



Get Out of the Training Box!

*From Training & Development to Performance Improvement
with The Six Boxes® Approach*



A White Paper from
The Performance Thinking Network
Carl Binder, PhD, CPT

Stuck in a Box?

Learning professionals in many organizations are involved in the transition from training and development to performance improvement, often aspiring to be *performance consultants*. Most of us – instructional designers, trainers, and training managers – seek to add measurable value to the organizations we serve, to help accelerate business results through people. In the course of conducting needs analyses, conversations with stakeholders and even while delivering training programs, our conversations with managers and individual contributors reveal a wide range of factors beyond skills and knowledge that either enable or obstruct performance. But for many reasons, we often get “stuck in the training box” – unable to apply what we discover to help align and coordinate *all* the factors, including training, that affect employee performance.

In part, departmental names, job titles and professional degrees hold us in place. If the office door says “Training,” then management expects us to deliver on that promise. While the emergence of HPI (Human Performance Improvement) and HPT (Human Performance Technology), approaches that take a more *systemic* view of factors that affect performance in organizations, has expanded our own appreciation for what is required to improve employee performance, such thinking has not necessarily touched our clients. They still want training and will sometimes actively deny us the opportunity to engage in discussions about *other* performance variables such as management practices, process improvement, compensation, or tools.

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This white paper explores challenges that many training and development professionals face related to the scope of their influence and impact, summarizes key elements of the Six Boxes Approach to performance improvement, and describes how this approach can help us transition from training and development to performance improvement.

Challenges for Training and Development

While training and development methods and programs are potentially powerful vehicles for accelerating performance in organizations, they never work in isolation. In fact, when disconnected from all the other factors that influence day-to-day employee behavior, they seldom yield hoped-for results.

While there are many ways to characterize the challenges faced by training professionals in modern organizations, there are at least four about which most of us will agree.

Challenge 1. Linking behavior to business results: Training is a common first choice of leaders, managers and human resource professionals when the goal is to accelerate job performance or eliminate performance gaps. Many business stakeholders and training

professionals assume that new or better skills and knowledge will accelerate productivity and quality, and enable employees to contribute to results results. While this might be true in many cases, it can be a very expensive assumption when skills and knowledge are *not* the most important limiting factors on performance.

When we ask what employees *need to know* to perform well, we're often asking for trouble, or at least for a bigger and more expensive training program than we might actually need. That's because analyses focused on skills and knowledge usually lack clear and direct links to business results or to the human performance required to achieve them. Instead, as you will see, we should first ask what employees must *do and produce*. Only then can we place skills and knowledge in the proper context, among multiple factors needed to support or accelerate performance.

Organizations often suffer from “bridges to nowhere,” a malady considered more fully in an earlier white paper (Binder, 2009a). They fund and create knowledge transfer programs and processes designed to support behavior *believed* to help the business, but not clearly connected to business results through specific work outputs or accomplishments that people produce. The result, often seen only in retrospect, can be programs that participants and their managers later tell us teach too much of the wrong things and not enough of what's actually needed to accelerate desired performance.

You will read later in this white paper how application of a model called the *Performance Chain* can significantly reduce the scope and costs of training while improving impact by drawing clear lines from behavior through work outputs to business results. Once we have established that line of sight from behavior to results, it becomes easier to focus on skills and knowledge actually needed to perform, and to scale back on “nice to know” training content.

Linking behavior to business results through the valuable products of that behavior helps us to determine what is actually needed, and helps employees understand how what they *do and produce* contributes to business success.

Challenge 2. Taking the whole performance system into account:

It is critical to understand how programs and processes for delivering skills and knowledge fit into the larger *system* of factors that influence performance. Otherwise, we can easily waste resources and fail to achieve performance goals by investing in training but not supporting its application on the job. Only with a view of how all parts of the performance system work together can our organizations hope to obtain an optimal return on all the investments they make in their people.

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Even if we, as training professionals, have a systemic or holistic view of how skills and knowledge fit with expectations and feedback, tools and resources, reward and

recognition, and so on, it is often difficult to draw our clients into this perspective. Thus, one of the most important challenges for us and for everyone in the organization is to take the whole system into account, communicate about its parts, and plan accordingly.

