

# ACHIEVING RESULTS WITH A PERFORMANCE-CENTERED DESIGN FRAMEWORK

Ron Drew Stone

Working with clients to deliver solutions provides ample opportunity for success as well as failure. This article focuses on how to address three shortcomings that often contribute to performance solutions missing the mark. These shortcomings include (a) the *framework* used to view, discuss, and analyze performance is too narrow; (b) performance solutions do not address the *ineffective habits* of performers; and (c) the important process step of *design* is often improperly defined or even ignored.

IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE in the training profession that performance improvement initiatives must align with the business needs of the organization. That is, the desired business outcome, performance requirements, execution gap, and root cause must be identified and analyzed so that the proper performance improvement solution can be determined, designed, and delivered. It is the correct performance solution that influences execution in the work setting, which, in turn, influences the desired business outcome. This is what alignment and linkage are all about.

## FAILURE BY DESIGN

If we know what alignment and linkage are all about, then why do so many performance solutions fail? One major reason, I believe, is that an inadequate job is often done with the *design of the performance solution*. Even when there is an adequate design, there is often a lack of focus on sustaining that design through execution in the work setting.

When performance processes get past the hurdle of identifying the root cause and relevant needs, our next concern is the design of an effective performance solution. Too often the design of the solution is shortchanged. Sometimes, the design treats the solution as a single-solution training program (a single answer to a performance issue having multiple causes). There are two fundamental issues with single solution designs. First, there is little to no consideration given to frequently existing non-training related causes of inadequate performance. Second,

even if a single solution is appropriate, historical evidence shows that follow-up support is often needed in the work setting after training is delivered. These are major design issues.

Treating learning in isolation is usually not an acceptable solution in today's highly integrated and fast-paced world. I am not suggesting that we have to be all things to all people and fix everything that surfaces. To the contrary, we have to determine what matters most to achieve the end in mind and focus on those key factors. If we try to solve all possible problems, we will fail because it is not realistic nor will we be able to rally the support needed. We should follow the 80/20 rule with our solution design. We should address the key factors that represent "that 20% of the root cause" that will solve at least 80% of the performance problem when translated into a solution. In other words, address those key factors that matter most. It is a subjective approach, but it keeps us from stalling when we cannot solve every conceivable problem, or when a problem seems too large to tackle.

## A DIFFERENT VIEW

Certainly as performance improvement processes are applied, there are ample opportunities for success as well as failure. One misstep can doom a performance solution that many people have worked hard to create. I believe that performance solutions often miss the mark due to three significant interrelated shortcomings:

- The *framework* used in viewing performance and performance shortcomings is too narrow.
- Performance solutions often do not address the *ineffective habits* of performers.
- The important process step of *design* is often improperly defined or even ignored.

Each of the above factors is addressed in the remainder of this article. First, a brief explanation of each factor is in order.

- A framework is merely a context for addressing an issue. Regarding the issue of performance, I believe that we must address four key components: business outcome, execution, performance readiness, and preference. Note that learning is not a visible component. Learning is not a stand-alone component because it is inherent in the performance readiness component.
- Ineffective habits are a key reason that performers do not perform in the work setting. Ineffective habits are the ghosts that linger in the walls of training sessions around the world. They are a major deterrent to performance, yet during learning engagements, we seem to ignore them as though they do not exist.
- As human performance technology processes are employed to identify performance problems, determine root cause, and identify and develop a solution, it is important to establish a feasible performance design. The performance design is a quality control point to guide development, delivery, and execution. Instead of creating a “learning design,” we should create a “per-

formance readiness” design. As pointed out later in this article, an effective design is made up of several key components to influence a desired result and business outcome.

Let’s visit each of these factors in detail and discover how we can establish a formula for success. These three factors are interrelated, and they come together as all three are addressed in the design of a performance solution.

## PERFORMANCE-CENTERED FRAMEWORK

The elements of the performance-centered framework described in Table 1 are linked relationships that help to establish alignment in achieving desired results from training programs and performance improvement initiatives. They are a key to viewing performance issues when conducting needs assessment activities and making decisions about performance solutions. Each element is actually a type of analysis. They are presented in Table 1 in the context of needs assessment.

