Performance Improvement: The Case for Horizontal Oversight

In most organizations, the responsibility for meeting targeted results is a shared one: Everyone makes a contribution to the bottom line that ultimately reflects the efforts of all employees. Finding ways to improve performance so targets are reached is a specialty that belongs to Performance Architects – those folks who use models and tools to develop and streamline best work practices for optimal results. To our knowledge, few organizations use the job title of Performance Architect, but many specialists carry out the work of improving performance. We know them as practitioners of Six Sigma, Lean, Human Factors, HR, Training, OD, Quality, and Systems Engineering, and we find them in silos in various functional areas (Rummler, Ramais, and Rummler, 2010, p. 207).

Generally, senior leaders recognize the value of having all employees contribute to results, and structure their management systems to support this. What they fail to see is that their broad collection of Performance Architects, with their various specialties, would make an exponentially greater impact on performance improvement and results if they were brought together to join their many skills for the greater organizational good.

Performance Architecture at the Three Levels

We find it convenient to explore organizations on three levels: Worker, Work, and Workplace.

At the Worker/Individual level, we commonly find some combination of HR, Training, and Learning and Development groups responsible for improving the performance of employees. These roles serve the individual and focus on building skills and knowledge. Most such groups offer a slate of courses that change little from year to year. Requests for training are episode driven and usually treat symptoms rather than root causes. Since training is most effective when employees don’t know how, offering it as a solution in other situations is predictably ineffective and does not improve performance or results.

At the Work/Process level are the Six Sigma, Lean, Quality, Systems Engineering, and perhaps Human Factors specialists focused on work procedures and methodologies. These Performance Architects have realized many improvements to process design and implementation over the years, gaining significant efficiencies. What compromises performance at this level are not usually the processes themselves, but the practices of the workers who follow them (Addison and Haig, 2010).

And at the Workplace/Organizational level, we find the OD specialists providing executive team building, succession planning protocols, change management programs, and 360° performance evaluations for managers. With their focus on the top tiers of the organization, these Performance Architects often miss opportunities for improvement that exist elsewhere in
the enterprise that exacerbate misalignment issues as they work in isolation.

One-off Performance Improvement

Our quick sketch of Performance Architects in the organization, and the kinds of work they typically do, is a profile of what we call one-off performance improvement. Each team of specialists, which may be very experienced and knowledgeable, labors in a void to address performance problems and opportunities in the functional areas they support, working with their assigned clients. Often, they are involved with the same initiative as other Performance Architects in other parts of the enterprise. Using different sets of skills and tools, these groups duplicate efforts, increase costs, and may or may not provide a successful solution. Most of the time, they toil without knowing of the work of their counterparts elsewhere in the system.

With this all-too-common arrangement, Performance Architects have limited line-of-sight across the organization, and are restricted from tapping the related expertise of their fellows scattered among the silos. Collectively, they risk delivering incomplete solutions, missing opportunities for improving performance, compromising efficiency, annoying their clients, and running up the bill. Many are likely frustrated by this sorry state of affairs.

A Modest Proposal

What if we brought together all the Performance Architects from all three organizational levels in a single team? Suppose we gave them the mandate to work horizontally across functions to ensure that every performance improvement initiative touched all involved departments, clients, processes, and workers? Why not have them identify the most appropriate techniques from their arsenal to improve performance in a cohesive way? How about encouraging them to share their models and tools to cross-pollinate skills among all the Performance Architects? Let’s direct them to eliminate duplication of effort, increase cost savings, and ferret out hidden opportunities to maximize performance and increase those target results.

Think about what could be achieved when clients access all the combined technologies for each of the three organizational levels:

- Human performance technologies that focus on individuals
- Process performance technologies that focus on processes and procedures
- Organizational performance technologies that focus on organization development

(Addison, Haig, Kearny, 2009, page 140).

The creation of a Performance Architecture team could take a form suited to the particular organization and its culture. Two suggestions to generate further possibilities:

- For brave and forward-thinking organizations, establish the role of Chief Performance Officer to lead the newly formed Performance Architecture team.
- More cautious organizations could name a senior executive as owner of Performance Architecture and organize the various performance improvement groups to report, through their existing managers, to this executive.

Let’s see how these options might look.

Chief Performance Officer

Using this title or something similar that is meaningful in a particular organization, the Chief Performance Officer would be charged with eliminating duplicate efforts, leveraging influence and skills to successfully bring changes where needed, and containing costs in the process. This role could integrate functions to gain support for performance improvement initiatives by working vertically within functional lines and horizontally across them. With this valuable line of sight combined with the powerful skills resident in the new team, the organization would realize
credibility for performance improvement and the results produced (Addison, Haig, Kearny, 2009, page 140).

**Performance Architecture Executive**

An immediate advantage to naming a senior person as Performance Architecture executive is instant credibility for the work of performance improvement (assuming the person is valued and respected) with the built-in plus of executive sponsorship. In many organizations, projects and initiatives can only proceed if an executive has agreed to serve as sponsor. With such a person at the helm of performance improvement, approvals, funding, and resources could be secured rapidly while projects not deemed worthy of pursuit could be speedily vetted and dispensed with. High profile initiatives would get the attention needed to propel them forward, with impacts on results established and reported quickly.

**Are We Dreaming?**

Lest our ideas appear unrealistic, we share with you two examples of large organizations that have united their Performance Architects in some fashion to maximize their skills. You will see that neither organization has exactly followed our ideas for pooling talent. However, both have seen the value of the contributions Performance Architects make to results and have innovatively deployed them in ways that work in their organizational cultures. Both configurations are making an impact and improving performance results.

**U.S. Coast Guard**

The Coast Guard has a history of effective training and performance improvement results. Two years ago, they determined to capitalize on this legacy by centralizing the command for the various groups that architect performance throughout the service. For example, the aviation training group reported to the Aviation program. The traveling training team deployed to evaluate the effectiveness of training after delivery was not connected to the main training group.

Now all functions responsible for training and performance improvement report to one Admiral. The 2600 employees in the newly named Force Readiness Command are responsible for developing procedures and tactics from Coast Guard policy and then providing the training needed to support those procedures. This Command also analyzes situations, such as boating accidents, to identify causes and recommend solutions.

The Coast Guard is seeing continuous improvement in the delivery, receipt, and implementation of performance improvement programs and initiatives. An immediate benefit is the sharing of best practices among the members of Force Readiness Command who increase their own skills and knowledge while producing higher quality programs.

**Lowe’s Home Improvement Centers**

At Lowe’s, forward-thinking executives are changing the way employees are developed by expanding the company’s training approach to one of performance improvement. With this broader view, Lowe’s looks for ways to harness the skills of all manner of Performance Architects throughout the company to contribute to a range of performance improvement projects and initiatives. Lowe’s larger intent is to approach employee development systematically so that the greatest efficiencies are realized and all workers can increase their professional abilities to better serve their customers.

While various structural changes have brought together some Performance Architects who previously reported elsewhere, others remain based throughout the company. Supported by an executive line of sight across the enterprise and a centralized strategy for performance improvement, individual projects are able to enlist appropriately skilled Performance Architects from wherever they are in the organization. The resulting teams investigate needs, and design and deliver suitable solutions linked to bottom line results.
These are just two examples of organizations that see the value their Performance Architects can add when they are brought together to leverage their expertise. We think that connecting these specialists is to the advantage of their organizations and that a variety of configurations for harnessing their expertise can be effective.

References