

Performance Architecture Roger Addison & Carol Haig

## Performance Architecture: A Dog's Guide to Business

Since it is now December and the year is drawing to a close, both individuals and organizations will make plans and create wish lists for the New Year. Much like those of us who make New Year's resolutions, those plans and wish lists often contain some carry-over items from the previous year.

For us, a recurring item on our annual wish list is to discover an exemplary organization that models the Performance Architect's view of how best to achieve and exceed expected results. Here, at the end of 2016, we have found such an enterprise: Guide Dogs for the Blind, a non-profit organization headquartered in San Rafael, California.

### ***What is Guide Dogs for the Blind***

Guide Dogs for the Blind (GDB) provides the best guide dogs, training, and services anywhere in the U.S., GDB breeds, rears, trains, and pairs the dogs with visually impaired partners. All services are free to recipients of the guide dogs. Veterinary care is provided for the dogs through their working years and on into their retirement from guide work.

With two campuses, the one in California and another in Boring, Oregon, GDB has built and manages a complex supply chain supported by legions of volunteers partnering with highly skilled paid staff.

### ***Site Visit***

We visited the San Rafael location and were given an extensive tour of the facilities. With a total customer focus, amazing quality control, and a highly effective supply chain, Guide Dogs for the Blind is an exemplar of an organization that:

- Lives its Mission, Vision, Values, and Behaviors
- Has a high degree of transparency as evidenced by their website, [www.guidedogs.com](http://www.guidedogs.com)
- Is generous, welcoming, accomplished
- Eagerly shares how they serve their clients



This is a magnificent braille sculpture of two quotations from Helen Keller: “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much,” and, “The most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched, they must be felt with the heart.”

### **Background**

GDB was conceived in 1942 to serve World War II veterans blinded in service to the U.S. The organization grew to serve thousands of clients throughout the U.S. and Canada. The goal is to “provide every blind person with the opportunity to experience the power of this partnership (*with a Guide Dog*).”

A non-profit, GDB is entirely donor supported and receives no government funds. All services are free to recipients including:

- Transportation
- Room and board during training
- Guide dog equipment
- Support services
- : At a guide dog’s retirement, GDB staff can evaluate the need for a successor dog.

### **Mission, Vision, Values**

**Mission** - Guide Dogs for the Blind empowers lives by creating exceptional partnerships between people, dogs, and communities.

**Vision** - Guide Dogs for the Blind envisions a world with greater inclusion, opportunity, and independence by optimizing the unique capabilities of people and dogs.

### **Values**

- Mission First – align all actions and decisions with the Mission and provide superior service
- Integrity – demonstrate accountability, transparency, honesty
- Kindness and Respect – treat every being with dignity and sensitivity
- Teamwork and Collaboration – encourage open communication and practice inclusion
- Empowerment – support personal development and self-reliance  
<http://www.guidedogs.com/>

**GDB Models RSVP**

Too many acronyms? This may help: You know what GDB stands for. RSVP is doubtless familiar as well. However, Performance Architects, as polite as we are about acknowledging invitations, also love a good model. And RSVP is one of the most useful we have for running a project, a company, or designing a process. We first introduced this four-principle model in our [Practice Makes Process Column](#).

**RSVP**

<b>R = Results</b>	Start by identifying the <b>Results</b> you want to achieve
<b>S = Systematic</b>	Use a <b>Systematic</b> and <b>Systemic</b> approach to plan for and produce the <b>Results</b>
<b>V = Value</b>	Identify the <b>Value</b> to the customer
<b>P = Partnering</b>	Choose <b>Partners</b> to join in working toward the identified <b>Results</b>

At GDB, they integrate the Mission, Vision, and Values with a dedicated customer focus. Their RSVP looks like this:

**RSVP at GDB**

<b>R = Results</b>	Enhance a blind person’s life with a trained Guide Dog partner
<b>S = Systematic Approach</b>	The supply chain is systematic: Breeding, Puppy Raising, Guidework, Class Training/pairing with a vision impaired partner, Graduation, Retirement
<b>V = Value</b>	The value of a Guide Dog to a blind person is life-changing and described differently by every Guide Dog recipient
<b>P = Partnering</b>	The purpose of GDB is to create partnerships between trained Guide Dogs and blind people who need them

**Processes at GDB**

The systematic approach GDB has created to provide Guide Dogs to visually impaired people in need of their help has driven the need for a thorough approach to process design.

### ***Breeding Program***

The scientific Breeding Program at GDB is state-of-the-art and produces puppies uniquely suited for Guide Dog work. The breeder dogs are carefully chosen and usually produce a number of litters. Their custodians bring them to the GDB campus to be bred.

All the resulting puppies are born in GDB's kennels. They are black and yellow Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, and Lab/Golden crosses, with the Labs having the greatest success as Guide Dogs. About 800 puppies are born each year. All dogs go into service or are adopted into loving families

The breeder dogs and their puppies are under the care of GDB's team of experts. These include full-time veterinarians and technicians, staff neonatal and breeding specialists, consulting allied professionals, and volunteers (website: Breeding and Whelping).



