In this groundbreaking volume, leading practitioners and scholars from around the world provide an authoritative review of the most up-to-date information available on performance interventions, all presented within a holistic framework that helps ensure the accomplishment of significant results.

Addressing more than 50 performance interventions, with such varied topics as Incentive Systems, e-Learning, Succession Planning and Executive Coaching, this volume guides readers through the development of comprehensive performance improvement systems. Each chapter illustrates in practical terms how to select, plan, implement, and manage performance interventions, as well as how to evaluate their results. Through best practices research, comparative analysis, illustrative case studies from around the world, and editorial guidance on how to link together diverse interventions, the handbook is an important guide for achieving desired results in the workplace and beyond.

Sponsored by International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI), the Handbook of Improving Performance in the Workplace, three-volume reference, covers three main areas of interest including Instructional Design and Training Delivery, Selecting and Implementing Performance Interventions, and Measurement and Evaluation.

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For more on Ryan and Doug’s work, including podcasts with contributing authors to the handbook, visit www.needsassessment.org.
Handbook of Improving Performance in the Workplace

Volume Two

Selecting and Implementing Performance Interventions
ABOUT ISPI

The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) is dedicated to improving individual, organizational, and societal performance. Founded in 1962, ISPI is the leading international association dedicated to improving productivity and performance in the workplace. ISPI reaches out to more than 20,000 performance improvement professionals in over 40 countries through publications and educational programs.

ISPI’s mission is to develop and recognize the proficiency of our members and advocate the use of Human Performance Technology. This systematic approach to improving productivity and competence uses a set of methods and procedures and a strategy for solving problems for realizing opportunities related to the performance of people. It is a systematic combination of performance analysis, cause analysis, intervention design and development, implementation, and evaluation that can be applied to individuals, small groups, and large organizations.
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Handbook of Improving Performance in the Workplace

Volume Two

Selecting and Implementing Performance Interventions

Edited by
Ryan Watkins and Doug Leigh

Co-Published by the International Society for Performance Improvement
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INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME TWO

Improving human and organizational performance is typically a worthwhile, valuable, and even valiant effort. Improvement efforts routinely bring about “bottom-line” benefits for organizations, and likewise they routinely change lives of those working within organizations in very positive ways. After all, improving performance isn’t just about improving workplace productivity; it can, and should, also lead to increased job satisfaction, longer retention, improved quality of life for employees, less job-related stress, new social networks, retained knowledge within the organization, and numerous benefits that directly impact the individuals who make up organizations as much as the organization itself and the societal partners that the organization serves.

These beneficial results, nevertheless, rarely happen by chance alone. Systematic, deliberate, and continual efforts to improve human and organizational performance are required to ensure success; as a consequence, there are generally no easy solutions and no quick fixes that can accomplish the sustainable results required for organizational success. Improving performance therefore requires both the scientific knowledge of how various interventions are effectively applied within organizations, as well as the artistic understanding of the delicate relationships among people, performance, organizational results, and beneficial outcomes for societal partners (including clients, customers, and others).

The path toward improved human and organizational performance is, however, routinely unclear and challenging to navigate. From defining what
results are to be accomplished to assessing the success of your efforts—and for every step in between—there are many complex decisions and tasks that shape performance, and for each there are numerous performance interventions that can be used to achieve desirable results. From six sigma and incentive programs to mentoring and on-the-job training, there are literally hundreds of individual, team, and organizational activities that are specifically designed to improve performance. Consequently, the accomplishment of significant results is not complicated by a lack of options, but rather by the multitude of possible combinations and alternatives.

Each day, nevertheless, organizations around the globe rely on single-activity solutions to accomplish their complex goals. Your organization, for instance, probably has a few dozen improvement efforts already going on; perhaps it’s leadership training, performance management, or improving employee retention. Maybe there is a restructuring initiative or a new coaching program. Or it could be the outsourcing of jobs or the introduction of e-learning courses. Or maybe even a combination of these with other activities to improve performance.

Given this complexity, simply adding another discrete and disconnected program to the mix is unlikely to significantly improve results. Few single solutions have the capacity to achieve sustainable improvements in performance. People are complex, and since organizations are made up of people, they are exponentially complicated. In response, successful performance improvement efforts work to address these complexities instead of offering a variety of one-off programs that only haphazardly address the various factors (or symptoms) underlying human and organizational performance.

By systematically and systematically aligning multiple improvement activities (both those that are already being implemented, along with new ones), it’s possible to accomplish sustainable improvements to performance. But before you can start to improve performance, it is necessary to gain consistency on what it is that you are trying to improve.

