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COMMENTARY

Delivering Results, Developing Leaders: A Performance-Driven Approach to Building Leadership Capacity

by Douglas K. Smith and Charles Baum

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We believe performance-and-challenge centric approaches to tackling many essential issues and opportunities can be very effective in the education sector.



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A Performance-Driven Approach to Building Leadership Capacity

| BY DOUGLAS K. SMITH AND CHARLES BAUM

Susan, an executive in a state mental hospital, participated in a two-phase leadership development program: (1) Phase One consisted of several months of seminars about new ideas and tools, followed by (2) Phase Two, which involved implementing a project and putting these new leadership skills to work.

Throughout the first phase, Susan enjoyed the speakers, was challenged by new concepts, and networked with people she hadn't seen in a while. Over months of learning, Susan's enthusiasm grew steadily. She couldn't wait for the conclusion of Phase One so that she could begin applying what she'd learned.

But, when the first phase ended and she turned her attention to identifying a project, Susan became anxious. She had identified patient violence at the mental hospital as the key performance challenge she wanted to address. But, though Susan had done her best to share new ideas with colleagues throughout Phase One, she realized the ideas and concepts by themselves had changed nothing. The staff still found it hard to cooperate across silos, the patients still acted out too much, resources were still scarce, her boss was still disengaged, and morale was still poor. She'd had many interesting, valuable conversations, but what Susan thought she had learned quickly faded in the face of the many obstacles she faced.

Susan's staff had proposed implementing a training program in how to handle assaultive patients, but it seemed as if it would take forever to organize. Her commitment felt like a New Year's resolution gone sour by January 3rd. And she wondered, how could she possibly effect any real change?

Sound familiar? Far too many professionals across a broad variety of sectors complete classical leadership development programs energized by ideas and concepts only to go back to their workplace and find themselves stymied by the same old obstacles.

School districts continually face substantial performance challenges as they try to meet demands for improved academic achievement against a backdrop of budgetary and political pressures. During the current economic crisis, there will be even greater pressure to show results with even fewer resources. Managing through the current crisis and meeting these performance challenges will require leaders—at all levels... people who can conceive of and implement major change in the face of major obstacles—whether in a classroom, in a school, or at the district and state levels.

During such challenging times when there is real urgency for performance and dwindling resources, you may think you can't afford to invest in leadership development on the hope that something of a transformative nature actually will happen. However, we firmly believe that one of the few remaining sources of potential effectiveness is leadership. We believe that the leadership capacity of most organizations is seriously under-tapped. And, unfortunately, many classical leadership development programs can ultimately disappoint when it comes to cultivating the kind of leadership that can deliver results back home.

Susan, within two months of starting Phase Two succeeded in getting people to cooperate across silos, and reduced the amount of patient violence by 50%. After two months, they were ready to expand their program from two wards to all six. Within a year, they ended up reducing violence by 80% in the hospital. Over time, their approach was exported to other hospitals in the state for a 40% reduction in violence statewide. >



Susan and her staff accomplished these results through a different type of leadership development approach that directly links performance and results to leadership skills learned in the classroom. Using this approach, the investment in leadership training pays back many, many times the dollars put into it—in financial savings and in better mission-related outcomes. Not only does the approach produce performance results, but it grows leaders like clockwork—reliably and dependably tapping into the hidden leadership potential that exists in every organization.

We've developed and used the approach in our consulting across more than fifty different industries over three decades. We've also captured the lessons in several books as well as in many different leadership programs spanning a wide variety of sectors. Both in our client work as well as leadership programs, the impacts in organization results as well as expanded leadership and other capacities have arisen across a wide spectrum of contexts, from affordable housing (Achieving Excellence In Community Revitalization) to journalism (The Punch Sulzberger Leadership Program) to social and economic development from Appalachia (The Berea Performance Compact) to Africa

(Rapid Results Institute). The success rate—measured by results and new skills learned and used—typically exceeds 80% and the value of the impacts compared to costs of the programs easily exceed 25:1.

