

Avoiding Performance Technology Myopia: Using All the Available Levers to Help an Organization Change

by Joseph J. Durzo, CPT, PhD

Sitting at his desk, Rick sipped his coffee and wondered, “Why wasn’t this project a real success? We did a needs assessment. We knew what the gaps in performance were and we understood the performers’ issues. We had the right measures in place. The pilot project was well received and it showed good results but we just could not get the organization to implement the solution everywhere. What went wrong?”

Just how did Rick’s project go “off the rails”? What could have been done to prevent it? If the solution was so good, why wasn’t it adopted everywhere? Too many times a similar lament can be heard wherever human performance technology (HPT) consultants gather. Many of us have had the experience of having a seemingly worthy project die a premature death. Why do HPT projects fail?

Large-scale performance interventions carry high risk and often fail; some say as many as 70% fail. The reasons for failure usually have more to do with engaging and working with the sociopolitical system and human dynamics than with doing a good job of planning, analysis, and design. As performance technologists we tend to focus on the arts of analysis and design because these are our special expertise. (Svenson, 2004, p. 28)

My own experience agrees with Svenson’s assertion about the key reasons that many performance technology projects do not succeed. For more than 25 years I have worked as an external or internal consultant on a large number of projects across a wide range of settings, from large corporations to small companies, non-profit organizations, universities, and hospitals. The HPT consultants with whom I have worked exemplify a broad set of skills and approaches to diagnosing and improving individual and organizational performance. We are a very results-oriented group of practitioners. Sometimes, though, results aren’t enough to produce wide-scale organizational change, and we have to look beyond the projects themselves to explain what happened to prevent success.

As Svenson points out, our strengths as practitioners usually lie more in the “traditional” performance engineering skills of analysis and design than in the softer disciplines of organizational dynamics and group process. Yet the critical levers for change often lie in these areas outside our “strike zone.” The suggestions in this article are based on lessons learned from years of acting, reflecting, and making adjustments to achieve better results—lessons from what worked and from mistakes that I learned not to repeat.

It is easy to get buried in the details and become so focused on the tasks of our work that we forget to pay enough attention to the manner in which those tasks are being accomplished. This is what I mean by performance technology myopia: focusing primarily on the *tasks* of the work and not enough on the *process* by which the work is getting done. By process I mean the range of activities focused on organizational dynamics and team behavior. To achieve 20/20 consulting vision we have to focus not just on the work, but on relationships with clients, team functioning, organizational politics, implementation issues and so on.

Task or Process Focus?

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship of task and process orientation that has been discussed widely in organizational development circles. The discussion of task versus process applies to project teams but also can apply to individual HPT consultants. Obviously a team that exhibits both insufficient task and process focus (Box 1) is headed for disaster. No more needs to be said about Box 1, since the problems are obvious. A more subtle but serious problem results from focusing primarily on process and not enough on tasks (Box 2). Teams that find themselves in this box do not produce the desired results because they spend a disproportionate amount of time and energy discussing how to go about doing the work, and not enough actually doing it. Teams in this box can be said to suffer from *process* myopia, resulting from an unproductive focus on process and not enough focus on tasks and results.

For many consultants, having a high task focus and insufficient process focus (Box 3) is a problem that they cannot see because it is in their blind spot. They do not know what

they do not know. Teams working in this mode are “heads down,” working diligently on project tasks and not spending enough time discussing how effectively they are getting their work done, how well they are interacting with the clients, or how well the team functions. If you are working in Box 3, you may be focused on the quality of the needs assessment, proper benchmarking techniques, relevant use of job aids, and measurement of performance results, while overlooking factors that will, in the end, determine how well the project succeeds. The goal for any consultant or team is to have a strong balance of task and process focus—the *what* and the *how*.

A glance at the checklist for article submission to *Performance Improvement* journal includes more than 60 categories, only three or four of which are related to organizational or individual dynamics. A review of schedules from prior International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) conferences shows that we have a great many task-oriented sessions from which to choose but far fewer process-oriented sessions. We have no shortage of great ideas about how to do the tasks themselves (better needs assessments, improved analysis methods, more focused interventions, and so on). As a field, we can benefit from a more inclusive world view that actively seeks out information about process-related skills.

