A Universal Performance Model for Human Performance Technology--The Time Has Come

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Note: This article is an excerpt of the focal article that will appear in Performance Improvement. A Call for Papers in this issue invites readers to submit an article or commentary in response to the perspective presented here.

In the September 2010 issue of Performance Improvement, Danny Langdon issued a provocative challenge to readers. He stated that if we want human performance technology (HPT) to become a true science, we must adopt a universal model of performance as the cornerstone of our technology. A commonly understood and applied model that works in any organization would both increase our ability to understand and improve performance and differentiate us from the many other groups that claim to improve performance.

Danny presented his Language of Work model (LOW) as a candidate for this universal model. He invited us--the members of the International Society for Performance Improvement--to put our stake in the ground regarding our support for a standard performance model and either accept LOW as the definitive model or recommend the adoption of another model. In this article I accept that challenge. The purpose of this article is to explain why we need a universal performance model and why the LOW model should be our official model, and also to encourage further dialog among HPT practitioners and academics on this critical subject. To obtain a copy of Danny Langdon's article, Mind the Performance, contact publications@ispi.org

Need for a Universal Model of Performance

Shared Understanding. At the core of any science and profession is a shared understanding of key concepts, principles, and theories and how they are applied in practice through models and methods. We who work in HPT lack this shared understanding. We cannot agree on the most foundational concepts of our discipline--what performance is and how it can be improved. We have produced a large number and variety of performance models and they continue to proliferate. Every year new performance models are introduced, many offering only revisions of terminology or emphasis to existing models. Most models share common elements but they are different enough to make it difficult to communicate clearly with each other and our clients about performance.

Credibility. A second reason for adopting a uniform model of performance is the credibility it brings to the profession. HPT currently has a wide array of performance models with a confusing range of terms and elements. How can we expect our clients and potential clients to place their confidence in us when we cannot agree on what performance is and how to effectively modify it? Standard models and uniform processes and tools bring both comfort and validation to management. They trust what is familiar to them and what they have seen successfully used in other organizations.

Investment in Time and Effort. As a profession and a professional society, we have invested an enormous amount of time and effort in developing performance models. Through the efforts of our best thinkers, HPT models have now evolved to a sophisticated state. We have several solid models of performance that are grounded in science and have been shown to be effective frameworks for improving performance. Now it is time to stop developing new models and time to start focusing our efforts on our core mission of improving performance.

Conclusion

The time has come for ISPI to adopt a single universal model of performance. We need to both move forward in claiming HPT as a science and profession and develop among members a shared understanding of performance and how to improve it. We need to select a model and devote our efforts to effectively applying it, building our body of research and documenting successful improvement efforts.
I recommend that Danny Langdon’s Language of Work Model be adopted by ISPI as the universal model of
performance for the HPT profession. There are several strong reasons for adopting LOW as our common model:

1. LOW presents a comprehensive model of performance that can be applied in all work environments.
2. It is easy to learn and use by managers and their staffs.
3. LOW focuses on the execution of work.
4. It has a documented history of successful use in organizations.

About the Author
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