Our Approach: Delivering Results, Developing Leaders

Our core concept is that the most powerful way to develop leaders is not to teach leadership and hope for the best, but rather to ask people to lead and achieve real performance results in their organizations over the course of 12-18 months. Ours is a pragmatic, common-sense approach to leadership development grounded in a direct tie to performance results.

Central to success is carefully selecting and defining the performance challenge. The performance challenge must be realistic and compelling. The challenges chosen cannot be “easy”, but the challenge must be carefully defined to be achievable. The performance goal has to matter, and while being concrete and achievable, it must be a source of inspiration and commitment.

Delivering Results, Developing Leaders: Key Concepts

- The best way to develop leaders is not to teach leadership and hope for the best, but rather to ask people to lead the accomplishment of real performance results with real people in their stakeholder worlds, against one of the top 2-3 performance challenges they face, over the course of 12-18 months.
- Leadership curriculum is delivered just-in-time for results. The curriculum is not in the foreground, but rather supports participant accomplishment. It is delivered in “small chunks” as programs unfold. No fire hose of tools and techniques!
- We believe that ideas, concepts and thoughtful reflections on leadership are helpful, but not if those curricular aspects sit at the center of the leadership program. We almost always find that “less is more” regarding curriculum, and the temptation is always to put more in!
- Our favorite leadership techniques include “turning up the heat”, getting outside one’s comfort zone, getting on the balcony to observe overall patterns at play, using early wins for momentum, tapping into the power of stories for organizational change, and a 2X2 matrix to sort out impact versus do-ability.
- Targeted support is helpful— a coach and peer group in our design, along with structured assignments every 2-3 months over 12-18 months geared to typical transition points are critical to moving the process along. The emphasis is always on accumulating more and more “wins” that steadily build the circle of involvement, and generate outcome wins that buy more and more success.



- A publicly-announced commitment to clear, measurable results—reinforced by accountability to one’s peers, coach, and back-home stakeholders—is essential to motivate committed follow-through. Participants are not left to their own “goodwill” to use what they’ve learned in search of results. Nobody wants to show up at a peer group meeting without having done anything—or having achieved nothing!

There is, though, an additional side to this: everyone deeply wants their colleagues to succeed because their uniquely shared experience builds very strong bonds. □

The performance challenge is then the doorway through which a focused array of leadership skills can be practiced and learned. The leadership curriculum is delivered just in time in “small chunks” as the participant is working on their performance challenge. Support is provided throughout the process in the form of a coach and peer group. Coaches, who work with participants throughout, pay particular attention at the beginning to help participants identify their performance challenges, and at the end to help participants expand based on success.

There are structured assignments every 2-3 months over the 12-18 months focused around typical transition points. The emphasis is always on accumulating more and more “wins” that steadily build the circle of involvement and generate outcome wins that buy more and more success.

The Cornerstone: Defining the Performance Challenge

The key to our approach is the selection of an appropriate performance challenge that serves as the vehicle for learning and change. For our methodology, it is critical to select compelling yet realistic and achievable challenges around which to ground the experience. We have defined criteria for a performance challenge. The performance challenge must (1) be one of the 2 or 3 most critical challenges facing the organization, (2) be achievable within a 12 to 18 month time-frame and reflect a “CEO’s” perspective on the whole enterprise, (3) require many folks beyond the leader to achieve the objective, (4) demand change as opposed to ‘business as usual’, (5) be sufficiently challenging that the participant and others who get involved feel “at risk” when going public about their objective, and (6) be “ripe” in the sense that it makes sense for the organization now!

The Performance Challenge: A Focus on Results, not Activities

In defining a performance challenge, there is a critical difference between results and what we call “activities”—e.g., creating strategic plans, conducting assessments, or implementing programs. With a results-driven challenge, your success or failure is clear as a bell. With an activity-based challenge, it’s hard to know what, if any, difference is made. For example, it is one thing to ask a mental hospital executive to analyze the causes of violence and train staff in how to handle the assaultive patient. It is quite another to ask that executive to reduce violence in the hospital by a measurable percentage! Which is more likely to create a leader? Similarly in the education world, it is one thing

to implement a promising educational program, and quite another to achieve demonstrable educational outcomes! Again, which is more likely to create leaders? (For more on the difference between results and activities, see *Make Success Measurable* by Doug Smith and *Successful Change Programs Begin with Results*, a Harvard Business Review classic by Robert Schaffer and Harvey Thomson.)