Challenge 3. Communicating and partnering with business stakeholders: To contribute to business results, we must communicate and partner with business stakeholders. This is critical if we hope to share an understanding, suggested above, of how all the parts fit together. Even within our conventional training roles, we need to *communicate* about business results and how we expect the programs and processes that we design and deliver to contribute to them.

It is certainly important to be able to converse in “business speak” and demonstrate awareness of strategic and tactical goals, challenges, and programs that business leaders and managers expect us to support. But it is at least as important that we find common ground for describing and discussing the *human* performance required for execution of strategies and tactics designed to achieve *business* goals. We need to communicate in order to understand and agree on the details.

It is in this communication about human performance and its drivers that partnerships with stakeholders often break down. Based on experience rather than on systematic analysis, business people often ask us to support behavior *that they believe to be important* in their employees. They may also make assumptions about what’s needed to drive that behavior. Whether it be training, compensation, “attitude” or some other variable, many of our clients have strong ideas and favorite solutions when it comes to enabling desired behavior. The fact that we often use different terminology, and different meanings of the same terminology, is a major obstacle to partnership around these topics and the critical decisions they require. Furthermore, our being placed “in the training box” sometimes means that business stakeholders discourage our efforts to talk about factors outside of training per se.

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While many training and development professionals have excellent and productive working relationships with internal clients and business stakeholders, many also express concerns about how best to communicate and partner with their internal clients in the process of analyzing needs and designing solutions. This is particularly important if they are attempting to “get out of the training box” and

expand their influence and recommendations beyond the scope of traditional training and development alone.

Challenge 4. Turning learning into performance: Finally, even when we create and implement training programs that demonstrably produce needed skills and knowledge in

employees, such learning is seldom enough to drive business results. People describe this challenge in many ways – *making training stick*, *turning learning into performance*, or *ensuring program ROI*. However we speak about it, the challenge is to work with business stakeholders to implement the non-training interventions necessary to ensure transfer of new learning into job performance.

We all know that when trainees learn new skills, application of those skills on the job demands that supervisors and managers expect them to apply the new learning, give appropriate and frequent feedback (at least in the beginning), match tools and resources to performance needs, and reward new behavior to ensure that it continues. When we send trainees back to work, the overall *performance system* needs to support and extend application of what they’ve learned.

Part of the challenge is to create methods and tools for follow-up and feedback to ensure learning transfer and application. These include factors *other than the design and delivery of training* that must be in place to ensure desired performance.

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But underlying this challenge is the previous one of communicating and partnering with business stakeholders, since they, not we, have control of many variables that influence performance. We need a language and a framework for discussing with business stakeholders what might be done to be sure the organization obtains the expected payoff for training investments.

How The Six Boxes® Approach Can Help

The Six Boxes Approach combines two models, plain English terminology, and a simple “logic” for understanding and improving performance.

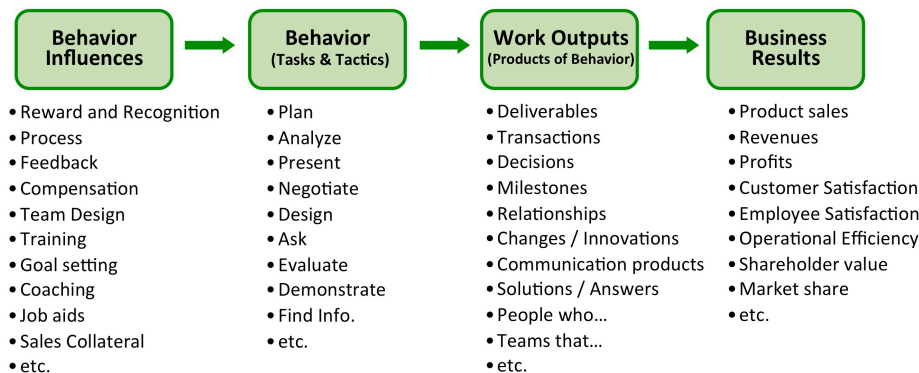
The first model is the *Performance Chain*, depicting what we often call the anatomy of human performance. It defines the distinct elements of human performance: *behavior* producing valuable *work outputs* that are valuable because they contribute to *business results*. We sometimes describe this model as “how behavior produces business results.”