**IMPROVING PERFORMANCE**

**What Is Performance?**

In order to improve performance, you must begin with a clear definition of what performance is, and is not. This clarification of what you are trying to improve will guide and give focus to your decisions. It will delineate the goal of your efforts from the activities that you might use to achieve it, and it will distinguish your efforts from the routine processes that typically cycle through organizations in conjunction with the latest management trends.
After all, confusion about what performance is, or is not, can be a major impairment to the accomplishment of useful results. Knowing what performance is “when you see it” is not enough to accomplish desirable and sustainable improvements. Likewise, you cannot rely on defining performance by what it is not either—identifying performance problems alone is no way to achieve success. Even more dangerous can be working with the assumption that everyone has the same operational definition of performance.

At the most basic and perhaps most valuable level, improving performance is the equivalent of improving results. Results are, after all, the reason that people and organizations undertake activities in the first place. Too often, the focus of improvement efforts ends up being solely on implementation of specific initiatives (for instance, quality improvement, knowledge management, information technology, employee recruitment, balanced scorecards, or training) without remembering that desired results should—and must—be accomplished.

Take restructuring as an example of a process that frequently gets off-track during implementation. Most organizations decide to restructure in order to improve performance in very specific ways: increase revenue, reduce expenses, eliminate redundancies, and so forth. Nevertheless, the complexity of restructuring initiatives routinely clouds the focus on results—and the processes associated with making structural changes—such as which departments to combine, what jobs should be cut, and who will be the boss—become the focus of the effort. When this happens, organizational politics generally takes over, and the meaningful improvements are rarely achieved.

Thus, improving performance is not just about implementing new activities, trying out new management strategies, or following any set of procedures. Improving performance is only worth the time and energy if it is going to achieve desirable and useful results.

Many well-meaning efforts likewise fail to improve results when performance is confused with performing. When such improvement efforts—often focused on implementing the new management tactics or perhaps new software applications—become inattentive to the basic results that must be accomplished they usually end up as the content of dusty binders on someone’s bookshelf.

A focus on performing (what people do) does not, in the end, ensure that valuable results will accomplished. From lean six sigma programs or supply-chain management to learning management systems or executive coaching, it is easy for individuals and teams to get so wrapped up with project design, implementation, and management that they lose track of why they are doing it in the first place. Therefore, we suggest that performance be defined simply as the accomplishment of desired and useful results. This will provide a focal point for your improvement efforts and guide all of the necessary decisions to accomplish significant results.
Ground your success in a definition of performance that includes the specific results you and your organization are trying to accomplish. These desired results may be a 5 percent or better increase in individual employee productivity, zero customer returns due of faulty products, 100 percent compliance with new legislation, $3 million increases in revenue, or the elimination of poverty in developing countries. No matter which results you and your organization are trying to improve, these should be the focus of your efforts rather than the procedures, processes, strategies, techniques, tools, or resources that you might use to accomplish these results.

Why Improve Performance?

Improving performance is about accomplishing desired results; as a consequence, life itself is an ongoing undertaking in performance improvement. From achieving personal goals to assisting organizations in accomplishing their strategic objectives to partnering with others to improve the quality of life in your community, these ongoing efforts to achieve desired results keep us moving ahead. This same desire to achieve results led Thomas Edison to thousands of valuable inventions and also brought an end to communism within the former Soviet Union.

The desire to accomplish significant results holds true of individuals, teams, divisions, companies, agencies, and even communities. Most of us work to improve results not out of greed or self-indulgence, but rather for the continual improvement of our life and the lives of others. We may not be striving for results that will single-handedly end poverty in the world, but we are working to achieve worthwhile results within our personal and professional realms of influence.

Frequently, our ambitions to improve performance are achieved through the organization in which we work, and at other times these ambitions are achieved through organizations with which we volunteer our time and energy. In both cases we are striving to achieve results that benefit others. Sometimes we call them customers or clients, while at other times we call them neighbors or friends.

The perceived value or worth of the results we accomplish will vary greatly depending on the diverse perspectives taken on the products, outputs, and outcomes of our efforts. This can complicate performance improvement efforts, since our perceptions of valued results (performance) may not be aligned with the perceptions of others. In response to this challenge, the practical place to begin an improvement effort is with the clear specification of the valued and desired results that are to be accomplished within your organization and delivered outside of it.

Throughout this volume of the handbook, we will refer to Roger Kaufman’s Organizational Elements Model (OEM), the basis of his Mega Planning approach to improving human and organizational performance. The OEM was designed as a framework for coordinating improvement interventions with the products,
outputs, and outcomes that are to be accomplished. Kaufman’s model helps align all that an organization uses, does, produces, and delivers with the outcomes accomplished in the broader society. By linking internal performance with external impacts, the model offers a systemic perspective on performance improvement and a perspective that builds on the relationships of all subsystems within the larger system of society.

