

IN PERSON
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Training Ain't Performance

Interview with Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps

by George Hall

In *Training Ain't Performance*, the companion book to the best-selling *Telling Ain't Training*, performance improvement experts Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps not only introduce key performance concepts including why training is often not the only answer, but also illustrate how to realistically transition from a "training order-taker to a performance consultant". In addition to this practical advice, the book contains a wealth of performance interventions to help with the day-to-day work of a performance consultant, including how to calculate ROI for various performance interventions.

In this interview, Stolovitch and Keeps share their views on:

- ROI Analysis
- Best Practices
- HPI Theory & Practice
- Leaders and Pioneers in the Field
- Professional Intuition

George Hall (GH): In your book you comment, "In the workplace, despite the explicit emphasis on "bottom-line results", there is still an enormous confusion between behaviors—or activities—and valued accomplishments, between knowing and achieving, and between training and performance. Why all of the confusion? What impact does this have? What do you recommend?"

Harold Stolovitch (HS): All too often, training programs aren't designed to deliver measurable bottom-line results. This situation is perpetuated by three primary dynamics: (1) the training groups' expectations for themselves aren't focused on the bottom line (2) senior management's expectations for training are generally not business-focused either, and (3) the types of metrics management currently uses to gauge the effectiveness of the training department are unsophisticated. For example, metrics like "filled seats" are often used to measure the contribution of the training department.



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Erica J. Keeps, M.Ed., CPT is a principal at HSA. Keeps was a corporate training director for two large American organizations and was a faculty member of the

Such metrics are false: they are inappropriate, imprecise, and do not capture the true value training professionals deliver to the company. What can training professionals do to demonstrate the value they really deliver to the company? It is our firm belief that the chief reason this situation occurs is very frequently our own fault: we haven't yet educated management sufficiently about the potential training has to measurably impact the bottom line. In short, we have to help management see the connection between performance interventions and solid, bottom-line results.

As professionals, it is *our* responsibility to educate management about *our* profession and the results we can deliver: management can and should demand of us rigorous, bottom-line performance. We recommend setting very specific performance goals for every single project that you do, which includes completing formal ROI studies both before creating an intervention and then again afterwards. Many people say that there is a mythology around ROI. We disagree: adding a robust ROI analysis to every project will drive needed changes in mind set and practice. The 'business case' for completing an ROI analysis is simple: you have to do it everywhere else in the organization—why not in training? Training professionals should anticipate that this will be required in the near future even if our clients and senior management are not currently asking for it now. By proactively providing this service, building a strong business case, and focusing on valued accomplishments and not activities, we can help everybody make that shift together.

GH: You stated, "Our performance improvement mantra is: Cause-conscious, not solution-focused". What does this mean in practice? How does it relate to the mantra in your best-selling book, *Telling Ain't Training*, which stated, 'Learner-centered, not content-based'?

Erica Keeps (EK): The purpose of each of the mantras used in the books is to provide a handle on which to hang a philosophy. You notice that the mantras not only say what 'should' be but also focus on what 'shouldn't' be. By using mantras, we are stressing the fact that too often learning and performance specialists see themselves as someone who implements a solution or buys the solution that their clients ask for. Our mantra, 'Cause-conscious, not solution-focused', cautions professionals to carefully consider the root causes before starting to look for the solution or accepting the solution that somebody else offers you. The mantra, 'Learner-centered, not content-based', stresses that the learner is the key to our work. This mantra is meant to highlight the fact that all too often trainers and those who design training are obsessed with the content and totally lose sight of the learner.

University of Michigan's Executive Education Center. Keeps and Stolovitch are co-editors of the award-winning Handbook of Human Performance Technology. They co-authored Training Ain't Training, ASTD's largest bestseller and co-authored Pfeiffer's Learning and Performance Toolkit Series.

*Interviewer **George Hall** teaches in the College of Business Administration at the University of Central Florida and the University of Phoenix. He is the ASTD Links In Practice Field Editor for Management Development. He can be reached at geohall@lycos.com.*

GH: Let's follow-up on that point. Why has there not been more of a focus on the learner?

