What's So New About The Six Boxes™ Model?

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This article answers the question posed in its title. After all, what *is* so new about The Six Boxes Model? Based on the long-respected, research-based *Behavior Engineering Model* originally formulated by Thomas F. Gilbert (1978), considered by many to be the "Father of Human Performance Technology," this elegant framework for understanding and designing performance systems has been around for 30 years, or more. It represents the seed or essence of an understanding that exploded the field of programmed instruction (PI) into the much broader and more powerful field of human performance technology (HPT). It has been used in one form or another by thousands (maybe tens of thousands) of performance improvement professionals and management consultants to analyze, problem-solve, design, and implement solutions for an enormous range of human performance challenges, from individual performance situations to entire organizations. Why bring it up again, when this model and its variants have been basic tools of so many for so long? Let me attempt to answer this very reasonable question.

A Little History

The answer to this question rests on a number of historical developments, and on the fruits of our decades-long mission to penetrate corporate and government organizations with a performance-based approach. When Gilbert introduced the *Behavior Engineering Model*, it reflected an evolution of research-based methods in his community of consultants and researchers from an exclusive focus on the design of effective instruction to a wider perspective encompassing more variables. It had become clear that while effective training could have a significant impact on human performance, it seldom worked alone. In fact, when training was introduced into performance environments in which other behavior influences were lacking or in conflict, it was seldom cost-effective. As Gilbert and his peers examined the full scope of potential behavior influences, they realized that for performance to accelerate and maintain, it was necessary to manage a broader range of variables and conditions. The story of this evolution is well-understood and documented (e.g., Dean, 1994; Stolovitch and Keeps, 1999). And the evolution itself gave rise to a change in the name of a professional association from the National Society for Programmed Instruction (NSPI) to the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI).

It is important to recognize, however, that the *Behavior Engineering Model* and its variants, along with the myriad of algorithmic processes and methodologies that emerged with these models, were strictly "in house" tools. That is, while sophisticated performance improvement professionals took pride in their understanding and application of these models and methodologies, their relatively arcane terminology hindered wider communication and adoption by ordinary training, development, and business management professionals. The language was too academic, too technical, and certainly

anything but intuitive. When introduced to the typical business or government manager, the model raised more questions than it clarified understanding. It was not for "the masses" of the corporate or public sectors.

During the early 1980's, Binder joined the ranks of performance researchers and consultants using the Behavior Engineering Model, under the tutelage of Thomas F. Gilbert. He became enthusiastic about its power and applied it to an increasingly broad set of situations, from needs analysis, to performance design, and implementation planning for training and management programs that required changes in the behavior of people in organizations. On the other hand, he and his associates were stymied by the lack of comprehension they encountered among their clients – executives and managers who appreciated the effectiveness of the programs developed using the model as articulated by Gilbert, but who expressed confusion or disinterest about the language of the model itself. Thus began efforts to reformulate the model in a way that would allow more rapid comprehension and more frequent and immediate application by those to whom it was introduced.

During the 1980's Binder and his Associates tested and refined new language for describing each of the cells in Gilbert's original model in their work with managers and executives, as documented in Binder's (1998) account of the The Six Boxes Model. By the early 1990's modifications in the language and simplification of the model had achieved its desired objective. By that time, introducing the model informally and in brief discussions to a wide range of individuals and groups typically resulted in immediate comprehension and application of the model in ways that delivered valuable outcomes to users. It was not uncommon to find, months after an initial introduction, that the language of the model had become part of the users' working vocabularies and that graphic representations of the model were posted in cubicles and on bulletin boards as reminders of the factors to be considered in the analysis and design of performance systems. This was an important breakthrough, only partly appreciated at the time.

Several years later, after introducing the model (which we still called by a variety of fancy names) as a core element in the training of a group of Performance Consultants at the major U.S. corporation, Dun and Bradstreet, we achieved the final clarification: it's new name. Our client at the time, an experienced and wise sales executive, suggested we simply call it "the six boxes." Since we often referred to the different cells in the model as "boxes," it made perfect sense to give the model this basic, descriptive name.

