

A DISCUSSION PAPER:

High Performance: Beyond Competency, Skills, and Employee Engagement

“Our prejudices are so deeply rooted that we never think of them as prejudices but call them common sense”

George Bernard Shaw

Most of us like to do things well. We feel better when we succeed. Success gives us a *dopamine* rush. It’s part of human nature.

It doesn’t matter whether we are working as part of an executive team, as a manager leading a team, or an as individual contributor. The feeling that we’ve made progress at the end of one day is something that drives us to get up and do better the next.

More than a decade ago Daniel Pink elegantly explained this phenomenon in his book *Drive*¹. Pink reported that our motivation to perform well and to improve our performance is largely intrinsic and consists of three core elements.

- a. The desire for autonomy and self-direction;
- b. The basic human drive for mastery and to become better at what we do, and;
- c. Purpose, our preferred option to do things that are meaningful and important to us.

In other words, it is natural for humans to aspire to these three conditions. When we do, then continuous improvement and incremental steps towards exemplary performance should not be a struggle.

So why does it sometimes seem so hard? Why isn’t the work of learning professionals easier when we’re apparently working with human nature rather than against it?

One answer to these questions lies embedded in our current approaches to solving *performance problems* and supporting a culture of continuous improvement.

Our narrow focus on developing skills and believing them to be the prime driver for high performance, on *competency* as being the endpoint we’re looking for, and the unfounded belief that employee engagement leads to high performance are three barriers which challenge us in delivering and supporting high performance.

¹ Pink, Daniel H. 2011. *Drive. The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Riverhead Books

In some way, we are either victims of the law of unintended consequences or we're guilty of Aldous Huxley's axiom.

"I see the best, but it's the worse that I pursue"
Aldous Huxley (author of Brave New World)

Either way, there are reasonably straightforward adjustments we can make which will help our organisations build better and stronger development and performance cultures.

Supporting High Performance

For many organisations the drive for high performance is supported around formal learning and development processes together with performance management, employee engagement initiatives, and reward systems.

Although each of these can provide some support, it is questionable whether they are enough to deliver the level of impact needed in today's highly competitive and demanding work environments.

If we want this combination to deliver results, we need to appreciate their limitations and have realistic expectations of their capabilities.

The Limits of Formal Training

When we ask the people leading Talent, Learning, Organisational Development, HR, and other functions focused on recruiting, onboarding, engaging, and developing the workforce how they drive high performance we invariably get the answer that their 'toolkit' is a combination of formal courses and programmes linked to skills and job role frameworks, capability mapping, compliance, and behavioural requirements. Often these are built into learning journeys linked with career development and sometimes driven through performance management processes.

Over the past 20 years many organisations have developed sophisticated academy and corporate university structures delivering to specific organisational needs such as DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), compliance, mental health, and wellbeing, as well as a range of training to support functional competence. Leadership roles have development plans and coaching solutions, while individual contributors have learning pathways linked to skills and job roles.

On the surface this sounds to be a comprehensive suite. It should work. It certainly involves a lot of planning and design, and plenty of work building both the structure and content. It's resource-intensive in terms of people and cost.

However, it's worth stepping back, looking at this approach and assessing its efficacy.

One limitation which is clear is that overwhelmingly most L&D resources are devoted to formal learning and training processes and activities focused on individual development. More enlightened L&D departments do some work with teams, but that's usually seen as an add-on rather than core.

One problem is that we often fail to use the entire system and look beyond this 'atomic unit', the individual employee, around whom we build a suite of learning services. Yet few workers ever achieve their objectives alone. We work in teams, usually in multiple teams which are created, carry out set tasks, and dissolve as team members move onto new objectives and projects.

The Cult of the Individual

L&D's focus on individual skills and competencies is a natural development from HR's priority for supporting individuals in all phases of employment from recruiting, onboarding, individual career development, individual engagement, and behaviours in areas such as DEI and compliance.

