Guaranteeing Performance Improvement

A Purely Practical Positive Approach

Richard F. Gerson, Ph.D.
Dedication

To my wife, Robbie, and my sons, Michael and Mitchell, who keep me focused on my quest to help everyone achieve and repeat that “perfect performance,” and to all my clients and colleagues who have improved their performances through our work together.
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Acknowledgments

It is definitely a cliché to say that no book is ever written solely by the author. And this book is no exception. Let me begin by thanking the thousands of clients and hundreds of thousands of seminar and workshop attendees over the years who allowed me to use the principles and tactics in this book to help them improve their performances. Without their participation in the “live laboratory,” nothing in this book would be possible.

I must acknowledge the powerful contribution of my good friend and colleague, Dr. Roger Kaufman. Roger and I have worked together these past several years on various projects, and his strict adherence to scientific rigor has helped me revise my thinking and elevate my performance at work, in my writings, and in my relationships with people. His contribution to this book, as an editor and a friend making helpful suggestions, has been enormous. My only regret is that we did not know each other 30 years ago when we were both at Florida State University. If we did, we could have combined our talents back then and would have already changed the world. Instead, we started a little late, but we are making headway. Roger, thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you’ve done, do, and will do. I appreciate it more than you know.

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The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) has been very gracious in publishing many of my articles in their Performance Improvement Journal (PIJ) and allowing
me to speak on some of the topics in this book at their professional conferences. These platforms have expanded my audience and have therefore enabled more people to become familiar with the “softer side” of performance improvement that I promote. Some of the material in this book is taken from my previously published PIJ articles, and I want to thank ISPI for the opportunity to provide the information again.

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Introduction

Just about everyone wants to get better at what they do. And very few people are totally satisfied with where they are at doing what they are doing at the level they are doing it at. Just think about yourself and people you know. Whatever you have achieved, you probably think or believe there is something more or better out there for you; you just have to figure out how to get there. The science of Human Performance Technology (HPT) and Performance Improvement can guide you from a theoretical perspective. However, most people don’t have the time or the inclination to read, understand, and try to apply the theories of the research community. They want an approach to performance improvement that has been tested, will work, and will virtually guarantee them success. Well, two out of three “ain’t bad”: You can get the first two most of the time, but not the third.

Current approaches to performance improvement in business and in a person’s personal life usually focus on a few typical factors. These include competency models covering job descriptions and standards of performance, performance appraisals identifying areas of weakness accompanied by feedback and coaching, some basic skills or remedial training, revisions to an instructional design system, and possibly some work redesign. The problem is that, for all the research and theory that supports their use in controlled or experimental situations, these approaches have had only a minimal positive effect on improving performance in the workplace. One possible reason for this is that people don’t readily and accurately apply what is known from the research. This could be one factor in why many performance improvement efforts yield less than stellar results.

The key to successful performance improvement—turning ordinary performers into extraordinary performers—does not lie in the development of the next great competency model, HPT intervention, or instructional design model. It also does not lie in the next great research project or theory of human performance. It rests solely on the shoulders of a human development mastery model. More specifically, it rests within the performer
and within a positive approach toward that performer. By this I mean the approach must consider the whole performer, not just the job-related or organizational development competencies, or the system-wide interventions that many people and companies apply. This new approach to performance improvement and human performance technology requires a focus on the psychobehavioral characteristics of the person in addition to their job-related skills.

These include:

- Individual behavioral preferences and tendencies, which are often based on past experiences
- Motivational and emotional styles and tendencies
- Mental tactics related to each performance (before, during, and after the performance)
- Mental and behavioral training techniques
- How they handle and adapt to stress and performance pressure

All the above factors can be assessed and quantified so that the performer always knows exactly where she stands. The old adage *what gets measured gets improved* applies here. After all, measurement is important for improvement. And when a performer knows that her performance will be measured, her motivation to succeed usually increases. Plus, you can develop performance improvement programs that mold intrinsic patterns and preferences to best fit the performer and the job, or you can place the performer in a performance (job, sports, school) situation where she will excel. And, when you combine this approach with the current research-based and proven theoretical models, you get an even more powerful and practical performance improvement program.

But, the success of any performance improvement program must come from within the performer first, including that person’s readiness and motivation to perform.

There is another way to help performers reach the top and to guarantee performance improvement in most, if not all, situations. You hear a lot of different phrases such as “Keep
your eye on the prize” or “Begin with the end in mind.” One that I personally use a great deal is “Results matter.” In all cases, there is a focus on what has to be accomplished, and the performer is advised to focus on that objective. We are helped in this regard if we follow the recommendations of Kaufman, who proposes that an Ideal Vision, what he calls Mega, will be the guiding factor in perfect performance.¹ The Ideal Vision describes a world (situation, organization) where everyone is capable and self-reliant, no one controls anyone else, and we appropriately do what we have to do to achieve our shared objectives. The Mega concept is part of Kaufman’s Organizational Elements Model, where Mega is the ultimate achievement that benefits society. The other aspects of his model pertain to individuals and organizations to help them achieve perfect performance also.²

These approaches can be stretched even further by using techniques borrowed from sports psychology and the mental training of top-level athletes. This requires focus on the overall performance objective and the positives that relate to that performance: strengths, talents, and successes. We can analyze the psychobehavioral and motivational profile and strategies of a top performer, and then develop individualized mental and “physical” training programs to close the gaps between the acknowledged extraordinary performer and the average or ordinary performer. The result is an extremely effective and easy-to-follow way to turn ordinary performers into extraordinary performers.

