Part One

The NuPlant Case Study

This part of the book is dedicated to the NuPlant case study. Chapter 1 briefly describes the situation leading to this particular performance improvement project, and chapter 2 presents the underlying mental model and templates used by the performance consultants in the case study as they identified the barriers to NuPlant's desired results and specified the changes necessary to obtain those results. Chapter 3 is a high-level walk-through of the project, including a week-by-week timeline spanning project design to final recommendations.

The case study is the story of Bert, a performance consultant, and how he changed the attitude of production supervisors and turned around the performance of NuPlant, all in a matter of months. Well, maybe that's a slight overstatement: The case study actually covers the performance analysis conducted by Bert and his team to determine the cause of poor supervisory and plant performance and his prescription for change.

The idea of this case study is to take you along on the performance analysis, to describe in detail what Bert does and why, and to see what he learns along the way.

Let's start the story of Bert and NuPlant at the beginning.

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Welcome to NuPlant

"They did WHAT?" Bert asked incredulously.

"Yup, last week someone put a dead rat in a supervisor's lunchbox and then welded the box to one of the steel girders out in the production area," the plant's human resources manager answered. "I'd say that things have been going from bad to worse. Every day there's more tension between production supervision and hourly personnel. The supervisors just have a generally bad attitude toward the hourly workers. That attitude is one reason we can't get our local union agreement signed. We need human relations training for our production supervisors—no doubt about it!"

The Request

The project began when Bert received a call from an acquaintance who headed the corporate training organization of Big Auto, a major U.S.-based automobile manufacturer. During this call, Bert learned the following:

- The human resources (HR) manager of Big Auto's newest and largest stamping plant (called NuPlant in this case study) had requested human relations training for first-line production supervisors from the stamping division's training organization.
- The division's training organization did not have the resources to respond to the request, so the request was referred to Big Auto's corporate training department.
- The director of corporate training was not convinced training was the solution and was interested in an outsider's view and opinion.

Key to this and any performance consulting project is having a contact or sponsor who understands that whatever is requested (in this case, training) is not always the solution to the problem. In this case, it was impolitic for the corporate training director to ignore the request for training even though she suspected this was not a training problem. She decided to use an outsider to present what would be seen as an objective view. Her choice of Bert was no accident because she knew he shared her view of training and performance.

The director of corporate training wondered if Bert and his organization would be interested in looking at this opportunity. If so, would Bert like to join her at NuPlant to take a closer look at the situation?

Bert said yes to both questions. His experience and belief in a model he called the anatomy of performance roused his curiosity about the perceived problem that caused the HR manager to conclude that training in human relations would benefit the plant's first-line production supervisors. Bert thought it was definitely worth a look.

Bert was a believer in the following performance consultant rule: You should never trust anyone's (particularly management's) description of

an apparent problem, probable cause, or preferred solution. The requestor is usually

- too far removed from the situation (and responding to "hearsay")
- not trained in observation and analysis
- heavily biased as to the probable cause and solution

Although the initial request to Bert was for human relations training for the first-line supervisors, Bert knew that he had to go see for himself what was going on at NuPlant.

Responding to the Request

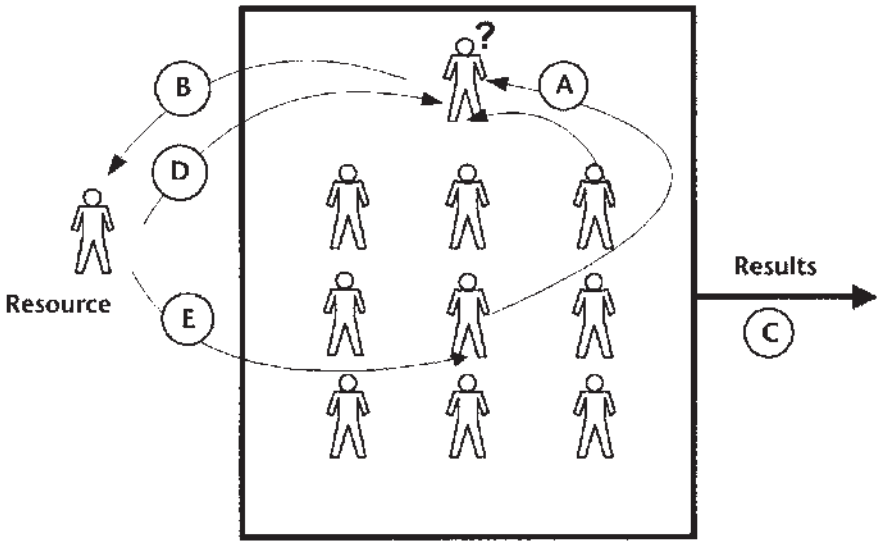
The request from the client is a critical point in this or any project. It is the critical juncture depicted in figure 1-1. Will the resource take path (D) or path (E)?

The response to a request such as, "We need human relations training for our first-line supervisors," can go in a variety of different directions, depending on the viewpoint, model, assumptions, and capability of the receiver of the request. If the resource takes path (D), likely "interventions" in response to this particular request could include the following:

- human relations training, with "human relations" being interpreted as any number of human relations knowledge and skill areas
- training in communications
- installation of a 360-degree feedback system
- changes in the performance management system
- an employee attitude survey
- team building
- a ropes course
- an analysis of the organization's culture

In reality, the proposed "intervention" will depend entirely on what the resource/consultant is capable of delivering. His or her capability influences the definition of the "problem" and the selection of an intervention. Unfortunately, in most cases, this approach via path (D) leads to a "buyer beware" situation for the client.

Figure 1-1. Typical performance consulting situation.



In contrast, the serious performance consultant remains solution-neutral. Bert's focus in a situation like this (indeed, in any situation) is to trace the symptom back to desired organization results to determine the performance context of the symptom/request and work from there (path E). To do this, he applies a conceptual framework called the anatomy of performance (AOP) and follows the results improvement process presented in the Introduction (According to Rummler [ATR] 1-1).

According to Rummler 1-1

Before we continue with the case study, I'd like to acquaint you with Bert's mental model for improving performance and the process he will be following on this project. Those items are discussed in the next chapter. Read on to see that, indeed, there is a method to his madness.

CHAPTER 1 HIGHLIGHTS

1. Performance problems in organizations tend to be defined by the solutions available.
2. Managers and executives need to be very careful when seeking help to solve a performance problem because the resource/consultant will tend to define the problem in terms of the solutions he or she is most comfortable with or capable of delivering.
3. A serious performance consultant must remain solution-neutral, take a good look for him- or herself, and trace the problem symptoms back to desired organization results.