The following article is adapted from the book *Performance Consulting: Third Edition*, co-authored by Jim and Dana Robinson, Jack and Patty Phillips and Dick Handshaw, published by Berrett-Koehler and released in 2015.

How Are Your Reframing Skills?

By Dana Robinson

How many times do you receive a request from a manager similar to the following:

"We are experiencing an increase in preventable accidents and incidents. Safety is a primary goal for our manufacturing facilities. What kind of safety training can we offer operators and supervisors?"

"I have two teams who are in continual conflict. I would like some type of team building experience for them. What do you suggest?"

This manager, who is your client, seeks your help implement an already determined solution. It is possible that the proposed solution will be insufficient to achieve results – and may even be unnecessary. Business and performance results occur from the implementation of *multiple* solutions – a single solution will rarely be sufficient. The goal for a performance consultant in these scenarios is to engage the client in a *reframing* discussion.

What's a Reframing Discussion?

In a reframing discussion the performance consultant transitions the conversation away from a focus on the solution and towards a discussion of the business and performance results the client wants to achieve. Consider the team building request noted above. Although the client has identified a team-building solution, it is highly probable that the client seeks results that go beyond delivery of this solution. Resolving team conflict would be one possible result; enhancing work efficiency could be another. In a reframing discussion you do not focus on the solution (the team-building activity). Instead, the focus is on the desired performance and business results the client seeks. You are *reframing* what is discussed.

To do this effectively requires two skills:

1) Form and ask powerful questions
2) Use a compelling logic when asking those questions.

1. Forming and Asking Powerful Questions

What is a powerful question? It is one that causes your client to pause and reflect – it is a question that is very thought provoking. Consider what one client indicated to his HR Partner: *"You ask questions I did not even know I had and then you help me answer them."* Performance consultants influence more by what they ask than by what they tell.

In the consulting role, there are three categories of questions you need to ask:

1) SHOULD Questions, which identify both the business and performance goals and requirements. Business SHOULDs are identified numerically ("*reduce preventable accidents by 27%")* and performance SHOULDS behaviorally *("team members should offer to assist each other during busy times").*

2) IS Questions, which clarify what currently is true in terms of business results and on-the-job performance. Information obtained from SHOULD and IS questions enable you to identify the gaps that need to be closed.

3) CAUSE Questions, which focus on the root causes for the gaps that have been identified. Causes can be identified for business gaps as well as gaps in performance.

SHOULD, IS and CAUSE questions provide content regarding what is known, and unknown, about a situation. Uncovering what is unknown, but key to deciding on the appropriate solutions, provides you an opportunity to partner with a client to obtain this missing information. Your role moves from solution-provider to solution-decider.

For questions to be powerful, they need to evidence four techniques. Powerful questions are:

- Open-ended. The questions cannot be answered with a 'yes' or 'no' response.
- Cause-neutral. Questions should not suggest causes (*"To what degree do managers have sufficient data to make the decisions needed?")*. Better to ask, *"Why do you think managers are challenged to make the decisions you have noted are necessary?"*
- Solution-neutral. Just as you want to avoid suggesting causes for a situation, you also want to steer clear of questions that propose or assume possible solutions. Consider the difference between these two questions:
  - *What do you want supervisors to do differently on the job after attending this workshop?*
  - *What do you want supervisors to do differently on the job?*

  Clearly the first question assumes there will be some type of training solution; the second question makes no such assumption.
- Focused. Each question needs to focus on one specific element – such as a Business SHOULD or a Performance IS. This is how you learn what is known and unknown about the situation. Again, two examples:
  - *What's going on?*
  - *What actions do your most successful operators use to avoid preventable accidents?*

  The first question will yield almost any response; the second question is designed to obtain specific performance information. It is the higher yield question.

2. Using a Compelling Logic When Asking Questions

Asking powerful questions is important, but insufficient, to a reframing discussion. You need to ask questions that follow a compelling logic path. This means you begin by starting with the client's mindset. Recall the example of the client who wants to offer some type of team building experience to address role conflict? Imagine this client's reaction if the first question asked was, "*What are your business goals* *for the coming year?"* The response is likely to be "*Huh????"* There is no connection – or logic – between the request and this question.

The alternative approach is to begin by acknowledging the request for a team building experience. Then you segway to a discussion about performance by asking, *"What have you observed occur within your teams that leads you to the conclusion they would benefit from a team building experience?"* The question includes the request but moves away from the solution and onto a discussion of on-the-job performance. Once you have obtained information about performance as it should be, as it is and the causes for any gap, you can move to a discussion about the business. An example could be *"Once your teams are performing as you have described, how will that performance benefit your business results?"* You want to discuss business results, but need to do so in a manner that is logical to the client.

Summary

Reframing is a questioning approach that performance consultants use when a client comes with a solution in mind. In a reframing discussion, the focus is on the results the client seeks rather than on the solution the client is requesting. The goal is not to solve the problem but clarify what is known, and unknown, about the problem and determine the optimal next steps.

Performance consultants focus on results - not on solutions. Mastering the reframing process, by asking powerful questions using a compelling logic, is an integral tool consultants use to achieve this focus.

Information on Authors of *Performance Consulting: Third Edition*
Jim and Dana Robinson are recognized thought leaders in the areas of performance consulting, strategic partnering and human performance improvement. They have coauthored seven books focused on these areas. ***Jack and Patti Phillips*** are founders and leaders of the firm ROI Institute, the leading source of ROI capability building. They have authored more than 75 books and consult globally with clients who implement their ROI Methodology. ***Dick Handshaw*** is chairman of Handshaw, Inc., a firm he founded in 1985. This firm is a leader in instructional design and performance consulting.