Participants in our programs must make real commitments to the results in their performance challenge statements. To paraphrase one of our favorite cartoons of a marriage ceremony, the official reminds the groom by saying to him, “you’re supposed to say ‘I do, not I’ll try...’”

Selecting a Performance Challenge

Susan, the head of wards in the state mental hospital, decided to get input from her staff about what kind of project to undertake in the second phase of her leadership program. She learned they were deeply concerned with patient violence. They weren’t alone—because of the severity of this problem, the state was spending \$25 million a year on workers compensation payments to injured mental health workers. But when asked what to do about violence, the responses were to implement a training program. Susan was inclined to go along with this suggestion. In a phone call with her project coach, she suggested a 9-month program to analyze causes of violence and to develop a training program for staff in how to deal with disruptive patients.

But is implementing a training program a result or an activity? The coach challenged Susan to do something very different: use results as the starting point. Susan balked—describing the reluctance she expected to a results-driven approach:

- “What do you mean reduce violence?”
- “Don’t you think we do this already?”
- “Tell the coach to meet with these patients!”
- They are in here for a reason.”
- “Give us more people, and we’ll reduce violence.”
- “Get the other people in this hospital to do their jobs—the psychologists and psychiatrists!”

Still, Susan agreed to try. She went back to the hospital and pulled together a team that included a nursing supervisor, orderly, psychologist, psychiatrist, and social worker. They agreed that the overall challenge was to reduce violence across the hospital by 25%. But Susan asked the team to focus on two wards by identifying an early outcome win: the team set a goal to reduce violence by 10% in 2 of the 6 wards within 3 months.

They now had a well-defined, results-oriented, seemingly achievable performance challenge upon which to focus. ▷

The Performance Challenge: The Criteria

What kind of challenges do people select? We do not specify content or subject matter. Rather, we use the following criteria in selecting the performance challenge:

- The Performance Challenge must be one of the top 3 most important challenges to the organization...** otherwise people won't make the effort.
- "CEO" perspective:** The performance challenge should be something between something small and "world peace". The objective should be achievable in a 12 to 18 month timeframe.
- The Performance Challenge must require the collaboration of several people;** it should not be a project for the participating leader to work on by him or herself.
- The Performance Challenge is something that demands change to achieve performance;** it is not "business as usual".
- The Performance Challenge will make you feel at risk when "going public."**
- The Performance Challenge selected must be "ripe"...** it must really make sense for the organization NOW.

Choosing a performance challenge....Is this a Result or an Activity?

| | RESULT | ACTIVITY |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Create 100 new jobs in our poor, rural community | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Conduct an economic development study of our county | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Within 15 months, cut in half the time to build a house and increase the percentage of people to whom we offer housing solutions by 30% | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Reengineer our processes to be more efficient and effective | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Shift those we serve to be at least 40% more in line with emerging racial and ethnic populations in our city | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Develop a strategy for serving emerging racial and ethnic populations | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

(Answers: 1. Result, 2. Activity, 3. Result, 4. Activity, 5. Result, 6. Activity)

Performance Challenges in Education

Leaders in the education arena have told us about a wealth of compelling performance challenges. Some examples identified include:

- Reduce district dropouts by 1,000 within 3 years
- Increase the number of Latino teachers by 50% within two years while simultaneously raising the average evaluation of Latino teacher performance
- In 22 under-selected schools, increase by 10% the number of families selecting these schools as one of their top two choices
- Increase by 20% the percentage of ESL children in our special program whose reading comprehension is at grade level within 6 months



The Performance Challenge: A Personal Commitment

As we say to people, you'd better love your performance challenge, because at some point over the next year or so, you will hate it!

In thinking about their challenges, participants need to decide where to focus their level of aspiration, how far out of their comfort zone (and their staff and stakeholders'!) they want to go, and how much they can safely raise the heat on others regarding performance.