There is often a lack of clarity in our professional and non-professional communications about these distinctly different elements of human performance. We use terms such as “outcomes” and “results,” but often in ways that do not clearly distinguish between behavior, work outputs, and business results. In order to be *actionable*, any description of human performance needs to clearly differentiate among these parts.



The Performance Chain

The Anatomy of Human Performance



As in any form of results-focused analysis, when we attempt to define and target performance for improvement, we work with the end in mind. Thus, we interview and observe people, consult with existing process or procedure documentation, and use logical analysis to pinpoint the key work outputs that are valuable because they contribute to business results. This is usually the most challenging part of the analysis.

Examining further, we check with internal and external customers to determine what makes for “good” work outputs. This is what many process improvement professionals call Voice of the Customer analysis, and it applies equally well for training and performance improvement professionals. We use business results, customer requirements, and sometimes organizational values to determine criteria for “good” work outputs. Defining criteria for good work outputs is very powerful because it enables us to decide what “counts” as acceptable performance, and what does not. It also helps to set expectations for performers, and to guide feedback that trainers, managers, and supervisors can deliver to improve and refine employee performance.

Once we define the valuable work outputs, our job of identifying key behavior becomes much easier. Anchoring our understanding in valuable work outputs enables us to distinguish between behavior that is actually required and behavior that we or others might have *assumed* is important, but is actually not. This process also allows us to identify *exemplary behavior* (tasks and tactics), also called *internal best practices*, that distinguishes those who produce target work outputs with the highest levels of productivity and quality from average performers. Designing training, coaching, and management programs and processes on a foundation of exemplary behavior can yield enormous payoffs in the form of accelerated business results, sometimes leading to improvements that are better by x2 or more.

Once we’ve identified business results, work outputs, and behavior, we can go to the next step, which is to select *measures*. The *Performance Chain* provides guidance for

selecting measures, since the changes we seek can be measured as improvements in business results, work outputs, and/or behavior. Work outputs that meet criteria can be *counted*, and it is often convenient to tally them often (e.g., daily, weekly, or monthly) to support frequent decisions about progress. Measures of business results, though important, are often lagging indicators and may not support frequent decisions. Measures of behavior can be expensive and, while worthwhile, might be most important when we are attempting to diagnose why work outputs or milestones are not being achieved as expected and to decide what changes in behavior ought to occur. See more about this topic in our chapter (Binder, 2009b) on measurement and evaluation.

Using The Performance Chain to Communicate with Stakeholders

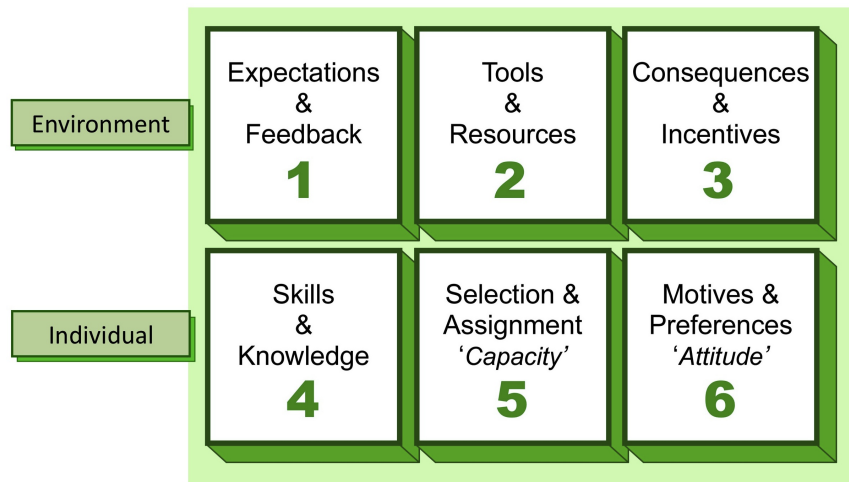
Elements of the Performance Chain provide a framework and vocabulary for speaking with business stakeholders. Business people usually have no difficulty recognizing the model as an accurate reflection of what they need from their people to achieve business results. Whether formally, by displaying the model on a white board or in a presentation, or informally by using the language and maybe sketching the model on the back of an envelope, we can speak with performers and management at all levels to determine the elements of performance needed to achieve business results.