There are four levers for success of large-scale projects that performance technologists may want to pay attention to in order to increase the process focus of their efforts:

- **Lever One:** Maximizing personal effectiveness
- **Lever Two:** Ensuring team effectiveness
- **Lever Three:** Managing expectations and communication
- **Lever Four:** Ensuring client ownership of procedures and results

Lever One: Maximizing Personal Effectiveness

One important determinant of whether a large-scale project will succeed is the quality of an HPT consultant’s personal effectiveness in building relationships with sponsors and stakeholders in client organizations. I once led a team on which one of the team members loved to debate and argue. It was almost recreational for him, though the client did not see it that way. His need to dominate the discussion and refute points made by the client annoyed the client’s team members to the point where they could no longer hear his good ideas.

Rather than follow Steven Covey’s fifth habit—“Seek first to understand; then be understood” (Covey, 2004, p. 235)—he often appeared to work in the opposite manner. He wanted to be understood first. What the clients saw was a person more interested in his ideas than theirs. That was certainly not what he intended, but it was what the clients felt. As a result, the good work we were doing on the project’s key tasks was nearly overshadowed by this individual’s blindness to the

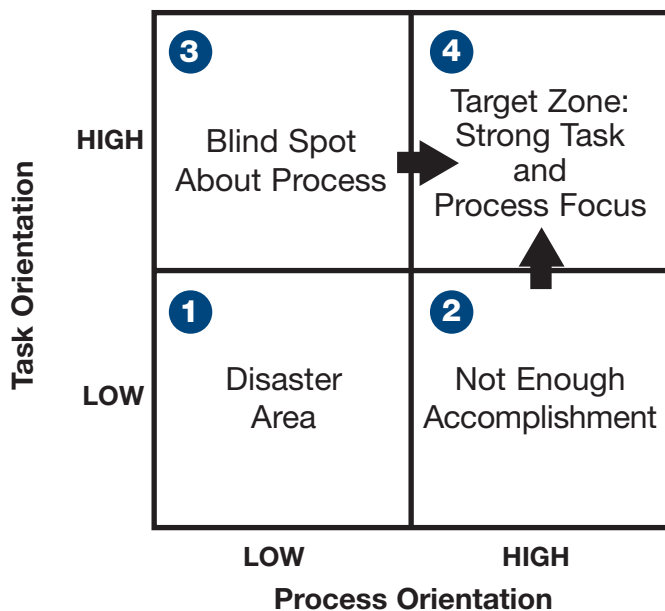


Figure 1. Task and Process Orientation.

effect his behavior had. His technical and business ideas were strong. On the task portion of our work he was very successful. On the process part of the work, however, he became increasingly ineffective. We were doing a good job on the tasks, but we were failing on the interpersonal part of our job.

You Are the Intervention

Our effectiveness in working with clients depends not just on our tools, methods, approaches, and techniques but also on ourselves as individuals. If consultants do not understand themselves well enough in terms of how they interact with individuals and groups, they may get in their own way when working with clients. Whether working as internal or external consultants, whenever we interact with a client organization it is important to realize that we, ourselves, are part of the intervention. In his excellent book *Flawless Consulting*, Peter Block describes the importance to consultants of understanding their own impact on the client situation:

Many people learning consulting skills look for techniques and procedural ways to be more effective as consultants. But there are special demands of the consulting role that transcend any specific methods we might employ and that contribute to our effectiveness no matter what our technical expertise. A unique and beguiling aspect of doing consulting is that *your own self is involved in the process* [emphasis added] to a much greater extent than if you were applying your expertise in some other way. Your own reactions to a client, your own feelings during discussions, your own ability to solicit feedback from the client—all are important dimensions to consultation. (Block, 2000, p. 13)

Our mindset when working with a client tends to determine our interpretation of and responses to situations. Hanley Brite explains that “we live in a world of untested beliefs and assumptions. We observe a situation and attach meaning to what we see and take action—adopting our interpretation of the situation as the truth” (Brite, 2004, p. 8). The filters through which we see situations affect both our understanding of the situations and our response to them. There are many perceptual traps that may cloud an accurate understanding of the organizational or human dynamics surrounding the project: “need to please or impress; need to refute; need to dominate; need to accommodate; need to hide” (Brite, 2004, p. 9).