But the overriding issue in identifying a performance challenge is this question: "Why is the proposed challenge important, and to whom?" This gets to the "centrality" question: Is the challenge really one of your top 2-3 priorities? Do stakeholders care (funders, beneficiaries, and employees)? Will you really stick with this over time? Why do you personally care about this so much?

We ask people to identify several potential challenges, and through a series of discussions, people gradually hone in on the one that is what we call 'good enough' because it meets the criteria identified above. Regarding measurability, participants work hard to convert the challenges into performance challenges by answering the following question: What does success look like in terms of outcome-based goals?

We also ask people to share why they originally entered their line of work. The purpose is to go back to original motivations that may have taken a beating in the years since entering the field. So when one school district executive mentioned coming to this country as a 12-year-old not speaking English and being placed in Track H (and yes, there were tracks A-G), you can imagine how his sense of social injustice will play into his selection of his performance challenge. By sharing these personal stories in peer groups, people also get to know each other better and hold each other accountable, gently yet firmly, to what really matters to them. We then ask people to start "building their performance story"—narratives that capture their personal passion and commitment, and convey the meaning of their challenge to others.

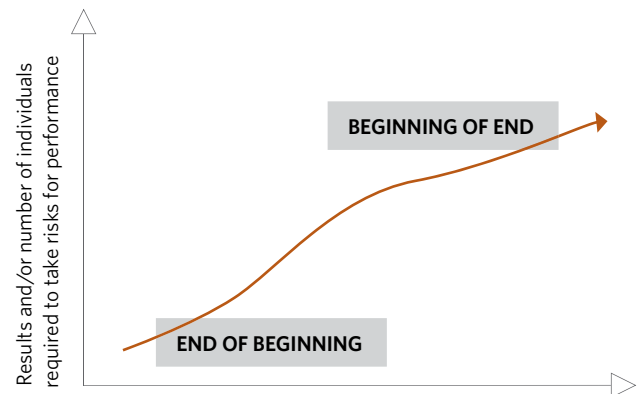
This performance story is crucial to the effort. Marshall Gans of the Kennedy School, a highly accomplished community organizer, has helped us understand the notion of organizational change as, in essence, an organizing endeavor in which the leader enlists a steadily broadening circle of people to commit to the overall performance challenge. And the use of "story" plays a key role in helping leaders enlist others.

Moving Into Action: Moving Up the S-Curve

As participants articulate their performance challenges, they already are moving into action. Why? Because they are testing the challenges with key stakeholders, building commitment, finding areas of possibility (and impossibility!), and getting a better feel for what will be needed for success.

As they more formally move into action, we organize the approach around something we call the "S-Curve".

The Performance Challenge S-Curve



END OF BEGINNING

- Challenge converted to performance challenge
- Major outcome-based goals have been set
- Have "gone public"
- Performance challenge at heart of organization agenda; consider effort "must do" instead of "extra"
- Early wins being realized (both process & outcome)

BEGINNING OF END

- Everyone needed is actively participating
- People have been through small scale change cycles
- New routines have replaced old routines; what was adaptive is now technical.
- In a sense, there are no risks
- Major performance outcomes accomplished!

Simply put, most models of organizational change involve some version of three phases—brilliantly depicted as the beginning, middle, and end! There is some form of "getting organized", which in our case involves defining a performance challenge, testing it with key stakeholders, creating the rudiments of a plan, and going public to an important audience. There then is the middle phase of moving up the S-Curve, which usually is not straightforward, but rather involves fits and starts, and ups and downs, and, in most cases yields significant results. This is followed by the end phase, in which participants institutionalize what has been accomplished, reflect on what has >

been learned, and articulate a new challenge based on substantially enhanced organization capacity.

Though these phases in and of themselves are important, we are most interested in the transition points, which we call “the end of the beginning” and “the beginning of the end”. Our coaching sessions, peer group meetings, and assignments are structured around 2-3 month segments of helping participants reach both of these points. Getting to “the end of the beginning” is all about traction and momentum, as participants clarify and refine their challenges, share them with key people, and begin building support and momentum.

