



Performance Architecture

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A Walk on the Human Performance Side – Part I

Performance Architects have a license to snoop. We are in the business of supporting our client organizations in their quest for results that meet or exceed goals. We accomplish this by poking our noses into all aspects of how employees perform their jobs to learn how they contribute to those goals. We uncover the nuances of how work gets done and can then identify where and how changes could be made to improve all the elements of the work effort.

When a client finds that a process is problematic, a process expert usually investigates. The expert dismantles the “problem” process, makes adjustments to fix what is not working, and often adds additional processes on top of it. Frequently, despite the expert’s best efforts, the performance issue remains.

With a focus on the process itself and no tools for exploring how other components of the work environment might be sabotaging success, the process expert is caught in a frustrating cycle of cause and effect with no clear way out. Often, it is not the process itself that is broken but other factors that impact the individual worker. Other factors might include challenges within the work group, the practices of the worker, or aspects of the workplace that create performance issues and cause results to fall short of expectations.

Introducing a Three-Part Series

With this edition of our Column, we begin a three-part series to explore models and tools to help process experts with the human performance side of work. Each Column in this series will walk through human performance issues at a different organizational level:

- Worker/Individual/Team
- Work/Process
- Workplace/Organization

We will discuss typical performance issues and opportunities for each level. Then we will share an appropriate model or tool to enable process experts to identify the performance issue and respond to it. Finally, we will share a success story in which the featured tool or model made a significant difference in organizational results.

The Worker/Individual/Team Level

At the Worker/Individual/Team Level, Performance Architects may investigate how individuals perform a particular job, the dynamics of a department of employees with varied responsibilities, or performance issues and opportunities within a specific project team.

Typical Performance Issues at The Worker Level

We are typically asked to address Worker Level performance issues like:

- A drop in individual work output levels
- Increased errors and the need for re-work
- Failure to meet sales goals
- Inconsistent use of required safety practices

Often, when performance is below standard, management assumes that employees need some training to improve their work results. To solve their performance issues described above, managers typically ask for training specific to the work to be performed. Unfortunately, at this point, training would be a prescription for a problem we haven't yet diagnosed. If we were to respond with a training solution without further investigation, we would want to be sure our medical malpractice premiums were paid up.

The Performance Architect's operative response to a request for training is, "Yes, and first let's take a look at all aspects of the work to understand how it is performed and what challenges may exist for this individual or team." While there may, indeed, be a need for training, it is more likely that the cause of poor performance is something else. For training to be part of a solution, we want to be sure that the employees *don't know how* to do the work. If they used to do it well, or if they were trained to do it in the past, the cause of their poor performance will lie elsewhere. The good news is that most performance improvement solutions are cheaper and faster to implement than training.

What we need now is a construct for exploring the performance issue or opportunity. There are a number of effective models and tools that can help. We share one here that has a proven track record of effectiveness: a diagnostic tool called the **Performance Map**.

The Performance Map

The **Performance Map** is easy to understand and use. It's fast, too. Roger developed it because he needed an easy way to talk with clients about solutions for performance issues other than training. Because the **Map** is visual, clients can quickly see the variables of performance. With its broad focus, the **Map** supports our preferred approach:

- Involve the client in diagnosing the performance issue
- Set the client's expectation that we will deliver a Total Performance System that may or may not include training
- Move our thinking from designing training to designing a Total Performance System

We involve the client early in our investigative process because this tool demonstrates very clearly why training may not be the best solution to a performance issue. It helps the client to own the investigation and the solution that will follow.

The **Map** is a diagnostic tool with a simple grid format that invites clients to pick up a pen and engage.