The “Soft Stuff” Is Not Easy

Imagine the following situation. HPT consultants Susan and Jim were in a meeting with a group of client team members. The client team, though far less experienced than Susan and Jim, ignored their recommendations about key issues and dismissed their concerns about important obstacles they felt the project was facing. To keep things moving forward Susan and Jim swallowed their pride and remained calm.

They decided that they could come back to these topics another time. They chose not to deal overtly with how they were feeling during the meeting, but to try later to address the substance of their concerns.

After the meeting Susan expressed frustration to Jim about the meeting, saying, “I haven’t felt that marginalized in a long time. It’s as though my 20 years of experience meant nothing to them. Why did they hire us if they don’t respect our opinions? You know, Jim, I’m really worried that if the project has difficulties a month from now, you and I will get the blame for it.” Susan and Jim did a good job of keeping their anger in check during the meeting, but overall did they serve the project well?

Their responses during the meeting (ignore their feelings and come back to substance later) were not “authentic,” meaning that they did not put into words what they were feeling (Block, 2000, p. 37). For most of us, it is easier to deal with the task issues (project obstacles, design issues) than to discuss feelings and concerns with the clients. Anger, hurt, other similar emotions are difficult to discuss. In a consulting situation (internal or external), being able to tell the truth as you understand it is very valuable, though being authentic in that manner is not easy to do well. Authentic reactions when done with skill and finesse can pay high dividends by establishing a healthy dialog among team members and with clients (Bancroft, 1992; Block, 2000). Doing this poorly, however, can lead to even more difficult organizational situations.

As experienced HPT consultants, Susan and Jim knew a great deal about the task side of the business. For some reason, they didn’t feel comfortable being authentic with their client. A performance analysis could help to identify whether their reluctance was due to issues about knowledge, skill, motivation, consequences, or some other factor. Whatever the reason, they chose not to deal with the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of the meeting. So what was the risk of not addressing their feelings? Susan already hinted at one risk: Future difficulties will result in Susan and Jim getting the blame. The larger issue is that this project may be headed for an “organizational iceberg” that could have been avoided.

Recommendations for Personal Effectiveness

- Be rigorous in determining what your blind spots are; attend personal development workshops and seek feedback.
- Acknowledge your feelings in work situations and respond carefully in an authentic manner.
- Consider using third parties to observe you and your team in action and to interview clients to see how they perceive you and your team.
- Add organizational development specialists to large project teams to help with political dynamics and interpersonal relationship building.

- Approach personal effectiveness issues with the same rigor that you would use for “core” performance technology tasks such as needs assessment, gap analysis, intervention design, and measurement of results.

Lever Two: Ensuring Team Effectiveness

Achievement-oriented team leaders may fall into the trap of spending more time managing the “hard” aspects of a project team’s work and too little time focusing on the “soft” elements such as team norms, conflict management and collaboration, ground rules, inclusion of new team members, and so on. High-performing teams do not get that way by accident. It takes purposeful focus on the underpinnings of team effectiveness to create teams that excel. Studying effective teams for lessons learned is a life’s work for many organizational development specialists, so it is not reasonable to expect all HPT consultants to develop that level of mastery. However, there are a few keys to success that ought to be in any consultant’s repertoire.

Team Alignment

Teams that share a common understanding of goals, purposes, work procedures, and time lines produce better results than teams that are confused about what they are doing or why they are doing it. This sounds so obvious that it *almost* goes without saying; however, my experience is that there are great many teams that are not clear about one or more of these fundamental aspects of their work. The larger the project, the more likely this is to occur, but even in small project teams it is highly valuable to be explicit about gaining alignment on the basics both at the beginning of the project and at key milestones during its life cycle. This clarity should encompass the combined client and consultant teams so that everyone is aligned around what you are doing, how you are doing it, and how the project fits into the goals of the organization.

Managing Conflict

Conflict among team members (or conflict with members of the client organization) is common at some point in most large projects. Individuals have different ways of dealing with conflict depending on their personal predispositions and the particular requirements of the situations in which they find themselves. To work more effectively with other team members and clients, it can be useful to help team members learn about the styles with which they handle conflict.

