

DO NOT CONFUSE THE FLOW OF BEHAVIOR AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS WITH THE VARIABLES THAT INFLUENCE IT

Carl Binder, CPT, PhD

Note: This commentary is part of an ongoing dialogue that began in the October 2011 *Performance Improvement* special issue entitled Exploring a Universal Performance Model for HPT: Notes From the Field.

MY PREFERENCE, IN part I suppose because I was trained as a behavior scientist, is not to use a model of performance that integrates into a single graphic both process flow and the contingencies or variables that affect behavior. For me, the problem with equating a process flowchart with the contingencies affecting behavior is that *input* is a broad term, not always referring simply to behavioral antecedents (discriminative stimuli), and an *output* is not always a functional consequence for the behavior. I think it is better to define *accomplishments* (what I personally call *work outputs*), the *behavior* needed to produce those work outputs, and then the variables likely to influence that behavior—what we call *behavior influences*.

Stated differently, I find it misleading to confuse the flow of activity or behavior in the flow diagram with the contingencies of reinforcement and the other environmental variables, as well as the variables in the performer (the person who behaves) such as skills (prerequisite repertoire), capacity (to use Tom Gilbert's term [1978, p. 83]), and individual reinforcer preferences ("motives and preferences").

I have always preferred to have a model of performance (behavior producing work outputs that contribute to business or organizational results) and a separate model of the variables that influence behavior. That is why I use the Six Boxes® model (www.SixBoxes.com) linked to the performance chain. But this is just a choice, perhaps an intellectual preference. I find intertwining the description of behavior

and accomplishments with the description of functional variables to be confusing, to both me and others.

To many of us steeped in behavior science or behavior engineering, the flowchart model seems initially elegant, and of course it lines up nicely with a process view of the world. But I would rather see Rummmler's (Rummmler, Ramias, & Rummmler, 2010) beautiful models of organizational performance used as descriptions of accomplishments and flows at various levels in the organization. And when it comes to the variables that drive the behavior to make those accomplishments happen, I prefer another model of behavior influence. I find that our clients understand this approach quickly, and it is quite practical or actionable. To me, that is the ultimate test.

I have no objection to the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) adopting any model that most people can accept and use. However, I think that in the end, the models will show themselves to be useful to people, or not, and that the evolutionary consequences will select models based on their value to users. I have great faith in selection by consequences, and it often works differently in different subcultures (e.g., types of users). I do not expect unanimity on this issue, and anything that the organization "declares" will likely be about as narrow in its appeal as is the conglomerate human performance technology (HPT) model on the ISPI website, which is quietly sneered at by a lot of our colleagues because it seems to have everything in it but the kitchen sink.

I think that in the end, the models will show themselves to be useful to people, or not.

My only HPT must-haves are that we focus on valuable accomplishments (work outputs) before we look to behavior and that we have a systemic understanding of all the variables that affect behavior that line up with the findings of behavior science. Those are the only unifying principles I can find in our rather diverse field.

What is quite interesting to me is that I do not think, based on a lot of contact with people in both chapters and internationally, that most HPT and ISPI participants use or fully appreciate the distinctions among behavior, accomplishments, and the business or organizational results to which they contribute. To me, without a clear delineation of these three elements of performance

anatomy, we slip back into the cult of behavior without a link from behavior to business results.

With this same issue in mind, I have recently polled quite a few groups within ISPI chapters and elsewhere to find out what they mean by the terms *outcomes* and *results*. I have found that each of those terms can refer to behavior, work outputs (accomplishments), or business and organizational results, depending on who is talking. With such a diversity of terminology, no wonder there is so much confusion. I recommend that we get these basic conceptual distinctions clear before we try building a universal model of performance. 🌟

References

- Gilbert, T.F. (1978). *Human competence: Engineering worthy performance*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Rummler, G.A., Ramias, A.J., & Rummler, R.A. (2010). *White space revisited: Creating value through process*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

CARL BINDER, CPT, PhD, is cofounder of the Performance Thinking Network (www.SixBoxes.com). He began his career as a behavior scientist, studying with B. F. Skinner in experimental psychology at Harvard University. Since then, he has conducted basic and applied research in learning and performance, founded four consulting firms, and works with organizations around the world to improve learning, productivity, culture, and employee engagement. Widely published in fields that include education, educational policy, instructional effectiveness, sales, marketing, customer service, knowledge management, and performance improvement, he received the American Psychological Association's Fred S. Keller Award in 2004 and ISPI's Honorary Lifetime Member Award in 2009. He may be reached at carlbinder@sixboxes.com.