Our model, now formally named and trademarked as The Six Boxes™, took yet another step when it became one of the core tools for training performance technology consultants and account managers at the joint venture consulting firm, Product Knowledge Systems, Inc. We learned how easy it was to train consultants in use of the model and to help them teach clients how to use The Six Boxes in performance analysis, training support, program implementation, and a range of other applications. Now fully field-tested, The Six Boxes had become a solid and substantial performance improvement tool, easily accessible to clients and colleagues alike, and made "public" in Binder's (1998) account.

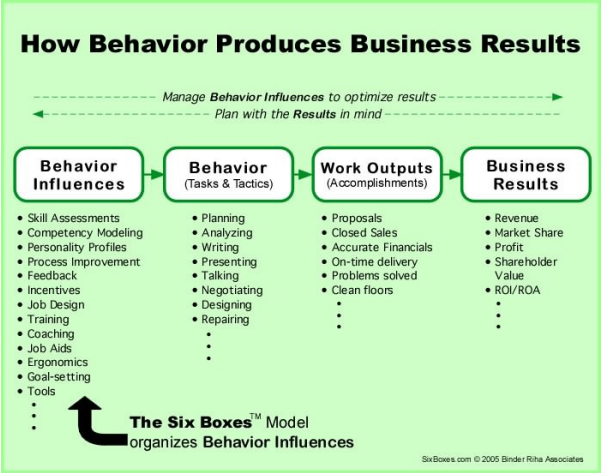
Still, however, the Six Boxes was a tool in our toolbox, not a shining gem displayed for all to see. We used it in virtually every project we conducted with clients, from executive alignment to detailed performance design; but we seldom talked very much about it, except as needed.

In a sense, we did not yet realize what a brilliant gem it is. It has been the emergence from our toolbox, the *public* emphasis and explicit commercialization of The Six Boxes Model, which represents what is truly new – as suggested by the title of this article. Let us turn, then, from the historical account to a more contemporary description of how we are now using the model, and about our grand scheme to take "performance thinking" deep into organizations of all kinds.

Driving "Performance Thinking" Through Organizations

Distilled to its essence, we would argue that the foundation of Human Performance Technology rests on two key understandings.

First, Gilbert's (1978) focus on *accomplishments* (outputs of behavior) in what he called "the world of work" shifted the fulcrum of analysis and performance improvement efforts toward the valuable products or deliverables resulting from the behavior of people at work, and away from behavior for its own sake. The impact of this conceptual and practical shift was enormous, not only because it aligns with an understanding of processes and process engineering, where inputs and outputs are important. But also because it helps the performance improvement specialist and the manager or executive to better understand what behavior is *important*. It is the behavior that exemplary performers use to produce valuable accomplishments of high quality and with high productivity that results in the greatest return on investments (ROI) in performance.



Second, Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model transformed into our easy-to-understand Six Boxes Model makes clear that *we must look at the entire set of variables or influences that affect behavior*, not merely at training or some other sub-set of the whole performance system. This understanding allows Human Resources and Human

Resource Development people to "escape the training box" and enter into the wider field of factors or variables that they, teaming with executives and managers, can analyze and configure to produce the best possible result.

A focus on performance *systems* is essential. Many of the most important advances in Human Performance Technology and allied fields in recent years have come from approaches that were systemic in scope. That is, they looked at all the influences on behavior and the interrelationships among them. This is the kind of "performance thinking" that we would like to communicate and disseminate in organizations. And it is what The Six Boxes Model enables us to do with relative ease and speed.

The Six Boxes: An Easier Point-of-entry

Our analysis of the human performance improvement field over the last decade suggests that the pace of organizational change along with a general acceleration of business processes driven by the Internet and allied technologies has created a situation in which systematic, systemic projects or interventions are more difficult than ever to complete, or even to begin. In the United States, and increasingly in other parts of the world, the increased pace of business means that executives and managers often resist linear, step-by-step procedures and processes for organizational change, no matter what the promised outcome.