EK: There has not been more of a focus on the learner for a number of reasons. Often times, the word 'training' is mistakenly used when what people are actually talking about is presentation. There is, of course, a world of difference between presenting (trying to transmit or transfer information) and training (trying to elicit some change in behavior). If you look at many of the 'train-the-trainer-type' books or workshops, for example, they focus on presentation. Presentation has so much to do with the content: everything down to the media support you should be using, how to stand, and so forth. The focus is on you, the instructor. In contrast, we suggest an approach that looks to transform the learner by focusing on the learner. In our workshop, for example, we videotape the practice training sessions that are going on and we aim the camera on the learners as much as we do on the instructor, so that we can all see what the learners are doing. Are they engaged? Are they involved? Are they applying what is being taught? Are they practicing what they are being taught? What kind of feedback are they getting, and how are they responding and reacting to it?

GH: "If you take the time to analyze the performance gap systematically, asking the right questions from the right sources, the suitable intervention or basket of interventions will surface naturally." What do you mean by 'surface naturally', and how does this happen? How can one cultivate this ability?

EK: Conducting a thorough, perceptive gap analysis is often a challenge. Once the root causes are correctly identified, however, the solutions become quite apparent. Why? There is a solution linked directly to each cause and the solutions surface naturally because of that direct linkage. For example, if you discover during your gap analysis that performers do not receive timely or specific feedback on their actions or their results, then it is pretty obvious that some form of feedback system is necessary. As to how you can develop this ability, we recommend that those new to the field use our decision matrix, which links the cause directly to recommended, appropriate performance intervention. We also have created an extensive tool kit, "Front-end Analysis and Return-on-Investment Toolkit", published by Pfeiffer (2004). People can use these tools to shore up essential but missing skills and knowledge. Over time, however, it will become natural to make these connections. In summary, the three words we use as our gap analysis mantra are: "practice, practice and practice".

GH: Can you mentor the type of professional maturity or patience needed to 'surface' the right interventions 'naturally'?

HS: Yes. When we run our seminars, we build these skills sets step-by-step. For example, we often ask our participants to identify the most common causes of lack of performance (lack of clarity and expectations) in their own work. We show them how they can help clarify expectations, and they say, "Oh, I can do that." We ask them if they can create job aids and again they say, "Oh, I can do that." We show them how to design a feedback system and they say, "Oh is that

all there is to it?" We actually walk them through each of these types of interventions with appropriate design principles and then have them develop examples of these. Flush with success, they remark, "Oh, is that all? What was the big deal?"

EK: We train our seminar participants to become brokers to other specialists and experts while retaining an integrated, holistic perspective. If they lack expertise in ergonomics, for example, then they should not take on such projects alone. They should get the right person in once they identify the cause of the problem. We teach our seminar participants to avoid looking for single point solutions to complex performance issues. Most problems have neither a single cause nor a single solution. When we find several things wrong or that several factors are contributing to the gap between desired and actual, we often become uneasy, professionally speaking. To date, training has been a wonderful, easy fallback intervention because we know it well and it offers the comfort of familiarity. But, it might not be appropriate, and it certainly isn't going to be sufficient.

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Training Ain't Performance (Part 2 of a two part series) *Interview with Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps* by George Hall

In *Training Ain't Performance*, the companion book to the best-selling *Telling Ain't Training*, performance improvement experts Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps not only introduce key performance concepts including why training is often not the only answer, but also illustrate how to realistically transition from a "training order-taker to a performance consultant." In addition to this practical advice, the book contains a wealth of performance interventions to help with the day-to-day work of a performance consultant, including how to calculate ROI for various performance interventions.

Here's part 2 of George Hall's interview with them about the new book.

GH: Can you briefly trace the historical development of HPI theory and practice from its origins to state-of-the art? What is your greatest hope for the field? What is your greatest fear?

