

## EVALUATING CHANGES IN TRAINING MANAGER'S ROLE PERCEPTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF THE NUCLEAR POWER INDUSTRY

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### Abstract

Organizations are increasingly recognizing the importance of moving from training to performance improvement in Human Resource Development (HRD). Business organizations need to dramatically alter the roles of training managers to ensure that they move towards a performance improvement process, and to ensure that potential solutions are linked to organizational and individual performance problems. As part of a program for nuclear power managers at a major university, we evaluated the changes in the perceptions of twenty-one training managers from around the United States. The evaluation data lead us to conclusions regarding the changing role of training managers from strictly training to that of performance consultant and the challenges manager's face as they try to build partnering relationships.

### Introduction and Background

During 2001 a large Midwestern university and a business association co-sponsored a course for nuclear training managers. Twenty-one managers took part in a two-week course, designed to reorient them to using performance improvement as the organizing scheme for their HRD or training divisions in nuclear power plants. The purpose of this study was to evaluate changes in training manager's role perceptions before training, during training, and at two points post-training. Both qualitative techniques (interviews) and quantitative techniques (surveys) were used to measure perceptions of the twenty-one participants.

The course design followed the five phases of the performance improvement process including training sessions on performance consulting, performance analysis, solution design, solution delivery, and solution evaluation. This curriculum followed a widely accepted model of performance improvement used in the field of human resource development (Rummler and Brache, 1995; Jacobs, 1988; Robinson and Robinson, 1996). This model was developed as a tool to help re-conceptualize training and development. In addition to requiring mastery of various technical skills, such as rate-of-return analysis, these changes require a conceptual shift in managers' attitudes towards training.

The course participants included nine training managers, three training directors, and ten individuals with jobs that included chemistry manager, operations manager, accreditation manager, and technical training superintendent. The level of experience in the nuclear power industry and specific expertise in human resource development varied substantially. The length of service in the commercial nuclear industry for attendees ranged from 2 to 29 years. The length of service in a training capacity ranged from 2 months to 18 years. None of the participants had formal graduate training in human resource development.

### Methodology

As part of the planning process, the course leaders agreed to conduct an evaluation of the course. The evaluation activities were agreed upon by both the sponsoring organization as well as the organizing university. A different staff was assembled to carry out the evaluation, a team of two graduate students and a faculty member that had no formal role in the training design or governance. Therefore, while the roles of the training staff were laid out in conjunction with the clients, the training staff could be independent of the design and implementation of the training activities. The evaluation activities included the following:

- ◆ Pre-course survey to determine participant expectations
- ◆ Mid-course survey to assess learner satisfaction
- ◆ Focus groups to investigate the level of learning in the course
- ◆ Final course survey to collect data on both the overall course satisfaction
- ◆ Follow up telephone interviews after one month and six months

While the pre-course survey and the mid-course survey focused on collecting background information about the program participants and their reactions to the course design, the focus groups, final survey, and follow up activities were developed to focus on the following research questions. 1) How did the performance improvement process change course participant's views of their roles as training managers over time, 2) What changes had training manager's made to their current performance improvement process as a result of the course? Full copies of the instruments are available upon request. These selected questions focused on the evolving sense of the performance improvement process.

### Findings

Some important findings emerged from these evaluation activities. These included the following:

*Role Definition:* A primary point of interest in the evaluation design was to determine how the performance improvement process changed participant's views of their roles as training managers over the course of the training. There was significant agreement among those interviewed that their understanding of their role as a training manager has changed as a result of the course. Specifically, during the first follow-up 87% of those surveyed stated that their role as a training manager has changed in terms of their understanding of the performance improvement process. Individual comments shown in Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate how participant's perception of their role changed.

Table 2 Focus Groups

<p><i>"I have been going over and over this with my chief nuclear officer. He truly believes that line managers run the site. But he also believes training professionals and other site professionals push the line organization. I hadn't really thought about our role like that before but performance consulting relates to that. What is my role? Do I do specifically what the operations manager tells me to do? Or do I consult him knowing what I know to get to the right answer? And I think that's what my bosses' boss has been hoping I would do.</i></p>
<p><i>A consultant is imbued with a sense of being an expert. We operate as peers with the line management. We are not viewed as experts in performance improvement. In fact, given that they're absent any knowledge of what we did here the past two weeks, there's no reason for them to believe we're any more an expert than when we left. So basically what we talk about now is changing the perception of the person and the organization that have hired this training function so that they have some recognized expertise in performance improvement.</i></p>
<p><i>I guess your question is do we see ourselves as performance consultants. I guess that would be what you are trying to ferret out with this question. And I think there's an element of that. If you take number 3 and turn it around to put training first and performance last, certainly that paradigm could work.</i></p>

Table 3 First Follow Up

<i>"I feel like my role changed to make sure that we are looking at performance in a broader picture and to improve performance may include a non-training solution."</i>
<i>"It's changed in the manner in which the course intended. It change the focus of my function from strictly training to performance improvement such that the final measure of effectiveness is whether performance has improved—not that training has been implemented."</i>
<i>"Yes my understanding of my role has changed. Since I lead teams I can take the performance improvement information and use it in terms of what I see at the stations. For example, I just finished a plant visit last week and I used the performance mapping process to identify gaps in the performance. Training was not the answer – there were other issues, causes, and symptoms."</i>

Thirteen percent felt that their role had not changed as a result of the course. These participants indicated that either they did not have a role as a training manager or had not presented data to their management yet.

*Changes to Job:* Again, during the actual training and as part of focus groups participants were asked to talk about how their job as a training manager changed. Participants reported during the training that their jobs included a great deal of performance improvement in addition to formal training. Table 4 shows examples of participant's comments on how their job as a training manager has changed.