The performance-centered framework is a guide to help performance consultants

- think about performance in the proper context
- frame the right questions for analysis
- identify the appropriate data to gather to determine performance requirements and analyze needs within each element of the framework
- identify the proper objectives and measures for each element of the framework

TABLE 1 PERFORMANCE-CENTERED FRAMEWORK	
A 21ST-CENTURY FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR LINKING AND ALIGNING TRAINING AND PERFORMANCE SOLUTIONS TO ACHIEVE EXPECTED BUSINESS OUTCOMES	
ELEMENT FOCUS	ELEMENT CONTEXT: TYPE OF ANALYSIS
<b>PERFORMANCE</b> Business outcome Execution in the work setting	Targets a desired business outcome and identifies a current or potential business deficiency. Identifies what a specific population should be doing or not doing, and how individual or team performance may influence the status of a desired business outcome.
<b>READINESS</b> Performance readiness Preferences	Identifies individual or team compatibility, ability, confidence, and willingness to execute in the work setting. Also identifies ineffective habits and the influencing factors of Active Management Reinforcement (AMR) and how they affect execution in the work setting (80/20 rule applies). Identifies client’s and population’s preferences regarding design and delivery of a solution (for example, likes, dislikes, learning style preference, delivery preference, client operational constraints).

- communicate with clients and gain their support
- create the most appropriate results-centered *performance solution design*

This is a contextual performance framework that can be used to address current performance, performance needs, and desired performance. (A slightly modified version of the framework is used for evaluation as an alternative to Kirkpatrick's model.) More important, it is a framework that allows us to visibly link the key elements of performance so that we can discuss performance with the end in mind and address all of the influences to get the desired result. Let's address the performance-centered framework one element at a time beginning with business outcome.

**Business outcome.** This identifies the desired business or organizational results. It includes measures such as quality improvements, increased profit from sales, increase in work output, improvement in on-time deliveries, increase in employee or customer satisfaction, time savings, reduced costs, reduced employee or customer turnover, reduced employee or customer complaints, and reduced accidents. When analyzing performance issues, it is possible that a current business deficiency does not exist. In this situation, there is usually a potential for a business deficiency unless the organization acts. Career development programs could be an example. Employees may be relatively satisfied and employee turnover may be within acceptable limits. However, senior management is aware that both measures could become deficient unless there are avenues to support the realization of career aspirations.

**Execution in the work setting.** This is the "secret sauce." Without execution, performance does not happen. Execution is what people do to get results. The reason we train people and provide performance improvement initiatives is to enable execution. So, if our needs assessment and our improvement initiatives are focused anywhere except execution, then they are focused in the wrong place. If our performance solutions provide the right focus and people actually "do it when returning to the work setting," then execution, in turn, should influence the intended business outcome.

**Performance readiness.** This is a way of looking at the whole pie, not just a slice. Learning (knowledge and skill) is but a slice of the pie. If needs assessment and root cause activities look only for learning deficiencies and if performance solutions treat only learning deficiencies, then our efforts are likely doomed to failure. Training is rarely effective as a stand-alone performance solution. Perhaps when the performance system is a closed system

*Ineffective habits are the ghosts that linger in the walls of training sessions around the world. They are a major deterrent to performance, yet during learning engagements, we seem to ignore them as though they do not exist.*

(limited environmental influence outside the immediate team), a single shot of knowledge and skill may be effective. However, in the dynamic work place of the 21st century there are few closed performance systems.