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Such a discussion might be difficult in the beginning, partly because most people seem to think and speak easily about *behavior* and have more difficulty identifying work outputs. But as we partner with our clients and stakeholders using this language, the communication and collaboration process becomes easier over time. One of our colleagues, a Director of Learning and Performance at a major biotechnology company, conducts what he calls “performance chain meetings” with business stakeholders who seek his help in addressing performance challenges. In those meetings, he uses the model to work through and clarify elements of performance they seek to improve, linking work outputs and behavior clearly to the business results that frame the purpose of their work together. We’ve learned from work with leaders and managers that using the Performance Chain to define employee performance helps them set SMARTer performance goals and have conversations with their teams and individual direct reports that are immensely clarifying and productive (Riha and Binder, 2012).

The Six Boxes® Model: A Systemic Model of Behavior Influence

Once we define performance using the Performance Chain, creating a plan to accelerate needed behavior is relatively straightforward, if we use the *Six Boxes Model* as a guide.



This model, which has evolved over nearly 30 years of application (Binder, 1998; 2005), began as a plain English derivative of Thomas F. Gilbert's (1978) *Behavior Engineering Model*. Since that time, however, it has taken on a life of its own, with applications not envisioned by Gilbert, and is now used by many professionals around the world to conduct performance analyses, design solutions, implement programs and strategies, support human performance in process improvement, and develop managers and leaders.

The Six Boxes Model is a comprehensive framework that encompasses *all* the factors or influences known from research and practice to affect human behavior. Anything you can envision or select that is intended to influence behavior can be sorted into one or more of the “boxes” or understood as a linkage or relationship among the boxes. Even something as abstract as *trust* in human relationships can be analyzed as the product of alignment between the expectations set between people and the resources and/or consequences provided for meeting those expectations.

The Six Boxes Model provides a comprehensive framework that encompasses all of the factors or behavior influences known from research and practice to affect human behavior.

It is relevant for the intended audience of this white paper to mention that this model evolved from Gilbert's Behavior Engineering Model when the author was working in “box 4” – as an instructional designer and program developer, creating and implementing programs to transform bankers into sales people. Those programs demanded implementation planning that went beyond the scope of classroom training, requiring participants to practice in the field and apply new learning on the job.

We needed to examine in partnership with our business clients how best to arrange the other conditions, beyond skills and knowledge interventions, to ensure improvements in

job performance. While Gilbert's model was quite useful for us specialists, its arcane language did not communicate effectively to our business clients. We began testing different labels for the cells of the model, settling on the current language some time in the mid 1980s. Later, a client suggested we call it The Six Boxes. Since then we've expanded its applications beyond Gilbert's, with more types of users.

Six Boxes® Performance Thinking

The Six Boxes Model has served as a *communication tool* in conversations with clients, along with the Performance Chain and the logic of analyzing the performance chain and then re-assembling it in an optimized way. More recently our clients have referred to use of these models, language and logic as “performance thinking” (Binder, 2005) – a shared framework for thinking and talking about human performance, the factors that influence behavior, and what can be done to improve them.

At several of our client organizations, colleagues have created and implemented initiatives to drive “performance thinking across the enterprise,” using our programs and materials to expand understanding of performance and its drivers among performance professionals, business managers and leaders. The practical results of this strategy for training and development professionals have included easier communication and more effective partnering with business leaders and stakeholders.

