Going Back to Basics?
Core Cognitive Processes for Performance Improvement

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Our field is said by some to be in constant evolution. Our focus has continued to expand over the years, and so, too, has the nature of our involvement in organizations. I have even heard colleagues from related fields suggest that we seek the impossible by trying to be all things to all people. In my view, they may be confusing “doing it all” with understanding how it all fits together to ensure sustainable added value. Improving performance at any organizational level requires a wide range of vision that can help us see beyond what is immediately obvious to what is not so obvious or immediate.

For decades, a small number of performance improvement pioneers have worked at the system level demonstrating that performance improvement is not just theory, and it is not magic—it is science driven, and it works. Unfortunately, the masses remained busy with isolated parts of the whole, with a significant amount of effort and resources spent and very little value to show for it. This is evidenced by the reputation that many traditional learning and development functions have created for themselves through “on-demand learning solutions” with very little consideration for the contribution and alignment of those solutions to strategic priorities. Consequently, this is the most vulnerable and affected area when the organization is faced with particularly challenging economic times, internal competition for resources, and budget cuts and layoffs.

Interestingly, over the last several years, we have been experiencing a higher frequency of job roles and titles associated with performance improvement: performance specialist, performance consultant, and other similar titles. Likewise, over the last few years, an unprecedented amount of university programs dedicated to preparing learning and development professionals have changed their program names, replacing traditional terms such as instructional design and instructional technology with terms such as workplace learning and performance; performance systems and design; and applied performance technologies. This certainly does not suggest that instruction is obsolete or no longer important. Rather, it may
indicate renewed attention to a more holistic, strategic, and critical focus on performance.

Of course changing the words we choose to describe ourselves is a small and preliminary part of this renewed focus. What is most interesting to me is the change occurring in our mindset, how we view performance in organizations, and in turn how we approach performance issues and opportunities. We have been both fortunate to have, and at the same time burdened with, many performance models to guide our discipline. Some models have withstood the test of time because they have been subjected to empirical research and continue to provide useful and rigorous frameworks for both practice and further research. Other models are perhaps redundant and offer restatements of original concepts and relationships that were perhaps better illustrated in their original forms by their original proponents. Other models are not based in science, offer questionable value, and can potentially result in negative consequences.

Keeping this in mind, I wanted to share a few thoughts about the cognitive skills that I see as critical to our success, credibility, and sustainability as a field and discipline. These cognitive skills provide us with a flexible and scalable base that transcends specific settings, situations, models, and solutions. They help us focus on what matters by asking the right questions at the right time.

First, system thinking is fundamental to our identity as performance improvement researchers and practitioners. System thinking is a set of habits that enable us to understand how things influence one another in a series of relationships within a whole. Our “whole” is society, but often the boundaries are placed around an organization and it is viewed in the broader context of external or societal factors (for example, policies and regulations, natural resources, economy, geopolitics, etc.) with which it interacts. In organizations, the internal elements that might influence each other include people, structures, processes, and information, to name but a few. Some might say that system thinking is fundamental to effective problem solving because it helps us consider problems as parts of a broader system rather than react to a specific event, which might result in exacerbating the problem.

Likewise, strategic thinking is integral to performance improvement. Strategic thinking involves a results orientation or understanding of where the organization wants to go. This often requires a long-term perspective to problem-solving or decision-making, rather than an exclusive focus on short-term gains or “low hanging fruit.” Short-term gains are indeed important to sustainable change, but strategic thinking requires that we consider multiple timeframes (long-, mid-, and short-term). This allows us to anticipate multiple scenarios and multiple courses of action that would be appropriate given our goals, resources, and other key considerations. Hence, being nimble and inquisitive is a critical characteristic of strategic thinkers.

Critical thinking, in turn, underlies both system thinking and strategic thinking, and is perhaps the most elemental ingredient to sustainably
adding value to any endeavor, within and outside of the organization. Critical thinking is the process for reflecting, assessing, and judging the assumptions underlying our ideas and efforts, as well as those of others. Critical thinking is at work when we ask questions for clarification, for probing assumptions, reasons, evidence, perspectives, implications, and consequences. Information seeking and analysis are central skills here, with the goal of reducing uncertainty, while realizing that there may not be a perfect decision or choice. Critical thinkers make the best possible decisions given what is known at the time and remain open to information that may later trigger changes. Those who don't master basic critical thinking skills are not likely to go far within the organization.

While there is certainly much more that could be said about each of these three thinking processes, and there are undoubtedly other important core skills that support performance improvement—for example, collaboration and communication—it is not my intent to provide an exhaustive discussion here. The key message that I want to leave you with is that what drives and unifies us as a field goes far beyond specific labels, models, or solutions. What defines our discipline, at its core, is our way of looking at the world, and how we approach the situation. Specifically, it is our system view of organizations and the strategic and critical thinking processes that drive our technical work.

I hope this introduction generates valuable discussion via ongoing, relevant, and timely research. We invite you to participate in this dialog via the submission of your own research manuscripts.