

A Leisurely Approach to Performance

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The extraordinary athletic triumphs I witnessed during the last Olympics triggered in me reflections about human performance. Medalists' accomplishments often appeared effortless, leading to reminiscences of conversations with the late Thomas Gilbert, generally considered the father of Human Performance Technology, and the "Leisurely Theorems" he espoused in his classic *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance* (1978; 1996). Provocative and profound, they offer wisdom and guidance to performance professionals. They also resonate well with the incredible Olympic performances I had observed.

First Leisurely Theorem

Paraphrasing Gilbert, worthy performance is a function of the ratio of valuable accomplishment to costly behavior. Value is derived from *accomplishment* not *behavior* (which is always a cost). Working hard and long, being knowledgeable and highly motivated without, minimally, equal accomplishment, is, in Gilbert's terms, *unworthy performance*. The focus, as Peter Drucker has suggested, must be on doing the right thing. Doing things right is a waste of time, money, effort or any other resources if you do not achieve valued results.

In the workplace, we expend far more energy on behaviors – how people should do things – than on valued accomplishments – the goals to be achieved. Compliance training (pure behavior), for example, consumes considerable resources and time. Questionable is whether or not this achieves the desired ends of regulatory agencies (e.g. clean air; pure drugs; reduced injuries).

Not long ago, I reviewed a multi-million dollar project aimed at getting automobile dealership sales agents to conduct 24-point walk-arounds of three new car models. The purpose: to increase sales of these vehicles. Mystery shoppers rated sales personnel on adherence to the 24-point presentation. Sales consultants and their dealerships received generous rewards for high scores. Our analysis of the data on thousands of salespersons unequivocally showed no significant correlation between mystery shop scores (compliance to the official walk-around) and sales of the targeted vehicles. Investment in walk-around behavior, which company experts had determined sold vehicles, yielded no return. What we did, however, is that sales of the three models strongly correlated with sales of all models. In other words, salespersons who sold lots of cars, regardless of model, also sold lots of the three vehicles.

When we watch people "behaving," whether in sports or in the workplace, they all seem to be acting very much alike. Yet when we examine accomplishments, we note vast differences. Gilbert's first leisurely theorem exhorts us not to focus on behavior. Begin

with accomplishment and work backwards. Essentially Theorem One suggests that our attention should be on performers who do the least behavior while achieving the highest results.

Second Leisurely Theorem

Improving performance requires a standard of ideal accomplishment. A first postulate is that anything, from animal training to Zen meditation, can be measured. We require careful observation, analysis and consensus to establish the ideal. Next, we identify exemplary performers (those achieving measured accomplishment closest to the ideal). Finally, we compare their accomplishments with average performance. This provides us with a measure of the potential for improved performance or PIP. Summarizing Gilbert's second leisurely theorem, the potential for improved performance is the ratio of the worth of exemplary performance to that of typical performance ($PIP = W_{ex}/W_t$). The greater the PIP, the greater the potential for improved performance for an entire group. A PIP of 2.0, for example, means that the average performers can potentially double their valued accomplishments. Key is to discover how exemplary performers achieve consistently superior results. Amazingly, we learn that star performers not only do things better, they do it with less effort! Gilbert presses us to pinpoint the few, essential factors that lead to success and to focus on these as we drive down the PIP and dramatically increase valued accomplishment.

Third Leisurely Theorem

For Gilbert, deficiencies in accomplishments are ultimately caused by management system weaknesses. "For want of a nail, a kingdom was lost." How performers are selected, integrated into the work environment, provided with processes, tools and resources and also how they are managed have enormous impact on their performances. These are the responsibilities of the management system. By selecting performers best suited for the job, easing constraints placed on them and providing the best conditions and resources to accomplish the job, wasted effort is reduced as valued accomplishment soars.

Less is More

Olympic athletes and workplace performers share a common goal: achieve the highest accomplishment possible. The rewards for this are career success and recognition. Gilbert's Leisurely Theorems suggest that the path to achieve this may be more leisurely, with respect to behavioral effort, than most imagine.