There are five key components of performance readiness that should be explored when looking for root causes, determining needs, and recommending a solution to influence execution. One of them, compatibility, is a non-training factor. The second, ability (knowledge and skill), is very much training related. Three more—confidence, willingness, and Active Management Reinforcement (AMR)—could be training or non-training related. Our challenge as performance consultants is to determine which components will make the most difference to influence execution in a given situation. Proper execution, in turn, should influence the desired business outcome. The five key components are defined as follows:

- **Compatibility.** An individual's compatibility to do the assigned work. This is not a knowledge or skill issue. It is a mental or physical challenge. It is the right person in the right job or assignment. Following the 80/20 rule, compatibility may or may not be a crucial performance issue. If it is, then performance consultants should partner with the HR department to address it.
- **Ability.** An individual's knowledge, skill, expertise, or competence to do the assigned work. It involves information, awareness, principles, concepts, facts, processes, procedures, techniques, methods, and so on.
- **Confidence.** A personal comfort level stemming from a level of mastery and active management reinforcement that will stimulate a performer to use knowledge and skill, or exhibit a specific behavior in the natural work setting. Even when skill exists, or once existed, other things can erode confidence and deter execution. For

*Performance readiness is a way of looking at the whole pie, not just a slice. Learning (knowledge and skill) is but a slice of the pie.*

example, a supervisor can be overly critical of a team member and tear down an individual's confidence.

- **Willingness.** An individual's attitude and a personal frame of reference. The willingness of an individual to learn and adopt targeted knowledge, skills, or behavior, discontinue ineffective habits, and execute in the work setting.
- **Active Management Reinforcement.** AMR addresses actions of the performer's immediate manager to reinforce performance, reflect sponsorship, and be supportive of execution in the work setting. AMR is nothing more than the ongoing responsibility of supervisors to establish and sustain an environment that gives performers the best opportunity to achieve the expected results. AMR includes:
  - advance communication of information and negotiation of expectations, including goals and requirements regarding work roles, work load distribution, and responsibilities
  - performance incentives and consequences
  - timely feedback, coaching, recognition, and support
  - adequate tools, equipment, technology, and resources
  - proper design of work space, job, tasks, policies, procedures, and processes

Unfortunately, in the fast-paced and pressure-filled workplace, supervisors often fall short of achieving their AMR role. Initiating an appropriate AMR strategy following the training or other performance solution can play an important part of reviving AMR and achieving learning and performance transfer. This occurs through the immediate supervisor supporting and reinforcing the desired performance and thereby influencing the readiness and willingness of the performer. Active management reinforcement gives ready and willing participants the best opportunity to execute following delivery of the solution.

AMR is a positive term, not a negative term. Active management reinforcement is something we need to

explore during needs assessment. We should address it in a positive way and not as though we are trying to catch management doing something wrong. Managers resent the latter and so would anyone. As long as we stick to the 80/20 rule, keep it focused on the desired performance result, and do not try to rebuild the organization, then we can make a lot of progress toward results with AMR and in satisfying our clients.

As part of the solution design, AMR should be encouraged for a period of time after the training delivery until participants abandon ineffective habits and achieve competence by adopting the new skills or behavior. This usually takes weeks or months depending on the factors involved in the specific situation. An AMR strategy may also include other stakeholders who can influence the performers' willingness to execute behaviors in the work setting. These stakeholders are typically identified during the needs assessment process.

**Preferences.** Preferences address likes, dislikes, wants, and constraints regarding the design and delivery of the performance solution. Clients almost always express operational constraints when a performance solution is delivered. For example, a client may want the training delivered only on Tuesdays to avoid heavy workload days. Or the client may express a lengthy time frame (the month of July) when training cannot be accommodated due to many employees taking personal time off. A client may have delivery preferences, such as using Web-based technology to avoid travel costs or to limit the time away from the job.

The participants may express desirable methods of learning or delivery that affect the design of the solution, such as case study, hands-on skill practice, expert coaching, action learning, Web-based delivery, visual approaches, and so on.

To the extent feasible, client and participant preferences should be honored. However, cost issues or learning effectiveness factors may trump certain of their preferences. That is, money may only be available to accommodate a specific type of delivery. Or a specific competency may best be learned when facilitator led because effective learning may be compromised if another delivery mode is used. When preferences cannot be met, it is the responsibility of the training function to demonstrate the compelling reasons.

## INEFFECTIVE HABITS

Habits have very little to do with know-how or skill. Habits are the way people go about performing tasks or activities. This includes the demeanor or the manner of behavior.

People are sometimes unaware of their habits and how they may affect desired outcomes. Perhaps some examples are in order to help clarify the picture.

