



## **Human performance improvement**

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# SAY GOOD-BYE TO THE BLAME GAME

By Michael Laff

The CEO of a large retailer recently paid a visit to one of the company stores. He was disturbed to find that greeters were stopping departing customers to check for receipts, instead of welcoming the incoming shoppers.

On his return to the executive office, the CEO fired off a memo demanding training for greeters to learn how to say hello to customers. Suddenly, all other training was made secondary. However, the CEO was unaware that store managers were under increasing pressure to reduce theft and had assigned greeters the task in order to save time for other employees.

“The ability to open more stores is what drives growth,” says Joe Willmore, a Virginia-based human performance

consultant. “More stores have greeters now. They rolled out training and spent a lot of time on something that has little impact.”

This kind of conundrum is a typical scenario that human performance professionals confront with their clients. An executive sees a problem in the workplace and identifies a simple, often misguided solution that calls for more training.

Initially, human performance improvement (HPI) professionals were viewed as trainers, and many professionals new to the field are still viewed through that same lens. But the field is broader now since experts can opt to analyze the entire operation instead of observing work flow on the shop



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floor or in the back office. And performance is about more than whether an employee is doing an adequate or poor job. It reflects an organization's priorities, especially the values managers assign to certain tasks.

Organizations are opening the door to HPI professionals much wider than before, recognizing that they themselves may not be able to spot the obstacles that are hindering performance. Line managers also now recognize the value of human performance better than they did two decades ago.

"It's less of a challenge to get line managers to focus on human performance," says Ethan Sanders, a Virginia-based HPI consultant. "They see the value of talent. Capital expenditures, technology upgrades, and other methods they used in the past to gain a competitive edge are fleeting."

Like many intangibles, HPI is difficult to define in concrete terms, yet the best practitioners say it provides a more complete framework for curing what ails any workplace. Left to their

own conclusions, managers often find fault with their staff and conclude that it is necessary to send them to a remedial training program. Workplace analysts note that while training can be a component to performance enhancement, it is rarely the sole solution.

"People throw training at everything," Sanders says.

Geri Lopker, an HPI expert based in California, suggests that line managers, ever watchful over staff, too often miss the entire environment as possible contributors to performance. When meeting with clients, she first asks them why they believe training is the answer. Such exchanges often require asking uncomfortable questions. Just as patients do not have the diagnosis correct when they visit a physician, managers do not know what it will take to reverse lackluster performance.

Lopker probes deeper, asking why, if employees understand their jobs, are they not performing at the level expected. Oftentimes the answer is lack

of resources, poor working conditions, or management indifference.

While working with a government client that handles building permits, Lopker encountered an office that received complaints from builders who submitted plans for permits but could not obtain approval for nearly one month. Approvals typically required one day or less. Management believed its employees needed customer service training. After talking with employees, they revealed that if they worked faster, there would not be enough work for the staff, leading to layoffs.

Lopker advised the management team to create a schedule that allowed employees to work flexible hours to meet peak demand, replacing the rigid 9-to-5 schedule. Layoffs were avoided. By delving into the motivations of the staff, Lopker was able to provide a remedy.

“HPI can assist with performance so that you don’t apply a useless training solution when knowledge and skill aren’t the answer,” she says. “I believe in training, but only where there is a knowledge or skills gap.”

Doing the work correctly may be physically unsafe, carry negative consequences, or be irrelevant if no one cares about the job being performed correctly. Performance should not be treated as a discipline issue or a behavior modification.

“You can’t just drop the performer off like dirty clothes at the dry cleaners without understanding the root causes,” Lopker says.

Part of the role of an HPI consultant is to act as an investigator as well as an adviser. While professionals say that they should not attempt to upset the work conditions, their powers of persuasion can be exercised subtly. According to Jim Robinson, a Pennsylvania-based consultant, when HPI professionals are observing the workplace, they are in a position of influence.

“Questioning is the primary tool of HPI, not only to gather data, but to influence the operations manager to look at things in a different way,” Robinson says.

Browbeating management into submission or to confess a mistake is not the answer. Many analysts will point out the divergence between management’s aims and working conditions. Oftentimes, the fault lines can be found within management if the organization rewards managers for fulfilling performance targets that run counter to effective performance by staff.

Leaders of a tire manufacturer were concerned because too many tires were being rejected during the quality-control phase. Georgia-based consultant George Piskurich watched as plant workers allowed flawed tires to pass without pulling them from production. When he asked workers why the tires were let go, the response was that “quality control will catch them.” With more investigation, he discovered the real reason.

“Management thought that they weren’t running the machines properly,” he says. “We found out that shift supervisors received a higher bonus if more products got out the door.”

HPI consultants exercise caution when reviewing a client’s operation, being mindful not to launch into a debate that might alienate an already sensitive manager.

“When you look at it from a system point of view, you step on the manager’s toes immediately,” Sanders says. “Even the best consultant does it.”