Selected Details about The Six Boxes® Model

Our two models and performance improvement logic provide a rich framework for understanding and improving performance. Participants in our programs for performance practitioners and business leaders/managers continue to learn and deepen their understanding of performance as they complete projects and management plans with coaching support, sharing their new learning with one another. While there are countless details about these models that we can discuss, several are especially important to training professionals:

Box 1 is the most important: Until we gain clarity and alignment among stakeholders about what is expected and how it contributes to business results, investments in the other “boxes” will yield relatively low returns. Without feedback about how one is doing in relationship to expectations, performance is equally unlikely to improve. We focus, then, on box 1 at the outset, clarifying expectations and arranging frequent feedback through the entire performance system to maximize the impact of any interventions or elements in the other categories of the model.

Notice that Box 4 in the model is not labeled “training.” That is because there are many different ways to obtain or provide skills and knowledge, even including elements from other boxes.

Box 4 is skills & knowledge, not only training: Notice that Box 4 in the model is not labeled “training.” That is because there are many different ways to obtain or provide

skills and knowledge, including elements from boxes 1-3. For example, managers who set clear expectations and provide timely and effective positive and corrective feedback (box 1) can enable their people to learn new skills and knowledge. A good job aid, while serving as a tool (box 2), can also help people acquire new skills and knowledge, if used repeatedly. We can employ formal training programs as well as job swapping, peer mentoring, informal OJT, and many other vehicles to provide skills and knowledge. One of our strategies as performance professionals is to discover the most cost-effective, convenient, and rapid vehicles for developing skills and knowledge.

Training implementation usually requires multiple boxes: Even the simplest training programs generally encompass additional components beyond skills and knowledge. Training programs, to be effective, must be accompanied by clear expectations and feedback from both trainers and managers about program engagement (box 1). Training often includes job aids or online reference tools (box 2), and may involve formal or informal consequences and incentives such as games where success is determined by how much one studies, point systems, or informal “atta boys” and “atta girls” from facilitators (box 3). Acquiring new skills and knowledge can often require learning-to-learn skills such as how to study the material, how to use the eLearning system, and so on (box 4).

Ensuring transfer of training requires boxes 1-3 on the job: Our most effective training programs align the skills and knowledge they teach with on-the-job conditions for continuing to refine and apply the new learning. This was the topic for conversations that led to our original development of the Six Boxes Model. We spoke with managers before program design and implementation to find out how *they* could set expectations

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and provide feedback for program participation and application on the job; what tools might help learners and their managers ensure application; how much extra time (a resource in box 2) might be required; and what formal or informal consequences supervisors or managers could use to recognize and motivate their people to do things the “new way” in accordance with what they learned during training.

Program implementation and transfer of training are rich areas for applying Six Boxes® analysis and design to ensure that training pays off. This application offers a relatively easy entry-point for discussions with business stakeholders. We need not appear to be telling business people how to do their jobs. We’re simply partnering with them to gain alignment and to plan for conditions that ensure we get maximum business impact from training. These discussions, however, can lead to more substantive conversations about overall conditions for job performance. Simply engaging in these dialogs, if done tactfully and in plain English, can earn the respect of business stakeholders and pique their interest in learning more about this approach to performance.

What we hear from our colleagues who've used Six Boxes Performance Thinking to bridge the gap between training and job performance is that the language and models of this approach allow them to deliver value and partner more effectively with their clients.

One of the messages we can deliver gently to business leaders, and at the appropriate time, is that research from multiple sources reveals a roughly 80/20 rule in leverage for improving human performance between the top and the bottom "rows" of the Six Boxes Model. If the top three boxes are not well aligned and coordinated, training can become an expensive waste. If, on the other hand, we align and manage the top three boxes, we can often reduce the time and cost of training while increasing its measurable impact.

Addressing Training and Development Challenges

Let us summarize how the Six Boxes Approach can help address the training and development challenges mentioned at the beginning of this white paper.

1. Linking behavior to business results: Using the language and logic of the Performance Chain, we can work with business stakeholders to clarify the links between the behavior of people on the job and results the business needs us to achieve. That is because we focus first on work outputs, the things that people produce with their behavior. If we can determine what those are, and what makes them "good" and therefore valuable, we can then discover what behavior is needed to produce them. At that point, we know what behavior to work on, and can determine what training and other behavior influences are needed to produce the desired behavior. We can also use this understanding to empower employees by drawing a clear line of sight from their day-to-day (and often seemingly mundane) work activities to important results for the company.