HS: I just finished a chapter to a book, which will be published shortly, on the history and evolution of the field. As demands for workers to perform more complex tasks increased, particularly in the second half of the 20th century, the need for training grew. The training movement evolved in terms of methodology, markets, perspectives, and new ways of working. The work setting became a place where people could experience personal growth. It was the age of Carl Rogers, Elton Mayo, and many others. However, a number of professionals, people such as Joe Harless, Tom Gilbert, and Gary Rummler found that even though workers were well-trained, workplace performance did not necessarily improve. Consequently, this insight led to more systemic ways of analyzing work, the workplace, and the worker in order to identify the causes of discrepancies between actual and desired performance.

It is interesting that the growth of the human performance technology industry, what we now call performance improvement, paralleled the growth of the ecology movement. At its very core, HPT is an ecological approach that focuses on the total system.

To better understand the historical origins of the state-of-the-art, one



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should be familiar with a few key publications. In the early 1960's, articles by Thomas Gilbert created a stir and interest in a small coterie of people. While these articles were not enough to trigger a revolution in thinking, they certainly were able to inspire. Robert Mager's and Peter Pipe's book on analyzing performance problems is significant, as is Gilbert's *Human Competence*, published in 1978 and reissued in 1996. Rummier & Brache's book (1995), *Improving Human Performance: Managing the White Space in the Organizational Chart*, are also important publications. I think, with both humility and pride, that the two editions of our *The Handbook of Human Performance Technology*, containing the thoughts and insights of many leaders in the field in 1992 and 1999, contributed strongly to the development of HPI theory and practice.

In summary, it is both remarkable and wonderful that today there is a huge number of publications on performance improvement. There are also various professional organizations, chief among them ASTD and ISPI, that have truly embraced HPI. Dana Robinson and I, for example, run a special program on performance consulting at the training conferences. ASTD has a wide array of HPI courses, as does ISPI. Universities offer advanced degrees and courses in HPT. Naturally, we love this trend, and we laud those involved in the growth of the field. Our greatest desire is for organizations to transform training groups into something else. We'd like to eliminate training groups per se and see learning and performance support organizations arise, like a phoenix, from those ashes. Our worst fear, however, is that like so many other valuable initiatives, uninformed enthusiasts or exploiters of the latest money-making idea will seize control of this needed transformation, and as a result of their ineffective performance, cause abandonment of HPI.

GH: How many performance consultants are practicing today? Who are today's pioneers? Where do you see the profession in five years? Ten years?

HS: Although I can't state the precise number of practicing performance consultants, the profession is certainly growing by leaps and bounds. In the next five-to-ten years, I imagine that it will grow by several orders of magnitude due to the incredible growth in the number of publications in the field, the number of people who are active in it, and the caliber of the key people shaping the field. We can, in fact, divide today's pioneers into three general groups: (1) long-time pioneers who have been around for decades like Gary Rummier, Donald Tosti, and Robert Mager, to name a few, (2) more recent pioneers who entered the field later but have had a significant impact like Dana and Jim Robinson, and (3) emerging pioneers who are making their names strongly heard in the field like Brenda Sugrue and Saul Carliner.

EK: No one field really 'owns' performance. Each discipline sort of grabs its piece of a larger pie. Consequently, in the future, we predict that there will be a fusion, a coming together of specialties that are all moving in this direction: organizational effectiveness, organizational development and HRD to name a few.

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HS: In February, for example, Dana and Jim Robinson have a book coming out that will focus on how the human resource professional can act as a strategic business partner. They are expanding the scope of HPI.

EK: This book is not the Robinson's first effort to promote a fusion of perspectives. Are you familiar with the book, *Zap the Gaps?* Dana and Jim wrote it with Ken Blanchard a few years ago. The Robinson's book is forward-thinking because it makes performance consulting gap analysis techniques and knowledge accessible to line management. If line managers become more performance sensitive, they, too, will be better business partners. In the next five-to-ten years, the performance improvement field will likely expand in two additional ways by: (1) introducing key performance improvement concepts to a larger, more diverse audience, and (2) making management savvier about performance consulting practices.