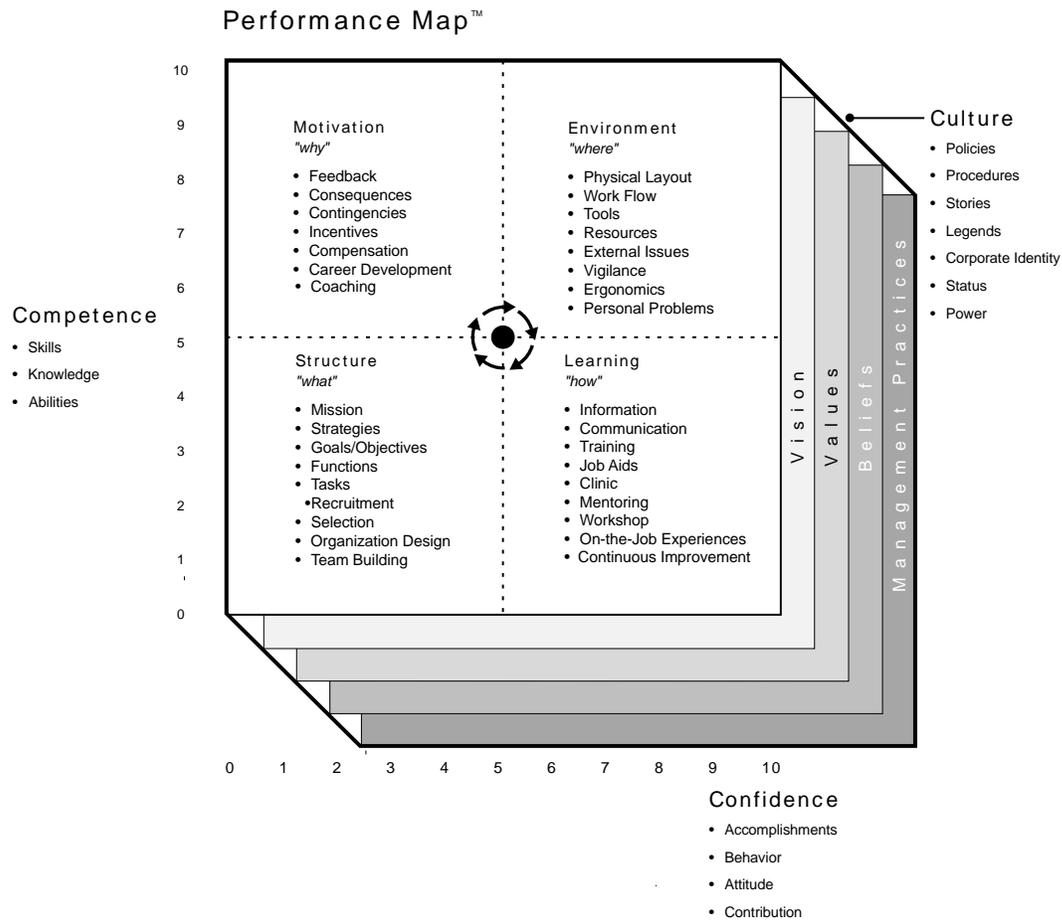


Figure 1. Performance Map

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The Grid

The four quadrants categorize the possible drivers of performance and identify typical elements to consider:

- Structure – shows the “what” of the organization, or its’ foundation
- Motivation – is the “why”, as in why do employees want/not want to perform their jobs well
- Environment – is the “where”, and includes all the external conditions that affect how the organization grows and develops
- Learning – describes “how” employees gain proficiency in particular skills and knowledge

The north-south axis considers employee Competence on a scale of 0 (low) to 10 (high). The east-west axis reflects the employee’s Confidence in being able to do the job, also on a 0 to 10 scale.

Using the Performance Map

Begin by meeting with your client to identify the employee(s) whose performance is not meeting standards, has deteriorated, or is otherwise cause for concern. Then:

- Help your client evaluate the Competence of the employee(s) by asking a question such as, “What critical skills must employees have to perform the job successfully?” Ask your client to rate the employee’s competence on a 0 (no skills or knowledge) to 10 (highly skilled and knowledgeable) scale.
- Determine the employee’s Confidence level next. Explore with your client examples of accomplishments, behaviors, attitudes, commitments, and contributions made by the employee. You might say something like, “Tell me about your employee’s attitude toward this job.” Again, ask your client to rate the performer(s) from 0 (the manager has no confidence in the employee) to 10 (the manager has complete confidence in the employee). It is good practice to have the same conversation with the performers to determine their views of their work. Conflicting responses often point to other issues that are affecting performance.
- Mark the levels for Competence and Confidence on the grid and draw lines to connect the two.
- Which quadrant holds the point of intersection? With this information, you can diagnose the most common causes of performance issues and prescribe one or more possible solutions. For example, in the Environment quadrant, obstacles to performance may come from inadequate tools and materials, poorly designed workflow, or individual employees struggling with personal problems.
- Regardless of the quadrant you focus on, be sure to consider the other three. You are working in a performance system that is part of the larger system of the organization. Actions you take in one area will affect others. For example, if you identify the Learning quadrant as the source of the performance issue, and the employee in question is confident but lacking in skills and knowledge, it will be important that the manager creates an environment in which that employee can perform at a high level.

Did you notice that the organization’s Culture is represented in the upper right of the **Performance Map**? Consider how the solutions you suggest will fit with the way the organization operates. A terrific performance improvement solution for one company may be a poor fit at another because the two cultures are different. Remember, culture rules!

Success Story

Some years ago we were Performance Architects at a large financial organization. A major initiative at that time was to provide extraordinary customer service. Our leadership saw service as one way the company could distinguish itself in the marketplace. Accordingly, we were asked to develop service training to give customer-facing employees the skills to provide exceptional service.

Rather than respond with a customer service training program, we met with the requesting executive with a copy of the **Performance Map** and extra pencils. We talked about the needs she saw and then asked the competency question. Our executive said that the customer facing employees were highly competent, took a pencil, and marked the north-south axis between 9 and 10. Her response to the confidence question was a much lower score, about a 4, and she marked that on the **Map** as well. When she connected her marks, she saw that the performance issue she described was in the Motivation quadrant. Our subsequent discussion explored the:

- Quality and frequency of the feedback employees received on their performance
- Coaching, if any, provided to enhance performance
- Incentives in place, or not, for front-line employees
- Compensation program and how it applied to these employees
- Career development opportunities for service employees

We were able to help our client see that service skills training was not likely to help with the service initiative. Instead, we created the foundation for a service culture by constructing a Total Performance System composed of improvements from the list above. The organization was able to successfully use the resulting exceptional customer service as a competitive advantage.

Tips for Success With The Performance Map

Use the **Performance Map** to identify obstacles to performance other than, or in addition to, skill and knowledge deficiencies at the Worker/Individual Team level. Take a systemic view as you and your clients explore the issues and opportunities for improved performance. Help them see that performance improvement is a product of the alignment of the Worker (people), the Work (processes and practices), and the Workplace (enterprise).

In our experience, most situations have a finite cause that can be resolved with one or more solutions. The **Performance Map** is a tool that can pinpoint that cause.

Next: The Work/Process Level

Join us when next Column continues our Human Performance walk with an investigation of performance improvement opportunities at the Work/Process level.

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