Once in action, with sufficient momentum behind them, participants make their way up the S-curve through a series of well-defined wins that create a positive self-reinforcing loop.

As time moves on, we then ask people to consider “the beginning of the end”. Perhaps the clearest criteria for having reached this point is that what once seemed adaptive (we won’t know how to do it) now seems familiar (we know how to do it, and it is just a matter of time before we realize our success). This is a huge transition point, at which juncture participants feel substantially more in control, with a renewed (and new) sense of possibility and potential for their organizations, and can postulate new futures that did not seem possible a year earlier.

Susan had decided on the performance challenge, and her team got to work. Within one month, violence had been cut in half.

How? The team did data analysis showing that two patients caused half the violence, that incidents tended to happen at lunch and dinner, and that many of other incidents were in response to the two initial patients.

With these insights, the team assigned better staff coverage at lunch and dinner, and did some “just-in-time” training aimed at more productive approaches and earlier reaction times to signs of acting out from these two patients.

With this early win in place, the team was energized and confident. They then built on their success by expanding their efforts to all six wards. Within a few months, they had cut the levels of violence by 80% across the hospital. Over time, their approaches were exported to other hospitals in the state for a 40% reduction in violence statewide.

At what moment did this process start? When Susan decided to commit to reducing violence—rather than solely

studying the problem. We call this “design/do”—in which action informs design, and design informs action.

What leadership development tools did she use? Clearly, committing to results, the use of early wins, turning up the heat, getting out of her comfort zone, using the 80/20 rule to focus on the “critical few”, starting small and steadily growing the circle of people involved, and more... As you see, her performance challenge was the doorway through which she walked to practice leadership and bring about organization change.

Susan took advantage of her coach and peer group for support and accountability, which helped give her the courage to lead this remarkably successful effort.

Applying the Approach in the Education Arena

We believe our approach can yield substantial results in the education sector. After all, the enormous challenges facing education leaders at the state, district and school levels require approaches for how best to:

- Break down large, complex challenges into achievable chunks...versus drowning in the complexities of those challenges
- Achieve and use results—from the outset—that can sustain and guide major initiatives... versus waiting for results to happen only after lengthy, activity-driven designs take hold
- Use segmentation to succeed with at least some groups or parts of the challenge...versus getting stuck in solving the ‘whole’ problem all at once
- Get the flywheel moving for energy, credibility and momentum...versus continually fighting cynicism, passivity, and resistance
- Steadily build an ever increasing number of leaders at all levels...versus relying on the individual “heroic” leader

To date, a variety of conversations we’ve had with various education leaders have surfaced many fascinating, important and achievable performance challenges:

Statewide education departments

- Within the next 12 months, grow by at least 20% the number of districts earning “Level 1” federal designation status in special education
- Increase the percentage of students with completed parental paperwork to receive lunch reimbursement

- By July 2010, reduce the number of long-term suspensions by 20 percent, and the number of days absent from school by 20 percent
- By June 2009, increase the numbers of students reading a grade level (as measured on the DIBELS) by 10% in 20 Reading First schools by fully implementing all 3 tiers of reading instruction/intervention

School district

- Reduce district dropouts by 1,000 within 3 years
- In 22 under-selected schools, increase by 10% the number of families selecting these schools as one of their top two choices
- Increase by 20% the percentage of ESL children in our special program whose reading comprehension is at grade level within 6 months
- Increase parental consent for Medicaid reimbursement from 35% to 65%, while yielding at least \$1.2 million
- Resolve 50% of harassment and discrimination complaints within 10 days without any drop in actual or perceived fairness of the results

Conclusion

We do not discount what is different about the complex challenges facing education leaders who work so hard to build better futures for our students and our nation. But, in our work across so many sectors, we have learned that each industry brings with it a unique set of constraints and conditions within which to find more sustainable and productive approaches. We believe performance-and-challenge centric approaches to tackling many essential issues and opportunities can be very effective in the education sector.

During this economic crisis, the challenge to do even more in terms of student achievement with even fewer resources will require innovation and leadership. We invite you to think about this methodology, and challenge you to use our approach and put results first while cultivating the leadership potential in your organization. □



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