- A service writer at an automobile dealership consistently fails to notify customers when repairs will take a few hours longer than promised.
- While standing around the meal staging area, a waiter or waitress in a restaurant avoids eye contact with customers at his or her assigned tables.
- An executive consistently waits until the last minute to communicate meeting date, time, and agenda for the upcoming week's staff meeting.
- A supervisor uses e-mail to communicate with her individual team members regarding performance issues.
- A customer service representative is handling a customer phone call. During the call, the representative talks out loud to himself as he goes through the steps of finding the customer's file and reviewing the previous contact information. Meanwhile the customer hears the annoying sounds.
- A physician and nurse discuss a patient's medical condition in an elevator while other people, including visitors, are present.
- An administrative clerk leaves a file with confidential information open on a countertop for anyone to see.

Unless habits are addressed directly, people have a tendency to do what they have always done, the way they have always done it. We know that habits are a major deterrent to transferring learning, yet they are rarely treated during development or delivery. Ineffective habits should have a place on the agenda and participants should address them, discuss them, and make a commitment to setting them aside. By asking participants to identify ineffective habits during a training engagement, we allow them to discover this shortcoming and make a commitment to do something about it. We put these habits on the table for everyone to see and discuss. We can also consolidate these issues and communicate this to the client as a means of gaining AMR and follow-up support to address these habits.

## THE SOLUTION DESIGN

Once a needs assessment has identified the root cause of a performance gap and related performance needs are determined, the design becomes the major controlling factor in the performance improvement process. Following the 80/20 rule, the design specifications should

focus on treating the key aspects of the root cause. If the root cause analysis has identified several key components of performance readiness that need to be addressed, then the design must address these key components. For example, suppose analysis of the needs assessment concludes that customer service representatives are not providing exceptional customer service because of vague performance expectations, a lack of skill, and inadequate supervisor feedback. These three key factors must be addressed for the representatives to be "performance ready." Two of the readiness factors are components of AMR. The third, lack of skill, is a learning readiness issue. All three causes should be considered as part of the recommended performance design.

The delivery of the performance improvement initiative must address these multiple factors to have the best opportunity to close the performance gap. To ensure that performance interventions avoid the mind-set trap of "*learning is a single solution*," training directors, performance consultants, and project managers should adopt the broader view of "performance readiness" in lieu of the limited view of "learning engagements." As described earlier, learning is only one component of performance readiness. Table 2 includes criteria for an effective performance readiness design. These criteria should be considered when designing any performance solution.

The design is determined after a proper needs assessment. Table 2 is a guide to help determine the components of the performance solution design. Once the design is determined and approved by the client, development and acquisition can begin. The approved design becomes the readiness framework for the solution. Everyone involved in creating and delivering the solution—client, developers, training suppliers, facilitators, coordinators—follows the design. It is the blueprint for success.

## INFORMED CLIENTS

Informed client buy-in of a performance design is important for one major reason. If the client really understands the importance of the design in relation to the desired performance result, then he or she is less likely to want to change it. Clients are also more likely to provide the support and reinforcement necessary to achieve the desired results. Almost every performance consultant has had situations in which a client has arbitrarily changed the performance design just by putting constraints on the delivery without really giving it a second thought.

Following the needs assessment, when recommendations are presented to clients, we must provide compelling reasons for each design component and how it

**TABLE 2** CRITERIA FOR AN EFFECTIVE PERFORMANCE DESIGN

- A. Partnerships are established with key managers, clients, or others to create and support an effective design that will achieve targeted outcomes.
- B. Some form of needs assessment is conducted or referenced to identify performance requirements, performance gaps, root cause, and performance readiness needs.
- C. The execution role of Active Management Reinforcement™ (AMR) is assessed and, if needed, becomes part of the solution design.
- D. At least one follow-up transfer action and strategy is included or a compelling reason is provided why it is not needed.
- E. Solution objectives and measures focus on root cause and target performance readiness, performance execution, and business outcome.
- F. All relevant components of performance readiness are addressed, not just learning (80/20 rule applies).
- G. An activity is included to facilitate participants' identifying ineffective habits and developing actions to eliminate them.
- H. A variety of action learning methods and practice activities are included to facilitate involvement, collaborative problem solving, and deeper thinking to build confidence to execute.
- I. The most effective delivery methods are chosen from among facilitator-led, Web-assisted, media-assisted, blended, or other options.
- J. A pre-engagement action is identified for implementation.
- K. As an alternative or in addition to traditional training, other developmental actions are explored and recommended as appropriate (such as job rotation, developmental job assignments, just-in-time coaching, Web-assisted approaches, and on the job training).