**Systems Theory and Performance Improvement**

By and large, systems theory (or more specifically, von Bertalanffy’s General Systems Theory) is viewed as the foundation of the principles, models, frameworks, and best practices that guide the improvement of human and organizational performance. As Richard Swanson describes in his three-legged stool theory of performance improvement (a metaphor he also applies to human resources development), systems theory is one of the legs on which the discipline and practice of improving performance relies. Along with theories of economics and psychology, the three legs rest on a foundation of ethics within Swanson’s theoretical model. And as such, systems theory plays a dual—and potentially more important—role in the model by also being the uniting theory that defines the relationships between the three legs and the mat on which they rest.

As you can see, systems theory is an essential and integral part of both understanding performance within your organizations as well as guiding efforts to improve it. General systems theory is built on several foundational concepts, or principles, that are applied whenever we strive to improve human and organizational performance; these include non-summative wholeness, control, self-regulation, and self-organization. Within this handbook, we particularly want to focus attention on the principle of general systems theory that has direct and evident influence on the selection and implementation of performance interventions specifically: the principle of equifinality.

**Expanding Your Options**

*Equifinality*—a principle from Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s General Systems Theory, which put forward that in open systems, a given end state can be reached by many potential means. It emphasizes that the same end state may be achieved via many different paths or trajectories.

*Based on wikipedia.org, January 2009*
Equifinality challenges us to look beyond the single solutions that we may have used in the past. Perhaps most performance issues within your organization have been addressed by traditional classroom training sessions. In this case, the principle of equifinality validates what you have probably already discovered—that training by itself is not capable of addressing the complex performance issues of today’s organizations.

The accomplishment of significant results (or “end states”) can, after all, be achieved through any number of potential activities (or “means”). Other options should be weighed in order to determine which activities or combination of activities, as the case usually is, are best going to accomplish the desired results. This basic notion is at the core of this handbook, and it is also the basis for most, if not all, worthwhile performance improvement models.

According to the general systems theory, equifinality applies within all open systems and is therefore a characteristic of organizations as well. While mandate, habit, or even past successes may push you in the direction of one performance improvement activity or another, there will always be multiple paths toward success in the future. Examine the various interventions that we have included in this book, and explore other fields and disciplines for more examples of improvement interventions that may help you achieve results. By expanding your options and comparing across multiple interventions—or combinations of interventions—you will find the “means” that will help you accomplish your desired “end states.”

**How Can Performance and Success Be Measured?**

The success of activities to improve performance is measured by the results achieved. Sometimes the results are immediate, such as when a product is produced or a report is distributed to clients. Other times, however, the desired accomplishments may not be visible immediately; for instance, when a high-performer retention program is created and it takes a year or more for the benefits to be realized by the organization. Regardless of whether the benefits are immediate or delayed, the success of an improvement effort is measured by the results rather than the processes.

As the saying goes, “You pay a cow for its milk, not for standing over the bucket.” In the same way, individuals and organizations are most successful when their processes and procedures produce results that benefit the team, the organization, the client, and the community.

At times, measuring results seems more challenging than measuring processes. For example, you can easily count how many employees sign up for a training course or the number of hours executives spend on succession planning. Measuring the success of a performance improvement effort must, however, include a focus on results, since *performance* is all about *results*. This is not to say that activities are inconsequential; processes and procedures
are critical for getting things done. They are, in other words, necessary but not sufficient for measured success. They should also be examined when you make improvements and assess your success, and they should be complemented by demonstrated results.

Consequently, performance improvement projects rely on systematic processes to ensure that desired results guide both front-end decision making and back-end evaluation—and every step in between. With the application of a systematic approach, improvement efforts can measure the success of their procedures as well as the associated results. Although direct attribution of results to a single process is generally tough—and frequently dangerous—the contribution of improvement efforts to beneficial results is the hallmark of human performance technology models, frameworks, standards, and processes.

**Where to Start?**

Improving performance requires more than just good intentions; things must change in order for new and desirable results to be accomplished. Change, although often challenging, is what allows individuals and organizations to move beyond today’s performance capacity in order to achieve the desired results of tomorrow. Change can, however, just as easily reduce performance and lead to undesirable outcomes for the organization and the communities in which it occurs. Thus, while change has to be created in order to form the potential for improved performance, change also has to be managed.

To create and manage change, you should rely on what Jay McTigue and Grant Wiggins call “backward design.” In other words, start with the end—the desired results—in mind and then work your way backward through the necessary processes and procedures for achieving those defined accomplishments. While this sounds simple and logical, most performance improvement projects still begin with a single solution or activity in mind and then go through a process of looking for problems that the intervention might solve.