The impact of this trend has been that in many organizations it is difficult to effect change or to design optimally effective training and non-training performance programs because of a certain degree of *institutionalized impatience*. When there are very high stakes, or when senior managers and executives consider initiatives to be of strategic importance, it may be possible to implement careful, systematic, systemic processes aimed at high-value improvement. But otherwise our performance improvement colleagues often find it difficult to use the powerful algorithmic processes for organizational alignment, needs analysis, performance design, implementation planning, and other related efforts. In fact, they often encounter significant resistance to what some

managers describe as "analysis paralysis" or in other negative terms. The result is that organizations often fail to take advantage of significant opportunities to improve performance and business results.

We believe that the Six Boxes Model can provide at least a partial antidote for this condition. Because it is conceptually simple, easy to understand and remember, and rapidly applicable by beginners at the level of individual and small group performance, managers and human resource professionals can easily begin to drive performance improvements through day-to-day application of an accomplishment-based approach coupled with The Six Boxes. Once introduced, The Six Boxes is also capable of supporting projects and initiatives at increasingly high levels of complexity and organizational impact. But to begin, the model provides an easy point of entry, avoiding many of the typical obstacles to systematic performance interventions and processes.

At higher and broader levels in organizations, executives and managers can use The Six Boxes to leverage the power of multiplication. When a growing number of people, across multiple functions (line and staff) share the same language and framework for communicating about and improving human performance, then the results are potentially multiplicative because they leverage the ideas and attention of many people working together. If a sufficient number of executives, managers, supervisors, team leaders and individual contributors learn the basics of the Six Boxes Model, and begin using it as a shared language and framework for understanding and improving performance (what we call "performance thinking"), then the potential for continuous improvement can be very significant.

A New Vision of Organization-wide "Performance Thinking"

In the past there have been a number of movements or trends in forward-thinking organizations that promised, and in many cases delivered, significant performance improvement. Variants of the quality movement, Six Sigma, continuous improvement, breakthrough teams, process engineering, and other types of strategies have attempted to leverage the collective intelligence of organizations to produce large improvements in quality, productivity, and human performance over time. Where these efforts have been applied consistently over time, they have produced results. Most of them incorporate processes involving goal-setting, identifying gaps, establishing metrics, generating ideas for change, and evaluating the ideas through measurement and feedback. These are key elements of any individual or group problem-solving algorithm, and they are virtually guaranteed to produce results over time if applied systematically.

What is largely missing from these processes and models, however, is a powerful and comprehensive understanding of the *factors that influence human behavior*. Since producing results in organizations, no matter how complex or elegant the processes involved, requires human behavior, it would seem important for those involved to understand the variables that influence it.

In the past, the scientific understanding of human behavior (Binder, 1995) has been incorporated into theories and models used by expert consultants and human resources professionals, applied by those experts in service of organizations. However, in conjunction with the growing resistance in many organizations to linear, time-consuming performance improvement processes, the requirement that "experts" be involved to guide and manage the process can often delay or undermine implementation of performance improvement efforts.

What is "new" about our current vision for The Six Boxes is that, unlike many of its predecessors (including Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model), we believe that it offers a model of human behavior influence that is *accessible to anyone and everyone in an organization, from the executive suite to the individual contributor*. Our experience suggests that in the span of a few minutes almost anyone in the organization can begin to understand and be ready to apply the model in simple but effective ways. After a day of instruction and discussion about applications, a group of executives, managers, or human resources professionals can begin to apply the Six Boxes in a broad variety of ways, specific to their job functions. When a Six Boxes Workshop and a second day of focused planning and tool development is scheduled to kick off a team project, departmental effort, or cross-functional initiative, the Six Boxes can serve as an organizational alignment and planning framework enabling that intact team, project or initiative to run more smoothly and have greater impact.

