



Measurement and HPT: Sharpening My Old Saw

by Carl Binder

In thinking about what to write for this special issue, two different but somehow connected images of saws kept rumbling around in my head: the old, noisy, repetitive saw that drives everyone crazy with its droning sound, yet serves an essential function. And Stephen Covey's saw, the one he says we ought to sharpen regularly (1989). I think I'll go with both of these images, perhaps with slightly different meanings than their originators intended.

My Old Saw

Measurement is my old saw. I've been going on about it for most of my professional life, perhaps preaching a bit too much about it to my colleagues in recent years (Binder, 1995, 2001, 2002). But as a field, we human performance technology professionals claim to produce *results* for our internal or external clients. Tom Gilbert (1996), one of our Founding Fathers, used the phrase "valuable accomplishments" to describe the performance we seek to improve. He stressed that in order for performance to be considered "worthy," it ought to yield accomplishments of greater value than the cost of the behavior required to pro-

duce them. To be true to this simple cost-benefit principle, we must *measure* the effects of our interventions.

However, as Lindsley (1999) and others have pointed out, less than 10% of the presentations at our conferences and the publications in our journals typically include objective measures of results, whether of business results, the accomplishments that contribute to them, or the behavior that produces those accomplishments.

If this is true, then we have both a marketing problem and a problem of professional identity. Because if we claim that HPT is a systematic methodology for producing results, perhaps even results that are superior in quality or quantity to those produced by other means, then we had better be able to back up this claim with data. And if we *can't* back it up, then it's not clear how we can claim to be effective, different in important ways, or even true to our roots (Binder, 1995).

So my old saw is this: As a profession, and as an organization (the International Society for Performance Improvement), we should take the high ground on the practice

of results measurement. We should systematically monitor and regularly publish the proportion of our publications and, ideally, of our conference presentations that include quantitative results data. We should do everything we can to make practical results measurement, not merely the assessment of opinion or reaction, a widely held and routinely applied competence within our ranks. And we should then, on the basis of these efforts, stake our claim to effectiveness on an increasingly robust database of objectively, quantitatively measured results.

Sharpening the Saw

We need to keep our intellectual and professional tools in good working order, to avoid superstition, and to stay away from faddish yet ineffective interventions. Given the origins of our field in basic and applied behavioral research, we ought to approach our work as scientist-practitioners, always seeking to produce more valuable results at lower cost and in less time. The only way we'll be able to do this, to borrow Covey's phrase, is to keep sharpening our saw.

We sharpen the saw by making contact with reality rather than living in a world of opinion, by letting the actual, objective results of our work serve as feedback to us—often as *corrective* feedback. In other words, we sharpen our saw with measurement of results and decisions based on that measurement about what to do differently, when we should change, and what interventions have the greatest impact.

If HPT is going to be anything beyond a philosophy that some people like and others do not, then it must keep sharpening its saw based on measured results. We ought to be using measurement to decide what types of interventions actually work best in different types of situations, to compare the magnitudes of our effects and provide copious rewards and recognition for those who produce big results, and to help our clients improve overall productivity and efficiency.

One of the most elegant communications that has come out of our ranks in recent years is Timm Esque's book, *Making an Impact* (2002). It is elegant because it reduces the job of managing and improving performance to three essential features: setting clear and measurable goals or expectations; putting the means of measuring progress against those goals in the hands of the performers; and then applying and optimizing resources based on measured results until expectations have been achieved and maintained.

Many of us are specialists in particular types of performance interventions, while some are generalists. Some of us are

even experts in practical results measurement methods and tools. In any case, it's clear that Esque's model is at the heart of what we must do to be fully effective HPT professionals. We must measure results, and we must use the data to make decisions about and adjust what we do.

It would be great if ISPI would take this issue on in a very proactive and public way, making measurement a cornerstone of its marketing and professional communications about the effectiveness of HPT. For me, the value proposition of ISPI and HPT must include this essential feature. Otherwise, we cannot credibly demonstrate value, no matter what we might propose it to be. 🏔️

References

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