WHEN TRAINING ISN'T THE ANSWER

Diagnosing Performance Problems at the Systems Level

Dr. Kesha T. Ward
KT Ward Consulting

ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT | PERFORMANCE CONSULTING

I. Executive Summary

When a performance issue reemerges after training, the instinct is to re-evaluate the training's effectiveness, but the issue may have never been a training deficit. Training is effective for closing gaps in skill and knowledge. It is not particularly useful for addressing breakdowns in information, misaligned incentives, or structural barriers. When organizations misidentify these conditions as employee deficiencies, they risk investing in repeated training while leaving the root causes of poor performance unchanged.

This white paper draws on Mager and Pipe's classic performance-analysis question and Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model to distinguish a genuine skill gap from a systems gap. It then examines what an organizational development approach can offer when training has failed to produce or sustain the desired outcome. The key is to treat the system, not the employee, as the primary unit of diagnosis and repair.

II. The Hook - The Training Reflex

Performance has noticeably dipped, so someone orders another round of training. Employees begrudgingly attend, the feedback forms are positive, and within a few weeks, the performance numbers move in the right direction. Then, they slowly return to their previous low levels. The dip returns, and the response is to schedule yet another training, perhaps with a more polished slide deck.

The temporary improvement may appear to validate the need for the intervention but, in reality, it may be evidence that employees have always understood the performance expectations. For a short period, the training may re-emphasize performance standards and organizational priorities. Once that post-training honeymoon phase subsides, employees return to operating within the same conditions that shaped their performance before the training intervention.

This is a classic misdiagnosis repeated in a loop. The return of the performance issue should alter the diagnostic question. Leaders should first ask whether training is the appropriate intervention. This paper argues that training is a legitimate and evidence-based response to a genuine deficit in skill or knowledge. It addresses something employees do not know or do not yet know how to do.

But sometimes the cause of underperformance is a broken feedback loop, poor allocation of resources, or a process that makes the correct action more challenging than the incorrect one. In those cases, training does not quietly fail. It fails expensively. The organization pays for design, delivery, and the many hours of lost productivity. In return, the organization sees a short-lived improvement that initially looks like proof that the intervention was successful.

III. What Training Can and Cannot Fix

Thomas Gilbert and Robert Mager developed frameworks for diagnosing performance problems many years before "upskilling" became a business line item. Both challenged organizations to identify what is producing a performance gap before deciding on an intervention.

Mager and Pipe framed one part of the diagnosis as a simple test. Could the person do it if their job depended on it? If the answer is yes, the employee possesses the necessary skill. Additional

instruction is unlikely to resolve the problem because capability is not the binding constraint. The diagnosis must then move beyond capability and examine what is preventing or discouraging the desired performance.

Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model offers a systematic way to conduct a broader diagnosis. The model organizes six influences on performance into two categories: environmental and individual. Environmental support includes information, resources, and incentives. Individual factors include knowledge, capacity, and motives. These categories create a sequence for inquiry. Before asking what an employee lacks, the organization should examine whether expectations are clear and consequences support the desired outcome.

IV. The Real Cost of Repeated Training

Misapplied training does not fail all at once. It fails in a pattern, and the pattern is what makes it an expensive business activity.

The first cost is direct: the organization pays for design, facilitation, technology, materials, and employee time. The second is an opportunity cost. While the organization repeats an intervention aimed at employee performance improvement, the process, resources, or information continue to negatively impact performance. Subsequently, the original gap remains, and the delay in identifying the root cause may allow the issue to deepen.

The third cost is institutional credibility. Learning and Development interventions may appear ineffective in addressing the root cause even when the training is well intentioned and appropriately designed. The problem is that the intervention was tasked with solving a problem outside its capacity. Leadership may respond by switching the program or vendor, while employees conclude that training is the organization's predictable response to organizational issues it is unwilling to address.

The final cost is diagnostic silence. Employees are often the first to recognize when the performance problem originates outside of their competence. Training is often the only lever leadership will pull. Eventually, people stop trying to bring attention to the actual cause and comply by showing up for the next training session. In the process, the organization loses its most reliable diagnostic signal: the people closest to the problem have concluded that shedding light on the real issue is not worth the effort.

V. Diagnosing the Real Problem

A systems lens begins with the assumption that performance is produced through the interaction between people and their work conditions. What employees accomplish often reflects the relationship between their capabilities and the environment they work in. Before concluding that workers need more training, leaders should first determine whether the system makes the desired performance clear and worthwhile.

A practical diagnosis can begin with four areas of inquiry:

Information. Do employees know the performance expectations and what successful performance looks like? The expectations should be specific and connected to timely feedback. Leaders must

identify whether employees receive conflicting instructions or are evaluated by measures that are not fully transparent. When standards are unclear, or if feedback consistently arrives too late to guide future performance, additional instruction will not resolve the information failure.

Resources and tools. Do employees have sufficient time, authority, technology, and access to successfully complete the work as designed? Unreliable or outdated systems are evidence that the environment may be the main performance barrier. If seasoned employees know what to do but are not able to carry out tasks efficiently with the provided resources, the problem is not a lack of competence.

Incentives. What behavior does the organization reward? A company may emphasize quality while rewarding speed or encourage collaboration while only evaluating individual output. Employees respond to consequences built into the system. It is crucial that leaders identify whether formal reward systems, informal recognition, or disciplinary practices are aligned with stated performance expectations.