Table 4 Focus Group

<i>So the role I have as a training manager isn't just about training. It's about running a nuclear power plant and all of the different pieces of that pie. Performance management in my view from our station is no one wants to take the pieces and put it together. I want to go back with an approach to my performance improvement manager is influence to him how we still have to bring more people together to talk about the big pie and not just try to influence training. I don't want to go back and just talk training.</i>
<i>I caution us that we can't walk out of this room back to our sites thinking we're consultants. If you wear that hat you separate yourself from the plant. You have to act as a partner also. And partnership with the line means you're in the plant, your people are in the plant seeing problems, identifying them on their own, and taking steps to correct them on their own without line management asking you to. Now when the line comes up to you and hits you with an emerging issue with a question, now you put on your consulting hat and act as an analyst to determine what is the best course of action.</i>

The research staff gathered additional in depth information about participant's jobs six months after the training ended through interviews. These telephone interviews revealed that 9 of the 10 people interviewed after six months had made at least a presentation to management about performance improvement. An equal number of those interviewed had followed up with management by actually developing a program for management to review that would incorporate some aspect of performance analysis. Fewer participants (6 of 10 interviewed) actually indicated that they changed some aspect of their job to fit better with their understanding of performance improvement. Three people stated they are using performance analysis tools developed during group projects. Others stated they are identifying gaps in performance using Meager's flow charts. One person stated they developed and conducted a training course for training instructors based on Rummler and Brache's model. The remaining 40% stated that they are still using their existing corrective action programs. Table 5 shows examples of comments concerning participant's jobs.

Table 5

<i>"I presented to management and they are more willing to view performance improvement as the overall objective rather than just delivering training. They didn't take any specific actions but the awareness is there."</i>
<i>"I trained senior management on performance improvement"</i>
<i>"I have taught about 25 line managers on how to do performance analysis and this has been added to procedures"</i>
<i>We are using the performance analysis tool we developed during the course using concepts from Rummler and Brache and also Meager."</i>

### Conclusions

An evaluation of the training program was designed in cooperation with the client, a major industry association in the energy field. The evaluation activities and questions were identified and approved in advance by both the agency and the university. While the client agency was interested in evaluation, the evaluation team and the agency went through a process of negotiation about the relative importance of qualitative and quantitative indicators of training effectiveness that more or less corresponded to a debate about the necessary level of evaluation discussed by Kirkpatrick. The nuclear power industry was primarily interested in quick feedback that measured issues such as participant retention of knowledge, while the evaluators were consistently concerned with qualitative measures that asked participants to look at changes in their roles over time.

Several interesting conclusions emerged from the evaluation findings relevant to the challenges that organizations face in moving from training to performance improvement. Two underlying themes were identified regarding moving from training to performance as participants responded to questions relating to their perceived role and changes to their job. These themes included participant's changing roles from training manager to performance consultant and the challenges facing them as they attempt to build partnering relationships with others in the organization to support their changing role.

Altering the roles of training managers to ensure that they move towards a performance improvement process is critical to the performance improvement process. Robinson and Robinson (1995) describe this shift as moving away from what people need to learn (training) to what they must do (performance). They discuss several distinctions between the role of the traditional trainer and the role of the performance consultant as outlined in Table 6.

Table 6

	Traditional Trainer	Performance Consultant
Focus	Learning needs	Performance needs
Output	Structured learning event such as a training program	Performance services including developing performance models and ensuring transfer of skills
Accountability	Training	Performance
Assessment	Training needs	Performance gaps
Evaluations	Based on learner's reactions	Measures performance change
Goals	Not linked to organizational goals	Linked to organizational goals

To help the organization in achieving business goals performance consultants need to establish and maintain relationships with other managers in the organization. Consultants should be included in weekly operational meetings to stay informed of performance issues. They should also be included in strategic planning meetings to actively participate in strategic goal setting.

Building relationships takes time and requires developing trust among key people. As a first step it was encouraging to see the number of people who had presented to their management teams on performance and that some people had actually conducted training for others in their organization on the performance improvement process.

The ability to link performance strategies to organizational goals and to accurately measure performance change are critical aspects of the performance consultant's role. Rummier and Brache (1995) suggest a "systems approach" for assessing training's impact on performance. They propose looking at performance as a function of the job/performer level (where job outputs are defined), the process level (where work flows are defined), and the organizational level (where strategy provides direction). The systems approach has important implications for moving from training to performance improvement because often times training is not the correct solution to a performance problem. Using the three levels of analysis will help consultants properly assess whether training is the solution or not.

Moving from training to performance is not an easy task. Although the training manager's comments about changes in their roles and partnering with others in the organization support movement from a training orientation to a performance improvement orientation, some concerns can also be inferred from a few comments. For example, one participant described the potential conflicting roles between the performance consultant who is viewed as an "expert" and the training manager who is viewed as a "peer" among the line managers. Galagan (1992) described high performance work systems as being characterized by collaboration, trust, and mutual support. Thus, all stakeholders need to work together to share the knowledge needed to move from training to performance.

Another participant reinforced this concern by describing the fine line that exists between being a consultant and being a partner. To this person being a partner meant being in the plant identifying problems and correcting them. This definition supports conducting assessments by analyzing gaps in performance and focusing on performance needs as opposed to learning needs (Robinson and Robinson, 1996).

There has probably never been a more challenging and yet exciting time for training managers as they continue to broaden their scope of work by moving from the role of training manager to performance consultant. Additional research should be conducted using the critical incident technique to identify success stories from training managers who have transitioned from strictly training to performance improvement. Another interesting area for future research is how performance consultants are ensuring that the knowledge and skills taught in training are being transferred back to the job. Additional studies could look at methods being used to ensure transfer as well as how performance is being measured.

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Presented at the Midwest Research-to-Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, October 9-11, 2002