HS: Although we predict a merging and fusion of related disciplines, there will always be a distinct place for the performance consultant. There will always be professionals who can do the job well and, in fact, practice professionally for a living. Similarly, there will always be those who, among other things they do, will be involved with performance improvement issues. There are, for example, certain core responsibilities that all managers have. Like training and coaching, performance is a discipline that every manager needs to possess to some degree. That being said, of course, there will be a distinct and emerging place for the performance consultant.

GH: In your book, you say, "There is a huge difference between 'identifying' and 'selecting' interventions". What criteria do top practitioners apply to make the final selection?

EK: To make the final selection between interventions, we suggest that you first identify appropriate solutions and then verify that they are accurate. Each of the potential interventions should be evaluated against a set of the specified criteria and everything should be treated as a hypothesis that has to be confirmed. Once this checking process is complete, you can make your final selection, wade through them, and determine if any automatically drop out because they are simply inappropriate to the situation. During this phase, new interventions may surface; however, they often are discovered to be unacceptable because they may be too expensive, there is insufficient time to do what may be required, or it doesn't really suit our culture. The verification process we recommend helps you select the most appropriate intervention given the complexity of a broad range of variables. Keep in mind that you are not on a 'hunt' for a single intervention. On the contrary, most performance gaps or opportunities require a basket of interventions and the idea here is to weed out those that are less desirable or unworkable. The tools in *Training Ain't Performance*, for example, can assist professionals in making the best selection decisions. We have also created a toolkit, "Front-End Analysis and Return-on-Investment," published by Pfeiffer (2004) to illustrate

our methodology in action.

HS: Over time, of course, professional intuition matures. You build a rich repertoire of nuanced interventions. But, it is just that—a repertoire, a library. You still have to make the correct diagnosis. In this regard, a performance consultant is like a physician or other medical professional that must diagnose and recommend treatment. Although the physician may make the correct diagnosis, he or she must then prescribe treatment interventions based on the individual's needs. The prescription will vary by circumstance or preference. For example, does the person have the time for it? Does the person have the money? What kind of genetic background does he/she have? Our books, tools and courses are all designed to develop professional intuition, build your repertoire, and refine the diagnosis and intervention selection process. In the final analysis, you must be data-driven and work closely with your clients to make the optimal decisions. We advise the following caveat: listen to your intuition but let the data talk.

GH: Let's expand on that point. What characteristics best describe an outstanding performance consultant?

EK: I am happy to focus on ideal characteristics because we often get hung up on the skills and overlook the characteristics or blend characteristics and skills together. We feel that outstanding consultants are diplomatic, assertive, certainly analytic, and they tend to be highly investigative and data-driven. These are all attributes; none of them are skills. They are also attuned to the organization's true mission and its goals. They are always striving to be professionally competent, to deliver results, not activities. Finally, the ideal performance consultant is one who speaks to people with authority, in plain language, and connects to them with data.

HS: Performance consultants focus on partnering. The Robinsons, for example, call their consulting company, Partners in Change, to underscore their commitment to collaboration and partnering. Integrity, of course, is also an essential attribute of any performance consultant. One of the tragedies that I've found are people, who have had the same training that we've had and who should know better, consulting in ways that no longer serve their client's best interests. They no longer have any value to add because they kowtow to authority. You can't do that. Performance consultants are attuned to the organization's true mission and its goals and should offer their services accordingly.

GH: The guiding principles of your book include (1) Don't let training become the default intervention for improving performance in your environment, (2) Single solutions rarely, if ever, work with complex performance problems, (3) Start with environmental factors before "fixing" the performers, and (4) Show key stakeholders the money. What inspired you to adopt these as your guiding principles?

HS: Experience and research on learning and performance demonstrate the low impact of short-term training on long-term performance. In other words, training doesn't stick; it doesn't work, not if it is left all to itself. Over the years, our research and practice have demonstrated the efficacy of interventions based on HPI. Underpinning these guiding principles, however, are values. I look at someone like Erica, whom I admired long before she and I worked together or got married, and see dedication. She has a special passion for developing people, growing people, and helping them to perform in ways that they and their organizations value. If you don't have that essential quality, then this isn't the job for you.

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