So we can guarantee performance improvement, not through the use of theoretical models and research, but through performer analysis, performance analysis, and customized psychobehavioral training programs geared to each individual performer. We further guarantee this improvement through a more positive approach to the entire process. And the hidden key is that, with our eye on the prize, this entire approach is a more practical application of proven research.
The Requirement for This Book

There is a definite requirement for this book. A huge gap currently exists in the field between research, theory, and application. Most of the books and articles published in this area focus on the latest research and practice results of a “human performance technology” project, a weakness improvement model, or a training intervention. Other books and articles talk about how to theoretically best apply other models to the performance arena, and you will find several of these in the endnotes for each chapter.

Yet, there are few books that focus on the practical application of performance improvement/enhancement/psychology to the real world, or operational world, where we all live. They give hints on what to do, some talk a little about how to do it, but few focus on a purely practical approach to performance improvement. And, very few of those theoreticians or authors would likely go out on a limb to suggest they can guarantee performance improvement.

A review of articles published by the two leading organizations in this field, the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), reveals that they are still primarily research or event based. The articles discuss how someone conducted an experiment to support the use of a model or they talk about the result of an intervention that worked. Some of the articles also talk about the process of an intervention, but the real-world applicability, as compared to the theoretical, is an isolated case.

What the industry (business, people) requires is a practical approach that gets guaranteed results. The question is really very simple, and it is answered by all my clients. When I work with them, what is it that they want and expect from me? They want RESULTS.

Do they really care about which theory I use or which approach/process I follow? No, they only care about my helping them achieve results. Do they care if the approach/model I use to help them is research based, statistically validated, and reliably measured? Not really, even though it helps if it is. They
only care that what I do for them gets them the results they want and expect in an appropriate time frame. Of course, it helps that all the work is based on proven theory from a variety of fields that has been re-dressed for practical application. That is the purpose of this book. That is what this book will do for you.

This book will equip you with how to develop performer-based improvement programs that generate positive results. Imagine if we can help 1,000 performers improve only 1 percent each month on their jobs (or in sports or school). What will this do for corporate productivity? Imagine if we can help people improve their personal relationships only 1 percent each year. What will this do for someone’s personal life? And if both types of improvement occur, how would society benefit from it all?4

Think about these benefits. When we know what we have to do and how to do it, and the how is related to how we normally behave and perform anyway, we will be more motivated to generate the performance improvement. And, when the improvement approach is based on a positive approach to getting better, we will be more inclined to work harder to achieve our desired results. The increased motivation will lead to increased effort on the part of the performer, resulting in the achievement of the desired result. When you take the performer into consideration in all improvement efforts, you can virtually guarantee an improvement will occur, regardless of the specific intervention.5

Benefits to the Reader

Here are some of the things readers will benefit from and/or learn by reading this book:

- How to use sports and performance psychology techniques to generate improvements
- Why individual performance patterns are important to performance improvement
• How motivation and performer psychology affect improvement
• How emotional intelligence relates to performance improvement
• Why a focus on the positives leads to performance improvement
• How stress can benefit performance and how stress management leads to performance improvement

Everybody wants to get better at what they do, or at least they should want to get better. The problem is that not everyone knows exactly how to do this—achieve measurable and sustainable performance improvements. This book will guide people and organizations to achieve those desired results by helping them focus on a positive approach to “what makes the performer tick,” which then gives everyone the ability to guarantee performance improvement.

Endnotes

1. Roger Kaufman talks extensively on how all that we do, use, and produce must ultimately benefit society, and that anything less is actually thinking too small. He suggests that one of the ways to guarantee performance improvement is to start with the “ultimate end in mind,” which he calls the Ideal Vision, or Mega. For more, see his new book, Change, Choices, and Consequences: A Guide to Mega Thinking and Planning (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 2006).

2. Again, Kaufman has written extensively on this concept for close to 40 years now. Others are starting to come around to this Mega concept of thinking and planning. See his book, Mega Planning (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006). He has also made these concepts available to the general public in another book, 30 Seconds that Can Change Your Life (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 2006).


5. I have written about this in several articles that have appeared in the ISPI journal, Performance Improvement. You can go to www.ispi.org and search the journal archives under my name for these articles. I have also covered the concept extensively in my book Achieving High Performance: A Research-Based Practical Approach (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 2006).