There are many ways in which to help individuals learn about their conflict-handling style. One common approach is the use of the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument. In use since the 1970s, this instrument is designed to assess an individual’s behavior in conflict situations. It measures the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness and results in five conflict-handling modes:

- **Competing:** High assertiveness and low cooperativeness
- **Avoiding:** Low assertiveness and low cooperativeness

- **Compromising:** Intermediate assertiveness and cooperativeness
- **Collaborating:** High assertiveness and high cooperativeness
- **Accommodating:** Low assertiveness and high cooperativeness

Individuals can, of course, use more than one mode at any given time, but they do have certain modes that they use more often than others (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, 2001). Whether a team uses the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument or another approach, it is very helpful to learn how to manage the inevitable conflicts in a productive way.

After Action Reviews

During the course of a post-project review session, my colleagues and I observed that we were good at diagnosing client problems and providing solutions, but that we appeared ragged and uncoordinated when we first got to a client’s site to begin an engagement. This made our clients a little nervous at the beginning of engagements because it violated their expectations. They thought that we should have been more “buttoned up,” and they were right. In addition, some of our associates also felt stressed during the early portions of engagements. In retrospect it became obvious that we had become myopic. We had been focused on the “real” work such as the designing information systems, diagnosing manufacturing procedures, and creating learning systems—not on understanding how our behavior was affecting our clients.

Our project review caused us to devote time and effort to finding out more about why some of our associates were so stressed during the early portions of engagements. We also explored the reasons why some of our clients became apprehensive during the early project activities. We set out to determine what we could learn about the startup process from our last dozen engagements. As a result of these discussions we redesigned our approach to beginning engagements. We took more time before going to our first client meeting to be sure that all team members understood everything about the project, that they all knew the goals, and that we had agreed on our operating plan for the project. We became buttoned up. But none of that would have happened if we had not taken time to look back at our practice and reflect on what we did right and what we did wrong.

The US Army has institutionalized reflection and review in a procedure they call the After Action Review (AAR). As practiced by the Army, an AAR follows a specific procedure in which the participants involved in an action meet after it is over to identify what worked and what did not and to determine how they could improve the next time. According to Garvin (2004, p. 106-107), an AAR discussion should include the following four questions:

- What did we set out to do?
- What actually happened?

- Why did it happen?
- What are we going to do next time?

The Army guidelines specify that 25% of the time should be spent among the first two questions, 25% on the third, and 50% on the last question. Whether a team uses the AAR format or some other review procedure, the purpose should be to determine ways to improve practice based on learning from past efforts.

Recommendations for Team Effectiveness

- HPT consultants should immerse themselves in learning about team functioning.
- Use approaches such as the Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument to help team members identify their most likely approach to conflict situations (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, 2001).
- Devote time at the beginning of projects to be sure all team members are aligned around key elements of the project. Ensure clear expectations and ground rules.
- Invest effort and energy in helping team members “sign up” for the mission.
- Role clarity is critical. Be sure that all team members know their roles and how those roles contribute to the end goal of the project.
- Assure a climate of openness and respect so that everyone feels free to confront issues directly in a positive, supportive manner.
- Use AARs following major project milestones and at the completion of projects to determine how to improve performance.
- Be sure that AARs focus on both task *and* process and that they include the client view as well as that of the project team members.

Lever Three: Managing Expectations and Communication

Marketing researchers have long known that a customer’s prior experiences with a service will affect their interactions around the next service. Imagine this situation. You have just had another terrible experience with ABC auto dealer’s service department. You are angry, disappointed, and frankly very sorry that you took the car there in the first place. How do you think you will feel when you walk into XYZ car dealer’s service department for service on your other family car? You may be anxious, suspicious, or downright hostile to the new car dealer.

Managing Expectations

The fact is that many of our clients have had unfortunate experiences with consultants (either external or internal). I remember walking into the headquarters office of a large insurance company with a team of colleagues to conduct the first meeting about a project. The distrust and resentment radiating from the client team was palpable. We did not

know that they had just completed a difficult and painful engagement with a “name brand” consulting company and were upset about their experience. The “name brand” team had treated people in the client organization with disrespect, had left senior team members out of key meetings, and had acted in a manner that the clients felt was arrogant and cold. They felt abused and devalued by the experience.