While working with a client in the U.S. military, Sanders discovered that the reasons for high attrition rates in one elite training program had little to do with what managers believed were the root causes. The military branch wanted to increase graduation rates without weakening the training regimen.

Stereotypical thinking held sway over the program. Rural residents were thought to be tougher and more likely to pass in comparison to residents from cities. Conventional wisdom also held that when more officers enrolled in the training, failure rates increased. Reviewing the training, Sanders concluded that attrition rates were higher during winter months when water temperatures were colder, since some of the testing included a number of

challenging underwater activities. He concluded that the time of year and location of the training affected attrition more than any other factor.

“You have to turn their minds away from all of the underlying assumptions,” Sanders says.

One ongoing question inside organizations is whether trainers should act in a human performance capacity or whether that is an HR function. Whatever the solution, Sanders points out that training provides a forum for discussing all performance issues.

“Invariably, during training, other issues come up,” Sanders says. “Trainers understand the misguided parts of the system, and they can broach those issues with management.”

Sometimes, HPI calls for creating a cleaner division of tasks. Piskurich worked with a drug store chain that was attempting to relieve overworked pharmacists who were working 12-hour shifts that left them with no time to take breaks. In observing the operation, Piskurich noticed that pharmacists were spending a substantial amount of time tediously counting out pills for each prescription. Sales associates at the stores were often called to help with distribution. Yet storewide, there was no qualified group of assistants available to provide help.

In tandem with management, Piskurich created a new position titled pharmacy technician, whereby sales associates were trained to recognize medications and count out pills properly. Certification was granted within the organization. Pharmacists were able to counsel customers and manage the site. Entry-level associates could aspire to a more skilled position without compromising operations.

“Sixty to 70 percent of all pills distributed were the same 20 kinds,” he says. “Pharmacists don’t need to check them every time.”

Mason Holloway, a Maryland-based consultant, believes HPI experts should do more than diagnose the problem and offer a solution; they should identify what works well and incorporate that into the solution. Just as a physician offers recommendations for living healthier, an effective HPI consultant

should be able to retool a dysfunctional office without imposing an entirely new method.

“It comes down to a question of skill or will,” Holloway says. “If it was skill, they wouldn’t be able to do the job in the first place.”

Like all specialists, HPI professionals only have as much influence as the client allows. Piskurich wishes that he could obtain more feedback from clients, but most organizations decline to allow their executives to participate in a debriefing session. While he noticed that HPI professionals have greater latitude to review multiple layers in an office, most organizations still carefully guard senior executives’ time.

Unfortunately, senior executives often do not acknowledge that employees might be working with inadequate resources to perform their jobs. While working with a U.S. federal government client years ago, Willmore was told that the agency’s data processors were in need of motivational training. Mistakes were piling up, especially basic spelling errors. The client was using the training as a precursor to termination if performance did not improve.

During a site visit, Willmore noticed that employees were using outdated word processors. To make matters worse, the room was surrounded by huge windows that allowed sunlight to enter. Because of high glare, employees could not see that the spell checker function highlighted a mistake. Since employees had difficulty reading the text, Willmore attached antiglare screens with duct tape. In a final analysis, the office conditions, not the employees, were the source of poor performance.

Human failings, not flawed or ill-prepared equipment, are usually the scapegoat when performance lags. Willmore was a consultant for a prominent entertainment company that produced elaborately staged musicals. The producers were worried because one team of singers was consistently outperforming their peers. During rehearsals, the second group struggled to keep pace and suffered vocal strains. Initially it was assumed that a possible contributing

factor was the group's emergence from a coffin under fog cover.

The producers considered hiring a vocal coach and replacing the fog used during the performance—two expensive options. But upon closer inspection of conditions, Willmore and another consultant learned that the microphones used by the successful group were too loud, forcing their colleagues to raise and eventually strain their voices. For the HPI practitioners, no special knowledge of entertainment or sound stages was necessary to find the problem, just a willingness to observe carefully and explore multiple options.

"It was a shock to everybody because no one saw it," Willmore says.

Daily pressures to improve performance often require managers to act with quick reactions. While working with a client specializing in building supplies, Robinson found a gap in performance. Account executives at the company were not meeting revenue goals, so the national sales manager decided that the sales staff needed training in territory management.

Robinson found out that the account executives were simply taking orders and were not integrated into their clients' businesses. Instead of working directly with customers, they were expected to push product. Pricing errors were also being made, so the salespeople were given laptops with the full pricing schedule. Here, sales staff were in need of some kind of training, but not in the field that managers initially proposed.

Managers don't always blame the employees first when performance declines. But the need to reverse conditions is so strong that everyone involved misses crucial signs.

"Managers are taught to make decisions, and the ones they make are often based on their history or how it was when they were in the positions in question," Robinson says. "They are often under pressure, so they think in terms of single solutions that are close to being right, but aren't." **T+D**

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