Perhaps most importantly, if individuals and groups across the organization – at multiple levels and in different functions – learn and begin to speak and think in the language of The Six Boxes, the entire organization can benefit from a shared model, based on research, that integrates all possible influences on human performance and the interrelationships among those influences. This is an incredibly powerful possibility!

A Proposed Strategy

We believe that dissemination of the Six Boxes Model via books, workshops and other forms of communication offers an enormous strategic opportunity for forward-thinking organizations. Linked with whatever other processes or algorithms that have been adopted for process improvement and performance development, The Six Boxes offers a nugget or central jewel that is capable of enhancing and building synergy across all efforts to improve quality and productivity.

Our strategic proposal, then, is to begin teaching the model to key leaders and influencers in the organization, and to work with them and their teams or colleagues to begin diffusing this common understanding of performance and the behavior influences that drive it. At relatively low cost, and over time, organizations can establish a common performance analysis, planning, problem-solving, design and implementation toolkit tied together by The Six Boxes, yet fitted to the culture and particular structure of the organization. Human Resources experts will be able to more easily communicate with their business colleagues, achieving alignment and a common approach more rapidly and with greater effect. Bridging the gap between functional groups and leaders of different

parts of the organization, this shared language should enable a greater degree of cooperation, shared visioning, and effective collaboration.

In the end, we believe that by establishing "performance thinking" across the organization using The Six Boxes Model, it should be possible to more effectively leverage the knowledge and experience of everyone concerning performance, and what works, because everyone will be communicating in the same language.

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Note: Download these and other publications at http://www.Binder-Riha.com/publications.htm.

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Dr. Carl Binder began his career in 1971 as a doctoral student at Harvard University with B. F. Skinner, continuing his laboratory and applied research in instructional design and performance measurement as Associate Director of The Behavior Prosthesis Laboratory during the 1970's. He was a consultant to dozens of educational and public sector agencies during that period, introducing fluency-based instructional methods and data-based decision-making to managers, administrators, and educators in a wide range of settings. Since 1982 he has founded three consulting firms while continuing research, development and dissemination of research-based performance improvement methodologies. Widely published in education and educational policy, sales, marketing, customer service, instructional design, knowledge management, performance measurement and human performance technology, he is an acclaimed speaker and international consultant. He advises Master's and Doctoral theses at universities both within and outside the U.S., and serves as Senior Consultant at Binder Riha Associates and President of The Fluency Project, Inc., a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the diffusion of fluency-based educational and coaching methods. He is a long-time thought leader and activist in the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) and the International Association for Behavior Analysis (IABA), and was recently awarded the Fred S. Keller Award for Contributions to Education by the American Psychological Association. His current focus is on dissemination of *The Six Boxes Model* of behavior influence and on *Measurement Counts!* – a methodology for measuring performance outcomes based on his early work with Skinner. See Binder's brief writings on evaluation and measurement at http://www.ispi.org/services/gotResults.htm#counts and some of his other publications at http://www.binder-riha.com/publications.htm. Contact Dr. Binder via email at CarlBinder@SixBoxes.com.

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Common Applications of The Six Boxes™ Model for Different Types of Users in Organizations

Applications \ Users	Senior Executives	Middle Managers	Front Line Managers Supervisors Team Leaders	Human Resources Training Performance Improvement	Individual Contributors
Organizational or Team Alignment	X	X	X	X	
Implementation Planning	X	X	X	X	
Best Practices Documentation & Continuous Improvement	X	X		X	
Performance Needs/Opportunity Analysis	X	X		X	
Performance Design / Training Support		X	X	X	
Management or Supervisor Development	X	X		X	
Leadership Development	X	X	X		
Performance Consulting				X	
Performance Problem-Solving	X	X	X	X	X
Career Self-Development	X	X	X	X	X
Specialized Applications	X	X	X	X	X

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