As we worked through the first part of our agenda, the verbal and nonverbal signals that we were getting were not positive. Clearly, this was no way to start a project. After about 30 minutes of awkward conversation I stopped our meeting and said to the clients that I thought they seemed very annoyed with us and not happy for us to be there. I asked them what we had done to set the meeting off on such a difficult note. That broke the ice with them and they poured out their story of the prior engagement with the earlier consultants. We scrapped our original agenda and spent the next hour discussing their concerns and ways our team could address them. By the time we went to lunch, the climate of the meeting had turned around 180 degrees.

Managing Communication About the Project

While we are busy in a heads-down mode working diligently on our tasks, communication about the project is moving across the organization. An organization’s “rumornet” can spread positive or negative perceptions about a project faster than an HPT team can do it on the company intranet. When people don’t have complete information about a topic, they’ll make up their own information to fill in the blank spots. You don’t want to be “behind the story” in any case, trying to get to all the places that have misinformation about your project.

A few years ago our company implemented a custom-designed computer-based pricing and revenue management system—a first in the apartment industry. The alpha and beta versions of the system implemented in the pilot sites performed extraordinarily well right from the start. However, it exhibited the kinds of bugs and performance issues common to complicated custom software. For a short time, the difficulties and uncertainties of using the new system were all that other associates heard about it from their colleagues at the pilot-test sites. The bugs and problems were annoying to pilot-test users, who complained about it to colleagues who were not in the pilot-test sites. Their legitimate concerns were being spread around the company, and the system began to have “bad buzz.”

Our formal communication efforts had fallen behind the story as it spread across the company’s “rumornet.” After finding themselves fending off bad buzz, the project team took action to jump in front of the story again. They determined what the successes had been, what the actual issues were, and what fixes had been developed. With this information in hand, team members communicated the message to all stakeholders through a range of channels. Their core message

was: “This is a pilot test. The purpose of a pilot is to find problems and issues so that we can fix them. Overall, the system is performing even better than we had hoped. We are getting great results, but there are some issues—and that is normal at this stage. We are fixing the problems as we find them so that the release you get will not have those issues.” One of my colleagues calls this managing the water cooler conversations rather than letting those conversations manage you.

In every large-scale intervention that I have been part of, similar situations have occurred at one time or another. Consider this example. Suppose you are going to a meeting of senior executives to discuss expanding your project beyond the pilot stage. One of the executives interrupts you early in the meeting and says, “My senior engineers tell me that your new system isn’t working very well in the Eastwick plant. They say that the staff over there is pretty disappointed in what’s been going on so far. What are you guys doing about these problems? Is this system going to work?” In this scenario your meeting agenda about expanding the system to other sites could turn into a defense and re-justification of the project.

Whatever you think about political consultants, they do offer some common wisdom that performance technologists can use to help manage communication about their projects:

- **Use talking points:** Have the team develop talking points about the project and practice using them until they are comfortable that they can deliver the key messages in a crisp, understandable way.
- **Stay on message:** If there is a set of key ideas about the project that various stakeholders should know, use the talking points to deliver the team’s “campaign stump speech.” Stay on message by being sure to cover the key points with every group every time.
- **Set the agenda and stay ahead of the story:** Keep the communication channels (formal and informal) full of positive information about the project. When there is bad news, stay ahead of the story by explaining what happened and what is being done to solve the problems before the story has a chance to spread on its own.
- **Listen with an open mind when someone is expressing negative thoughts:** Be sure to make every effort to clearly understand the perceptions of the various stakeholders. Sometimes they’re off base, but many times there is a golden nugget of useful information under the list of concerns.

Recommendations for Managing Expectations and Communication

- Make time during early meetings to check client expectations and determine what they liked and did not like about prior projects and consultants.
- Assign communication about the project as a key task.
- Be sure that the client owns a key role in communication. Do not leave all project communication to the project team. Sponsors and stakeholders should share these responsibilities.

