditional training model, assessing in the performance consulting model is used as the basis for designing interventions, which may include training. But, the goal in this model is to enhance performance, not merely knowledge.

Paul Elliott (1998) states, “The focus must be on outputs, which is what workers produce, and not simply on what they do” (p.63). This view of assessing is clearly influenced by Tom Gilbert’s (1978) book, entitled *Human Competence*.

This model uses a “gap and cause” analysis. Similar to the traditional

training model, a gap and cause analysis contrasts current performance with the organization's expectations.

One significant difference in the assessment phase of the performance consulting model is the use of exemplary performers, individuals whose outputs (results) exceed requirements. Remember in the traditional training assessment phase the task was to compare current KSAs (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) of the worker with the required KSAs of the job. There can be significant differences between average, successful, and exemplary performers.

3. Implementing Phase

The implementing phase involves determining the proper intervention(s) and then carrying them out with the client. These interventions are based upon the findings of the assessment phase.

Performance consultants consider both learning and nonlearning interventions. With such a wide range of possible interventions (learning and nonlearning) no single consultant can be an expert in all of them. Stolovitch and

Keeps (1998, p.95) recommend building a “resource bank” of internal and external consultants “to whom work can be brokered when required.” They go on to say, “It is unlikely that learning interventions alone will solve complex performance problems” (p.103).

Nonlearning interventions including everything from reward system changes for improved motivation to environment changes (sometimes simply referred to as “other changes”), such as:

- improving information flow
- redesigning jobs
- reducing interruptions
- changing worker selection criteria
- providing technical support

While the literature on nonlearning interventions tends toward the grandiose, occasionally interventions as simple as written “job aids” are sufficient. Written job aids are nothing more than task lists, recipes, formulas, or decision tables.

Solovitch and Keeps (1998) recommend systems thinking leading to a “basket of solutions” (p.113). They point out that outsourcing is not the only option here; another option is “insourcing” (p.122). The idea of “brokering-in” is not new, but it is often underutilized. Brokering-in involves identifying and utilizing in-house expertise, instead of giving the work to an outside vendor.

4. Measuring Phase

Evaluation of performance improvement initiatives (or learning activities) requires an open discussion about desired results and actual results. This requires a model of “measurements.”

Brinkerhoff (1998) offers a five-phase model for evaluation “that parallels the five fundamental errors”:

1. goal setting
2. performance analysis
3. design for improvement
4. implementation

5. impact

Key questions associated with each phase, according to Brinkerhoff (1998) are:

1. “How important and worthwhile is the business goal for the performance improvement project?” (p.156)
2. “Have sufficient primary performance improvement needs been identified?” (p.159)
3. “Have correct and sufficient performance improvement methods, tools, and other support aids been identified?” (p.161)
4. “Were all performer and manager expectations considered and addressed in the design of the performance management tools?” (p.164)
5. “What evidence is there that performance improvement efforts have ‘caused’ performance improvements?” (p.167)

Practitioners in the performance consulting movement place serious emphasis on measuring results. This focus on results should be adopted by all practitioners. Senior executives are increasing the pressure to justify all project expenditures. This is a trend that will not reverse itself.

All consultants, internal and external, whether they call themselves trainers, OE consultants, or performance consultants must provide evidence for their contribution to the organization's business objects. Understanding and commitment to the business objects are essential prerequisites for any consultants hoping to become strategic business partners.

Summary

Performance consulting offers both wisdom and tools for trainers and OE consultants. Judith Hale (1998) believes what “distinguishes performance consultants from other consultants is their lack of bias in terms of finding a solution” (p.7) While no consultant can truly be bias-free, I believe the intent of

her comment is worth considering.

To add more value to organizations, trainers and OE consultants must conduct needs analysis to distinguish between learning and nonlearning needs. Thorough needs analysis requires building a strategic partnership with the client, and the skillful use of questioning. The performance consulting movement has drawn our attention to these critical skills.

Conclusion

Performance consulting skills are critical to the success of internal consultants, independent consultants, and trainers who are responsible for performance improvement in their organizations. For more information on consulting skills and topics for consultant success, visit my website at www.mikebeitler.com. Please feel free to contact me anytime at mike@mikebeitler.com.

References

- ASTD (1998). "Trends in HRD," *National HRD Executive Survey*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD.
- Beitler, M.A. (2003). *Strategic Organizational Change*. Greensboro, NC: Practitioner Press International.
- Bellman, G. (1998). Partnership phase: Forming partnerships. In D. Robinson & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Moving from training to performance*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, and San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Brinkerhoff, R. (1998). Measurement phase: Evaluating effectiveness of performance improvement projects. In D. Robinson & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Moving from training to performance*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, and San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Elliott, P. (1998). Assessment phase: Building models and defining gaps. In D. Robinson & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Moving from training to performance*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, and San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Gilbert, T.F. (1978). *Human competence: Engineering worthy performance*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hale, J. (1998). *The performance consultant's fieldbook*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.
- Robb, J. (1998). The job of a performance consultant. In D. Robinson & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Moving from training to performance*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, and San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Robinson, D.G. & Robinson, J.C. (1998). A focus on performance: What is it? In D. Robinson & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Moving from training to performance*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, and San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Schein, E.H. (1999). *Process consultation revisited: Building the helping relationship*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Stolovitch, H. & Keeps, E. (1998). Implementation phase: Performance improvement interventions. In D. Robinson & J. Robinson (Eds.), *Moving from training to performance*. Alexandria, VA: ASTD, and San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.