will contribute to the desired performance result. We must demand that clients respect our design. When clients choose to change the design, we must emphasize, by example and experience, how this will change the result. These are specifications. The design is like a crossroads: whichever road is chosen will certainly change the result. Can the design be compromised because of operational constraints? Certainly it can. There are always alternatives. But when these alternatives are chosen, it must be an informed choice in relation to the consequences to the desired performance result.

There is good news and bad news here. The bad news is that clients do not understand the learning component. That is understandable; after all, that is the job of the performance consultant. But the good news is that almost all clients can discuss the job performance issues, especially when guided by a performance expert. Everyone is inter-

ested in execution, and it is an excellent place to focus our attention when discussing the performance design.

After one has looked at hundreds of designs, it becomes apparent that the design of a program sometimes never occurs at all. Somehow, we take a giant leap from needs assessment to course development, leaving design at the crossroads. And, in many cases, when we do have a design, it focuses only on the learning component and the mode of delivery. We must abandon this 20th-century thinking.

The work we put into creating the design specifications must carry forward to the development and delivery activities. The design specifications are a blueprint for development, delivery, and results. The design should not constrain developers in selecting and implementing the appropriate learning methods, tools, and techniques. Whatever needs assessment or other research we have

done is fed into the design and that, in turn, is the compass that guides the ship. The needs assessment and other research give us information to ensure that development and delivery are relevant, focused, and targeted to eliminate ineffective habits and build performer mastery and confidence.

So, when we provide the design specifications to the course developers or training suppliers, does this mean everything is clear-cut and the development specialists will know exactly what to do? This is more of a fantasy than a reality.

Certainly developers will have decisions to make and ideas that lead to a better solution. We want and need their ingenuity. We do not want to tie their hands. But we should not leave the development of content to subject matter experts without providing guidance.

Guiding objectives and measures exist for each readiness component, execution requirement, and targeted business outcome. This is the professional way to help ensure that designers and developers have a blueprint with which to build the performance improvement product. When developers want to pursue something that does not appear to fit in with the design specifications, the course manager, or project manager, should be made aware of it. It may even be necessary to inform the client so that we are ensured of maintaining the focus intended by the original design.

## PROPOSING THE PERFORMANCE SOLUTION

The design criteria in Table 2 are also useful as a framework to present the recommended solution to a client. By presenting recommendations in a framework that includes the design criteria, we are demonstrating how alignment should work and the significance each design component has for a successful outcome. At the same time, we are educating our client. As the proposed performance design is presented, agreements or adjustments are made in regard to the design. The parties agree on a performance design that seems to be the best alignment, given all conditions and preferences. The client wants results; if we have conducted an appropriate needs assessment, then we have a performance design based on multiple inputs from credible sources that should get results. We have used tools to help us systematically analyze the data and develop conclusions. We have used our professional expertise to look at all the data and determine what the performance readiness factors should be, and we have developed readiness objectives that link to execution objectives. We have also addressed Active Management Reinforcement. Can this performance solution possibly

fail? Certainly it can. But we have touched every base that may influence success, and success is what we expect to happen. The book referenced at the end of this article includes more detail on design and proposing a performance solution to clients.

## EDUCATING CLIENTS

Perhaps the best opportunity we will ever have to educate our clients is when we present our recommended performance solution and discuss how it will solve the performance issue. Our role at this point is to educate clients and get them to see the key components of the preferred performance design that are necessary to achieve their desired results. Part of this educational process is pointing out the inadequacies of alternative designs as compared with the preferred performance design. We should anticipate that the client does not necessarily know how the performance design will integrate with the work setting to achieve results. We should anticipate that the client also does not know, or has forgotten, how AMR influences performance.