Lever Four: Ensuring Client Ownership of Procedures and Results

While working with a large financial service provider, our project team had spent several weeks trying to understand the economics of the regional processing operations and what the important criteria were that determined profitability in the business and what actions we could take to help them improve. The operations and financial analysts had determined that the traditional “scorecards” used by our client did not measure the items that mattered most to customer satisfaction and profitability. The team had some useful insights about how to help the client improve operations, reduce costs, and improve customer satisfaction. In working with the pilot-test sites, they concentrated on fixing the things that their analysis showed would have the most impact.

During a project review meeting with several senior executives, our team presented the results of the pilot tests and showed how much the regional sites had improved on our new measures of success. The executive vice president for operations looked over the report and asked, “Whose numbers are these anyway? Where did they come from? That’s not what we look at in our monthly reviews. That’s not how we measure our business.” The chief financial officer shrugged and said, “The consultants put them together with the west vice president for operations. I’m not sure what they show. I haven’t seen them before.”

We had analyzed the pilot test results and compiled the report and with too little involvement from the client’s team, violating one principle of successful selling of ideas: persuading clients by involving them every step of the way. The senior executives had far too little involvement in the analysis, discussions, debates, and arguments that led to the new measures of success reflected on the revised reports. They did not own the diagnosis; they did not own the revised model of success; they did not own the business metrics that measured it; and consequently, they did not own the results. Our team had become infatuated with its own brilliance and analytic insights and had neglected to bring the client team along. As it turned out, we were eventually shown to be correct, but the fallout from that lack of involvement crippled the project for a long time. Lesson learned: If you want to turn a client’s world upside down, be sure that the senior sponsors are helping you do the heavy lifting from the very beginning.

Recommendations for Ensuring Client Ownership of Procedures and Results

- Determine the most effective and efficient ways to involve senior clients in key aspects of the project so that they will own the results.
- Involve senior sponsors and stakeholders in all key analytic reviews and decisions; be sure they understand the reasoning behind all key actions taken or proposed.

- Use sponsor and stakeholder steering committees to be sure your efforts are continuously aligned with key organizational goals.
- Have senior clients join your team in presenting to stakeholder groups.
- Resist attempts by the client organization to put 100% of the ownership for results on your team's shoulders; it's their problem and it should be their solution too, not just yours.

Final Thoughts

HPT has a great deal to offer organizations, and successful implementation depends on more than good analysis, design, and development of solutions. Very often success hinges on factors related to organizational culture, interpersonal dynamics, and the skill of the project team members in how they interact with individuals and organizations. For all of us this means that we should attend to both the task and the process sides of HPT consulting with equal determination, vigor, and professionalism, so that our good work will lead to successful implementation of solutions. 🌱

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As Senior Vice President and Chief Learning Officer for Archstone-Smith (a leading owner, operator, acquirer, and developer of more than 250 apartment communities in 30 markets across the country), **Joseph J. Durzo**, PhD, CPT, is responsible for leading teams focused on improving Archstone-Smith's core operating processes and implementing e-business initiatives. He is also responsible for the customer service and national training organizations. Joe feels fortunate to work with colleagues who want to create a great company and for an organization that values innovation and change.

Joe has more than 25 years of experience in various management consulting, training, academic, and performance improvement organizations, where he helped companies and individuals develop programs and implement strategic initiatives. He has had successes and failures and has learned some important lessons about leading change from both—mainly not to have the same failures again, but to have new ones! He believes that if you are not making mistakes, you are not doing anything new.

Joe lives in Denver with his wife Judy and is applying everything he knows about HPT to reduce his golf handicap (with mixed results). When he is not on the golf course, you may reach Joe at jdurzo@archstonesmith.com.

Master's Statement

What defines your mastery?

My mastery is taking big, fuzzy problems, defining them clearly, and creating solutions to them. I have learned a great deal about how to drive change in an organization that I apply in every aspect of my work. It really boils down to being able to get done things that matter.

What advice would you give someone on the path to becoming a master of his/her field?

Approach your work with a wide-angle lens view. Take every opportunity you can to learn from colleagues who are not HPT professionals. Find out what makes them successful. Think about the world from your client's point of view. Learn the business. Learn as much as you can about people and organizations.

How have you passed on your wisdom to others?

I do this by helping individuals who work with me grow and develop through our day-to-day working relationships—coaching and mentoring. I also present at conferences occasionally.