



Human Performance Consulting: Transforming Human Potential into Productive Business Performance

James S. Pepitone (Gulf Publishing, Houston; 2000; ISBN 0-87719-352-3) \$37.95

REVIEWED BY RICK VOSSMAN

As the debate between training and performance improvement continues in recent journals and publications, advocates in both professional fields continue discussion of the relative pros and cons. Training advocates deride performance improvement as being too focused on the financial results and not enough on the development of the individual person. Performance improvement advocates maintain that training usually falls short, or worse, is the wrong solution altogether to address true problems with performance.

From the title of this book, and Pepitone's 22 years as a performance improvement researcher and consultant, one would guess that he also takes a strong stance against training. While he does his share of that, he also builds a strong case for the use of human performance consulting to address performance and productivity problems in the workplace. If you are looking for a quick-fix book with lots of checklists and templates, this book is not it. If, however, you are looking for a book on performance consulting that lays out its history and foundation, presents an integrated process for attacking performance problems, and presents interesting ideas about who should consult on those

problems, then *Human Performance Consulting* serves that purpose well.

The book has three parts. Part 1, "New Opportunities Within Organizations," presents a brief history of organization science, the evolution of the knowledge and service industries, and a foundation for the processes advocated by the author. Part 2, "Improving Human Performance," sets forth the author's process for addressing performance and productivity problems. Part 3, "The Consultant as Instrument," outlines the author's views on continuous process and what characterizes a competent performance improvement consultant. Also of note are two items in a very large appendix—a benchmarking study of internal consulting functions entitled "Developing a World-Class Consulting Function to Improve Performance and Productivity," and a sample project report that illustrates the author's consulting process. These appendices are worth the price of the book, as they both provide a wealth of information.

Pepitone argues that most corporate training today is still a vestige of the past, when productivity was seen through the eyes of Frederick Taylor, with an emphasis on assembly-line efficiency and industrial might. Although the economy has shifted to a knowledge and service-worker base, these outdated ideas of training continue to be emphasized to the detriment of real performance and productivity improvement. Pepitone says knowledge and service workers (estimated at over 80% of the U.S. workforce) require independent thinking, not the standardized behavior that traditional training provides. He concludes that this misuse of training creates situations in

which companies are not addressing the very issues that cut away at productivity and financial performance.

Pepitone, as do many others, lumps knowledge and service workers together in one category. Should we separate those categories? While his argument applies with great weight to knowledge workers, I question whether it applies equally to service workers. Does a service worker at a fast food establishment need independent thinking? Would that translate to higher levels of performance? Can that skill or trait be developed or even found in the target population for hiring new workers? A McDonald's executive would probably say no, and so do I.

While the early chapters in Part 1 establish a foundation of opportunities for performance improvement work, the final chapter in that section is the most impressive. In "Creating Financial Value," there is a cogent definition of what it means to add value to an organization. Pepitone strongly urges consultants to use only financial measures, and none other, to justify a project. As he says, "If workers are to be treated as assets—human capital—then the only acceptable measure of success is improved human performance that in turn creates improved financial performance, which increases enterprise value. Thus the role of management, and of every knowledge and service worker, too, is to create value—to act in ways, make decisions, and implement initiatives that generate positive financial effects." Demonstrating ROI in nonfinancial terms almost always falls way short when selling performance improvement programs to senior management.

While the author's definition of what adds value is substantiated by a unique and clever model for calculating the financial value added, I wonder—especially in a post-September 11 world—where we take account of other values that are important. For example, how do nonprofits and government agencies define *value-added*? Isn't value also created by what an organization contributes to society? Can't other kinds of value be added besides financial value? Or is this just naïve thinking? I don't fault the author's model or definition as such. But a part of me wants a broader definition of value-added.

In Part 2, the author describes his process for improving performance. He coins the phrase "humaneering" for his approach and focuses on the critical role of systems thinking in the engineering of performance solutions. Pepitone says performance improvement efforts must look at all subsystems within an organization. He labels these subsystems as workers, operational subsystems (role/job, task, resources), organizational subsystems (process, structure, management systems), culture, strategic subsystems (philosophy, mission, strategy), and market environment (economic, legal, cultural).

This model supports his assertion that systems thinking is important when consulting on human performance issues. The model also supports his assertion that there is no easy answer for performance problems. They cannot be solved with one approach or one program. The *program du jour* mentality that most of us have encountered in organizational life runs contrary to systems thinking. As Pepitone writes, "every activity in an organization is in some way related to everything else in the organization." He readily admits that performance improvement can be tremendously complex and that consultants may feel overwhelmed when using a systems approach, but he argues it is the only way to achieve results that truly create value.

He then describes 12 categories of performance interventions with broad titles such as *inform*, *instruct*, *align*, and *redesign*, but he seems content to leave these vague. I wanted more here. Instead, he focuses on how difficult and complex it is to design effective interventions in a systematic way, and the point that training must be limited to closing gaps in skills.

If the process of conducting performance improvement interventions is so complex, what type of consultants should be used? Pepitone suggests in Part 3, "The Consultant as Instrument," that process consultation (about which Edgar Schein has written so eloquently) is an essential skill for human performance consultants. This fits well with Pepitone's focus on systems thinking, since any consultant using his methodology must be able to focus on processes and their interaction.

The author's final chapter, "The Competent Consultant," outlines four criteria for the selection of performance consultants. The first criterion is *client conditions*, where the nature of the client and the presenting situation are the foremost reasons for identifying specific consultants. While this seems logical, it is simply not possible—if one depends on internal consultants, as Pepitone recommends—to always have on staff the competent specialists that are required to deal with the extraordinarily diverse problems that arise in an organization.

The second criterion is *role competence*, defined, somewhat frustratingly, as "competence in a particular consulting role." We can glean a better definition of what role competence is by looking at the four necessary ingredients: (1) intellectual horsepower; (2) appreciation and concern; (3) knowledge, skills, and experience; and (4) maturity, wisdom, and tact. Basically, Pepitone argues that one needs to be smart, value the work of performance improvement, have a wide breadth of experience and knowledge, and be able to demonstrate empathy in difficult situations. These are all valid criteria.

The third criterion for selecting per-

formance consultants is *supportive competencies*. These are defined as underlying characteristics that are causally related to a person's effective performance in a consulting role. Pepitone says these are generally inborn and stable traits, similar to personality characteristics. I had difficulty distinguishing between *role competence* and *supportive competencies*. For me, intellectual horsepower is a competency that could fit in either category, as are maturity, wisdom, tact, knowledge, skill, and so on. While I wholeheartedly agree with the criteria in general, I was unable to discern the unique differences in the categories.

The author defines *natural temperament*, the last criterion for selecting consultants, as genetic predispositions to certain behaviors across the sameness and diversity of human behavior. He cites the opposite traits of extroversion and introversion as examples. These characteristics, he argues, can be a rich source of insight in working with people. Again, I agree this is a critical criterion, but I had difficulty discerning the difference between *natural temperament*, as Pepitone describes it, and maturity, tact, and appreciation as mentioned in the other categories.

Even so, *Human Performance Consulting* is generally well written and builds a strong case for a systematic approach to performance improvement compared to traditional training or other nonsystematic approaches. Whereas some of the detail on intervention design is thin, and the focus on financial results is a little too materialistic for me, I still highly recommend this work as a good source for anyone who wants to become more capable of enabling performance improvement, either as an internal or external consultant.

Rick Vossman (rick@cimpath.com) is Chief Creative Officer of CimPath, a Jacksonville, Florida-based human and organization development consulting firm. He has over 16 years of experience as both an internal and external consultant.