By adopting the conceptual framework and language of this approach, whole organizations can apply systems thinking to achieve continuous performance improvement.

2. Taking the whole performance system into account: What we call the "performance system" really encompasses both the Performance Chain – which clarifies goals and expectations – and the Six Boxes Model. The former helps us define and target the elements of human performance. The latter gives us a way to analyze and communicate with others about *all* the factors that might be obstructing or enabling target behavior, and to develop plans (sometimes called performance designs) for accelerating that behavior. In this context, training and development fits into the larger picture, and we can talk with stakeholders about it. By adopting the conceptual framework and language of the Six Boxes Approach, whole organizations can apply *systems thinking* to achieve continuous performance improvement.

3. Communicating and partnering with business stakeholders: It should be obvious by now that the plain English and self-evident models of this approach provide easy communication tools for just about anyone with whom you might work. Combined with your own knowledge of the business, the Performance Chain allows you to ask good questions and to clarify how the behavior of people can best contribute to business results – by producing valuable work outputs. Using the Six Boxes Model (whether explicitly as a “model” or simply with the language of each box) in conversations allows you to investigate and conduct dialogs with business stakeholders and employees at all levels

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about the factors currently obstructing and enabling performance, and what can be improved. Even if you continue to focus exclusively on training deliverables, these conversations can lead toward more systemic thinking and planning, increasing the likelihood that your programs will succeed in accelerating desired business results, combined with factors in the other “boxes.”

4. Turning learning into performance: This, of course, is the reason you exist from the business perspective. Your job is, in one way or another, to help accelerate *the right* job performance. By using these models to clearly define requirements, and partnering with clients to align and coordinate all important factors that influence employee behavior, you can maximize the likelihood that your work will help people measurably improve results in their day-to-day work activities. You can definitely “make training stick.”

Conclusion

By now we hope that you see the potential implications and applications of Six Boxes performance thinking. The models and logic of this approach reflect the essence of methods often called Human Performance Technology or Human Performance Improvement, without some of the conceptual and linguistic complexity. This approach can help training professionals make the transition to a more systemic treatment of the factors that influence performance, loosening the confines of the “training box” while connecting employee behavior to business results and partnering with business stakeholders to accelerate performance.

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The Performance Thinking Network

The Performance Thinking Network offers programs that enable performance professionals, including training specialists, to apply Six Boxes Performance Thinking in the analysis, design, and implementation of performance interventions and systems. We also provide programs for leaders and managers, using the same models and logic, to help them manage and coach performance day-to-day, and to collaborate with performance professionals using Performance Thinking to drive continuous improvement.

For More Information:

The Performance Thinking Network
Tel. 800-358-3629
info@sixboxes.com
www.sixboxes.com

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Dr. Carl Binder began his career in 1971 as a doctoral student at Harvard University with B. F. Skinner, continuing his laboratory and applied research in instructional design and performance measurement as Associate Director of The Behavior Prosthesis Laboratory during the 1970's. He was a consultant to dozens of educational and public sector agencies during that period, introducing fluency-based instructional methods and data-based decision-making to managers, administrators, and educators in a wide range of settings. Since 1982 he has founded four consulting firms while continuing research, development and dissemination of systematic performance improvement methodologies. Widely published in education and educational policy, sales, marketing, customer service, instructional design, knowledge management, performance measurement and human performance technology, he is an acclaimed speaker and international consultant. He advises Master's and Doctoral theses at universities both within and outside the U.S., and delivers workshops and coaching as part of the Performance Thinking Network. He is a long-time thought leader and activist in the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) and the International Association for Behavior Analysis (IABA), has been awarded the Fred S. Keller Award for Contributions to Education by the American Psychological Association, the Honorary Lifetime Member Award and the Thomas F. Gilbert Award for contributions to the profession by ISPI.

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