As many L&D departments sit within HR this 'cult of the individual' is also reflected in L&D priorities.

When the HRD and HR leadership team decides their organisation needs to establish or renew its job role framework, L&D leaders are asked to join in and define job-related skills frameworks and role-related competency maps. Once L&D is in the individual 'funnel', focus tends to be on creation of role-based learning journeys and pathways and on other formal learning resources to meet individual learning and career needs.

If there is any focus beyond the individual, then OD specialists are assigned to deal with that.

Although OD and L&D teams are increasingly working more closely, L&D's role is still principally seen as 'fixing individual people'. These individuals may be clumped into cohorts based on the time they join the organisation (for onboarding), their wider job families (finance, marketing, legal, sales etc.), or the organisational hierarchy (first-level managers, managers of managers, senior leaders) but our approach is invariably built around our 'atomic unit', the individual employee.

When we place our learning and development focus on people and on individuals, the next logical step is to assume our role is to 'fix' them. In other words, on addressing deficiencies. So, we map existing skills and competencies to desired skills and competency outcomes and build our formal training and development solutions around closing the gaps.

This funnel approach on 'fixing deficiencies' in people overlaid with an almost obsessive belief in the role of skills acquisition as the *fixing instrument* is at the root of one of the problems.

*"Pit a good employee against a bad system
and the system will win most every time"*

Geary Rummler²

Often, little thought is given to more important influences which limit performance. Once the focus is firmly fixed on the individual, then skills building and 'personalised learning' become an aspiration and the endpoint. The detail overtakes the need to think and work with the health, development, and performance of the organisation as a whole. And organisational performance is much more than an aggregation of the performance of individuals.

That's not to say there is no need to devote L&D time and resources to build individual capabilities. It is not an 'either-or' situation. L&D needs to support individual development, but that should be neither the starting point nor the end point.

The Competency Barrier

When we look L&D's work in building individual capabilities, the tendency is to build learning interventions and pathways around *competencies*. After all, most organisations have created competency frameworks as part of their HR job, career, and skills work.

However, competency may sometimes be a starting point. Experts and high performers are not 'competent'. They are beyond competency. Competency may be a waypoint on the path to high performance but, like individual capability development, it certainly is not the end point.

The accepted definition of competency is 'the demonstration of a set of characteristics and skills required to successfully perform in a job'. However, competency frameworks rarely link in detail the specific critical tasks that define success for specific roles in specific situations.

² Geary Rummler 1983. *Training Skills Isn't Enough*. Training Journal, 20 (8).

Competencies are light on context. They define knowledge, skills, and characteristics required for defined job roles, and people can be assessed as competent within an HR framework or a skills training context, but competency rarely, if ever, assesses the important characteristic of experience.

Someone who is competent has a 'licence to operate'. In other words, they can remove the training wheels from their bicycle, but they're not yet fit to join the Tour de France.

While exploring the difference between competence and expertise, the great American psychologist Jerome Bruner posed the following question:

"What is the difference between learning Physics and being a Physicist?"
Jerome Bruner

For Bruner, the answer was that a physicist (or the member of any other profession or holder of expertise) is *"inculcated in the practices and community of his profession"*. By implication, someone who simply held a certificate or degree verifying progress through a formal education or training programme had not yet reached that point.

In other words, the basic knowledge and skills we develop through formal training and development are not enough to produce expertise. It may well get us started, but more learning is required through experience, practice, collaboration, and reflection.

From the pure human performance point-of-view competence is simply not enough. And the unrelenting focus and resource-hungry activity of many HR and L&D professionals on competency is creating a barrier against more effective development within the workflow.

Skills Alone Are Not Enough

Equally, skills alone are not enough to deliver high performance. Many highly skilled people in dysfunctional organisations can attest to this.

As was pointed out in a recent discussion paper³, the skills displayed by the 'performer' are a relatively minor contributor to overall performance.