How often have you heard someone say, “We need to send everyone to training on this,” “We need this new software” or “We have to bring consultants in to help us implement this”? Or maybe you hear: “We can only compete if we start doing what our competitors are doing.” While each of the activities suggested in these statements might bring about valuable improvements in performance, all put a possible solution ahead of the desired results. In essence, these people are prematurely selecting their tools before they even know what it is that they are trying to build.

Remember, the systems theory principle of equifinality tells us that within organizations, there are always multiple processes that can be used to accomplish a result. Therefore, selecting a process before you have adequately defined the targeted results, as well as alternative options, is not going to be your best path toward success.
Useful results are better achieved when all options for how to improve performance are weighed against the desired results to be achieved and then compared based on their effectiveness, efficiency, and other pertinent variables specific in the performance context. While these steps may slightly delay the selection of which performance interventions to implement, it provides you the opportunity to define what results must be accomplished, what criteria should be used for selecting appropriate interventions, and then to assess how well each alternative activity will do within your organization. In the end, systems of multiple interventions are most frequently found to be necessary for achieving valuable results—thus countering the single-solution focus of “we need” this or “we must do” that.

Throughout this book you will find many performance interventions that can help accomplish positive results for your organization. None of these, however, is a “silver bullet” or a “panacea.” They are simply proven activities that, when used (typically in conjunction with other proven activities), have demonstrated capacity to accomplish desirable results. As such, the decisions around selecting which interventions are going to help you and your organization be successful are best made in a systematic manner, built on models and frameworks that are grounded in pragmatic theory and research.

In recognition of this, we are using John Wedman’s Performance Pyramid model (or framework) as a structure for this handbook—clustering performance interventions into building blocks for accomplishing significant results. From building performance capabilities and providing a supportive environment to giving timely performance feedback to updating employee skills, each component of the Performance Pyramid model is associated with a variety of interventions that can be used to achieve results (see Figure I.1 and Chapter Three).

The Performance Pyramid model offers a whole-system perspective on performance improvement. From culture and vision to significant accomplishments and monitoring, the model illustrates the relationships among inputs, processes, and results. Interestingly, while the Pyramid at the center of the model could be considered a hierarchical tool with one building block of performance being more important than the others, within the systemic perspective of the model you can see that all of the blocks within the pyramid itself are interconnected. As a result, each of the potential performance interventions associated with the model can play an important role in achieving desired results.

As an organizational tool for classifying performance interventions, the Performance Pyramid lies at the heart of a comprehensive and results-driven model for improving performance. As such, we are using the pyramid model as a framework for the book’s chapters, examining a variety of interventions associated with each component of the model to provide a systemic perspective on improving performance.
In addition to the interventions included in this handbook, there are hundreds of other activities you can implement to accomplish better results. Thus, the chapters do not represent an exhaustive list, but rather a starting place. Along with the material in the chapters, we include our own discussion and descriptions of many other performance interventions—from lean six sigma to job forecasting—throughout the text.

Nevertheless, your own creativity and knowledge are the best tools you have for complementing any, or all, of these performance interventions with other activities that will work best to achieve results within your organization. For example, developing communities of practice can be a
very effective tool—especially when paired with other interventions such as training, mentoring, and incentives—for improving individual and organizational performance. Brown-bag lunches or other informal learning opportunities, as other examples, can also be valuable additions to almost any performance improvement effort.

The consequence of having numerous and varied options when deciding which performance interventions to implement is that the decisions become increasingly challenging—just as decisions were easier when the choices were either black or black for Ford’s Model T or when your options were between preparing a letter on a personal computer or a typewriter. Nevertheless while the numerous quality performance improvement activities that can be used in organizations today make decisions more challenging, our ability to improve performance and accomplish significant results make it well worth the effort. As the saying goes, “The hardest choices in life are between multiple good options.”

There are, however, no easy formulas or checklists that can be used to define the “right” mix of performance interventions for your organization. Consequently, we start this handbook with a broad discussion of the models, frameworks, theories, and research findings that support the improvement of human and organizational performance (see Chapters One and Two). From there, we further introduce John Wedman’s Performance Pyramid as an applicable model for organizing performance interventions and guiding improvement efforts (see Chapter Three) and introduce Roger Kaufman’s Organizational Elements Model (Figure I.2) as a systemic framework for ensuring that everything your organization uses, does, produces, and delivers is aligned with beneficial results for the system in which the organization exist.

Later in the book our authors present numerous software applications that are available to assist in making improvement decisions. Nevertheless, in the end the decisions still have to be made by people—people who understand the culture of the organization, who have “power” to get things done, and who have relationships with those who will be most impacted by the changes associated with any effort to improve performance. Therefore we have also