We should also inform the client that we are following the 80/20 rule with our recommendations. We are not trying to address every potential performance issue; we do not want to overwhelm our client by overcomplicating the situation. Clients are operating experts, not necessarily performance experts. We should be one of the client's most important resources in this regard. Now is the time for us to help our client understand how a performance design integrates into the work setting to achieve desired results. Now is the time to help the client understand how some factors in the work setting can deter performance.

We want the client to see the importance of the overall design and how alignment takes shape. We need to be proactive in establishing or reestablishing the client's frame of reference that execution in the work setting requires active management reinforcement. It may require additional transfer strategies. Getting transfer to the work setting often requires overcoming ineffective habits, dealing with competing priorities, and reinforcing new behaviors.

Although many performance designs may work, we must influence clients to see that we have chosen the design that best meets their requirements for success. If any component of the design is changed or if a component of the design fails, then the result will likely be different than the targeted result. The learning may be different, the execution will be different, and the outcome will be different.

A healthy discussion of the findings and recommendations usually takes place with our client during and after

our presentation. There is often a request to clarify and even to change something regarding our recommendations. There is give-and-take on the issues when the client wants us to alter the design. For example, suppose we have recommended that the delivery of a coaching program for supervisors be time spaced. Our design in this coaching program example includes a 2-hour session on the first day, followed by 2 weeks on the job, and returning for another 4-hour session during week four. The idea is to allow time for participants to execute the skills between sessions one and two and then bring issues back to session two for discussion and action recommendations.

We know the value of this time-spaced scheduling because performance is our business. The client may merely see it as a disruption and would prefer all 6 hours to be delivered in 1 day so that the work is not interrupted twice. The client is also thinking about performance, but from a different vantage point. Unless we can convince him or her of the added value of having two sessions with an interval in between, we will lose this debate. So we focus on the intent of the performance design. Remember, it is not a *learning* design, it is a *performance* design—that is, to allow participants to experience use of the skills and then do some problem solving during session two. If we can convince the client that this will make supervisors more effective at coaching or that it will bring about greater employee satisfaction and so on, then we may be able to keep the design intact. The burden of proof is on the performance consultant, not the client.

## IMPLICATIONS: PARTNER FOR RESULTS

Perhaps it would be best to begin this article with an emphasis on partnering. However, we will close it on this note. The most effective way to influence results is to partner with clients and managers. This gives us a great opportunity to educate stakeholders about how to influence learning transfer to the work setting. Although we should be concerned that managers do not always reinforce or support the use of new skills following a training intervention, we should not be pessimistic or critical of managers because of it. Pessimism and criticism are paths that lead deeper into the woods where things become even more uncertain and the pathway out may be difficult to find. We should be sympathetic that managers have one of the most difficult jobs in the universe. They must understand their operation and they must deal with difficult operational, financial, and people issues each day. Is it any wonder their own performance sometimes falls short?

This creates an opportunity for us. We should figure out why managers fall short in this area and then address this reinforcement and support issue in a positive way. We must address it in a way that allows managers and other stakeholders to see it in a different light. We should be their willing minds, eyes, ears, hands, and voices to help them address performance reinforcement and support. Some performance consultants have found it awkward to discuss this with clients. Our positive approach to AMR is helpful in triggering this discussion. 🙏

RON DREW STONE is president of the Center for Performance and ROI, Inc. He is an author, international consultant, and presenter, and one of the world's most recognized and accomplished authorities on improving training and performance improvement interventions and measuring results. He provides measurement and performance consulting for *Fortune* 500 companies and government organizations in North America, Europe, Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. His Performance Alignment and Linkage Process™ provides a methodology and tools to initiate and sustain alignment to achieve desired business outcomes. This article is derived from concepts and processes in his book, *Aligning Training for Results: A Process and Tools That Link Training to Business* (2009, Pfeiffer, San Francisco). He may be reached at ron@performanceandroi.com.