"W. Edwards Deming, the American engineer and statistician who played a key role in the reconstruction of Japanese industry post-World War II is credited as a founder of the total

³ Jennings & Broadhurst. 2022. *Performance Beyond the Skills Obsession*. <http://www.duntroon.com/publications/>

quality management approach. Deming's prime focus was on the 'system'. His approach is grounded in systems theory and based on the principle that each organisation, no matter how large or small, or whether for-profit or non-profit, is built around a system of interrelated processes and people⁴."

At various points in his career Deming reviewed the nature of the performance problems he encountered. Towards the end of his working life, he reflected that:

'I should estimate that in my experience most organizational performance problems and most possibilities for improvement add up to the proportions something like this: 94% belongs to the system (responsibility of management); 6% special (the performer)'

W Edwards Deming⁵

The implication of Deming's work, along with work by others in the Human Performance Improvement field including Gilbert, Rummler, Brache, and Harless, is that skills are just one small slice of the performance pie and when we limit ourselves to developing skills alone, we will never lead our organisations to high performance.

"90% of performance gaps are caused by organisational barriers, not by knowledge deficits"

Rummler & Brache⁶

So long as L&D professionals fail to take account for all the factors other than skills which influence performance – including clarity of process, clear task guidance, compatible management, leadership approaches, appropriate tools, and other factors – we will fail to be significant participants in developing high performance in our organisations.

People achieve high levels of performance largely through the factors mentioned above plus prior experience and the support of their networks and colleagues. Opportunity to practice and reflect on previous work are also significant factors.

⁴ Petersen, P.B. (1999), Total quality management and the Deming approach to quality management, Journal of Management History (Archive), Vol. 5 No. 8, pp. 468-488.

⁵ W. Edwards Deming. 1982. *Out of the Crisis*. MIT Press. page 315

⁶ Rummler & Brache 1995. *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organizational Chart*. ISBN 0-7879-0090-7

It is far better for L&D professionals to focus on the entirety of the opportunities their organisations are looking to exploit or the challenges their organisations need to address than to take the narrow 'skills' path.

The result of systemic approaches will far outweigh those limited entirely to competency and skills.

The Employee Engagement and Performance Conundrum

The common belief with HR and L&D is that if we improve employee engagement, then performance improvement will follow.

Although evidence suggests improved employee engagement has significant impact on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, staff turnover, and employee health and wellbeing, the link between employee engagement and performance is not so straightforward.

The research suggests there is a relationship between employee engagement and high performance, but that the causality flow in the relationship is converse to common received belief. A belief especially embedded in the HR and L&D communities.

In other words, performance drives employee engagement, not the other way around.

Whilst high performers tend to be more engaged in their work and with their organisation, the more engaged employees are not necessarily higher performers. The link between engagement and performance is, in fact, weak at best.^{7 8}

The research casts significant shadow on the idea that if we work to improve employee engagement and measure that improvement through staff surveys and other instruments, we are also impacting workforce performance and the overall performance of our organisations.

If our aim is to increase employee engagement by far the best approach is to devote time and resources to improve performance across the entire organisation. Where high performance goes, employee engagement follows.

⁷ Riketta, M. 2008. *The causal relation between job attitudes and performance. A meta-analysis.* Journal of Applied Psychology, 93(2), 472;

⁸ Faragher, E.B., Cass, M., & Cooper, C.L. 2005. *The relationship between job satisfaction and health: a meta-analysis.* Occupational and environmental medicine 62(2), 105-112

This is not to say we should not spend time and resources on employee engagement surveys and working to increase employee engagement. We simply need to understand that while increased levels of engagement should lead to increased employee wellbeing and retention, it is unlikely to have any impact on overall performance.

Summary

Competency, skills, and employee engagement are three major focal points for HR and L&D leaders and their teams. All of these have an important part to play in building high performing cultures and organisations.

However, tunnel-vision on any of these will hinder rather than help the development of high-performance organisations and cultures. We need to consider and accommodate them, but they should be neither the starting nor end points in our professional practices.

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