### **Photo source: Guide Dogs for the Blind**

We visited the Nursery and saw the always-on Puppy Cam. A yellow Lab mother and her puppies were nursing in a child-sized swimming pool. The pool is perfect because the puppies cannot get out but the mother can do so easily and take a break from active motherhood for short periods.

### ***Puppy Raising***

When they are about 8 weeks old, the pups are placed with volunteer puppy raisers to be socialized and experience a wide range of different environments. Many of the 1,000+ puppy raisers have been doing their part for years. They help the dogs learn good manners and provide scheduled evaluations of the puppy's behaviors and progress.

### ***Guidework Training***

At 14-18 months, the puppies come back to the GDB campus for 2 to 3 months of formal Guide training with licensed Guide Dog mobility instructors. Their training uses science-based positive reinforcement methods. The dogs work hard every day and are evaluated regularly to note their progress.

We talked with an instructor who was working with one of the 4 puppies she was training. The puppy watched her eagerly at all times. Hand gestures accompany all verbal commands and are critical. If the trainer gives a verbal command to turn left combined with a hand signal to go right, the dog will obey the hand signal rather than the verbal command.

“Our dogs are smart—very smart! In addition to learning how to lead a person safely around obstacles, guide dogs are also trained in "intelligence disobedience": if they are given an unsafe cue from their handler, they are taught to disobey it (for example: refusing to step out into the street when there is oncoming traffic).”  
(Website)

Licensed Guide Dog mobility instructors are responsible for:

- Training dogs to become guides
- Teaching clients how to work with their dogs
- Training and mentoring apprentice instructors
- Interviewing prospective students in their homes and making follow-up visits to alumni
- Representing GDB by speaking at various public functions (website: Guide Dog Mobility Instructors)

Licensed instructors complete a 3-year Apprenticeship program and have passed a rigorous set of oral, written, and performance tests administered by the California State Guide Dog Board.

### **Career Change Dogs**

Even with a state-of-the-art breeding program, not every dog is suited for Guidework. Some dogs, smart as they may be, may have a health limitation or behavioral issue. These are Career Change dogs and GSB strives to identify them as early as possible to minimize the time and expense of training them.

A Career Change dog is usually made available for adoption as a pet. There is always a waiting list for them, of course. Some of these dogs are well suited to other types of work such as search and rescue, medical alert, cancer detection or pet therapy and may go on for further specialized training with other organizations.

### **Class Training**

A dog that successfully completes Guidework Training is considered fully trained and ready to be paired with a visually impaired student who is enrolled in a residential class at the GDB campus. This is called Class Training.

The pairing process includes the careful matching of personalities, communication styles, and other characteristics that can make or break a working team. The new team spends two weeks in training to learn how to work together in many real-life situations. They live together during this period in one of 8 suites on the campus.

This is an exciting time for both Guide Dogs and students. Upon starting to work with her Guide Dog, one student said, “I felt as if I were flying. It was like picking the handle to my life back up.” (Thomas)

## Graduation

Class Training culminates in a graduation attended by the breeders, puppy raisers, trainers, and family members, all celebrating the launch of an eager new team. It takes an average of 251 volunteers to help a single puppy become a Guide Dog. In San Rafael, graduations are held every other Saturday and are open to the public. If you are in the area, stop by and join the celebration!

## Guide Dog Lessons for Businesses

Lessons for business abound at Guide Dogs for the Blind. Here are some examples:

- *Start with the end in mind* – What results is your organization in business to provide? What are the outputs of current projects? What does each process in your company produce?
- *Focus on the customer* – Who are your customers? What do they want and expect from your product or service? What is of value to them that you can provide?
- *To what extent are processes and practices aligned?* That is, how parallel are the connections between *processes* – the prescribed ways to do work that employees are to follow – and their *practices* – what it is that employees actually do? The closer processes and practices are to being the same, the more efficient and effective the organization.
- What are the critical links in your company's supply chain? Are there missing links in the chain? Are there weak links that should be strengthened or replaced? How reliable is the supply chain?
- What can your organization learn from Guide Dogs for the Blind?

## Summary

Besides the wonderful dogs at Guide Dogs for the Blind and the vital services they provide to their blind partners, they are philosophically and operationally an exemplary model of a tightly constructed, well-run organization.

With focused Mission, Vision, Values, and Behaviors that staff and volunteers live every day, the supply chain is the motor of Guide Dogs for the Blind. The processes built to power this motor are continually improved to reflect the most current customer needs using up-to-the-minute scientific knowledge.

After 75 years of experience, many long-term employees and volunteers, and a world-wide reputation for excellence, Guide Dogs for the Blind has much experience to offer to organizations and businesses of all kinds.

We encourage you to explore the many outstanding facets of Guide Dogs for the Blind and reflect on what your organization might learn from them.

## References

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## AUTHORS



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