Structure. Where does the work slow down or break down? Unclear roles, an exhausting approval process, and fragmented decision-making can create failures that appear to be individual but are produced collectively. Mapping the workflow from beginning to end can reveal where the organization is inviting friction.

These questions should be answered with evidence, not assumptions. Leaders can observe the work and examine patterns in errors and delays, but they should also ask employees what is helping or preventing them from meeting expectations. Training is warranted when the inquiry identifies a genuine gap in knowledge or skill. When the evidence points elsewhere, the intervention must address the part of the system that is producing the gap.

VI. What an OD Approach Looks Like Instead

When a performance problem persists, an organizational development (OD) approach does not begin by selecting an intervention. It begins by identifying the conditions that produced the problem. Rather than treating employees as the primary unit of analysis, OD examines how people, processes, structures, and organizational expectations interact. This broader perspective allows leaders to distinguish an individual capability gap from a system that restricts capable people from performing successfully.

The people closest to the work must be involved in that diagnosis. Employees understand where procedures conflict, how informal practices differ from official policies, and where approval processes repeatedly stall. Their participation gives leaders access to knowledge that may not be visible through performance reports alone. It also prevents solutions from being designed around assumptions held by people who are removed from the day-to-day work.

The OD toolkit provides practical ways to uncover these conditions. Structured diagnostic interviews can reveal recurring experiences across roles or departments. Process mapping can show where work is delayed, duplicated, or handed off without clear accountability. An incentive-alignment review can identify where rewards and consequences encourage behaviors that contradict stated priorities. When roles and workflows are contributing to the problem, structural redesign can change how the work is organized and carried out. Each method directs

attention toward the conditions surrounding performance rather than automatically prescribing another course.

This approach places training among several possible interventions selected after the cause has been established. If employees lack essential knowledge or skill, instruction may be the appropriate response. If they already possess the necessary capability but encounter conflicting expectations, inadequate tools, misaligned incentives, or structural constraints, training asks them to compensate for failures they did not create.

The distinction is consequential. Training changes what people know or can do. Organizational development changes what the system enables them to do. When a performance problem survives repeated instruction, leaders should consider whether the enduring gap resides not in the workforce, but in the conditions under which the workforce is expected to perform.

VII. Illustrative Scenario

A customer service division was experiencing a steady increase in processing errors. Leaders responded by requiring the entire team to complete refresher training on transaction procedures. Error rates declined during the first several weeks after training, but within two months, they returned to their previous level. Management concluded that employees were failing to retain the material and began planning another mandatory session.

Before repeating the training, the organization conducted a broader performance diagnosis. Interviews confirmed that experienced employees understood the procedures and could accurately describe every step. Observation of the work revealed a different problem. A recent software update required employees to move between several screens to complete a transaction, but the system routinely timed out before all information could be entered. At the same time, employees were evaluated primarily on transaction speed. To meet the established productivity target, many had developed informal shortcuts that increased the likelihood of error.

The problem was that the environment made the correct procedure slower and more difficult while rewarding the speed achieved by bypassing it. Repeated training temporarily emphasized accuracy, but employees eventually returned to the behaviors reinforced by the system.

Instead of scheduling another course, the organization adjusted its productivity measures, worked with the technology team to reduce unnecessary steps, and created a process for employees to report recurring system barriers. Error rates declined without additional instruction. The original training had not failed because employees were unwilling or unable to learn. It failed because the organization continued to reward one behavior while asking employees to perform another.

VIII. What This Means for Leaders

When a performance problem returns after training, do not immediately authorize another course. Make three moves before investing in a new intervention.

First, ask the Mager and Pipe question. Could employees perform the task correctly if their jobs depended on it? Determine whether they can demonstrate the required behavior under the right conditions. If they can, stop treating the problem as a knowledge or skill deficit. Move the

diagnosis toward the conditions that are preventing or discouraging successful performance.

Second, conduct an environment audit before conducting a skills audit. Examine the information, resources, incentives, and structures surrounding the work. Confirm that expectations are clear and employees have adequate tools and access. Compare stated priorities with the behavior the organization rewards. Map the workflow to identify delays, conflicting responsibilities, and unnecessary approvals. Include employees in this inquiry because they experience the system in operation and can identify barriers that performance reports may conceal.

Third, treat the failure of training to stick as diagnostic information. A temporary improvement followed by relapse is not proof that employees need more instruction. It may show that they understood the expectations but returned to behaviors encouraged by their working conditions. Use the pattern as evidence. Identify what changed briefly after training, what remained unchanged in the environment, and what pressures eventually reasserted themselves.

Training should follow diagnosis. Do not ask employees to compensate for organizational conditions that leadership has the authority to change.

IX. The Real Diagnosis

The training reflex persists because a course is visible and can be relatively easy to authorize. It creates evidence of action without requiring leaders to examine the conditions that surround the work. But when the same performance problem returns, another round of instruction will reproduce the same temporary result unless the diagnosis changes.

The next question should be what the organization continues to make difficult, unrewarding, or impossible. That shift moves attention away from correcting employees and toward understanding the system shaping their performance.

Sometimes workers need additional knowledge, skill, or practice. When they already know what to do, however, training cannot repair unclear expectations, inadequate resources, contradictory incentives, or structural friction.

> **The problem was never that people did not know how. The system never allowed them to perform consistently.**

KT Ward Consulting helps leaders examine performance problems at the systems level and identify interventions that address the conditions producing the gap. The next step is a diagnostic conversation before another solution is prescribed.

References

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