

The Odd Couple: From OD and HPT to High-Performance Consulting

by Tim Johnson and the Bandag Performance Consulting Team

Combining a human performance technology (HPT) organization with an organizational design (OD) organization can sometimes result in a dysfunctional marriage—assuming the bride and groom even get to the altar. This article, from a theoretical as well as practical perspective, describes one group’s odyssey to improve its internal performance consulting practice.

Background

In 1999, Bandag, Incorporated, a global manufacturing company with headquarters in the Midwest, went through what was for the company a major organizational change. As a result, three existing staff groups under three separate vice presidents were combined into one core group with a sub-department called Performance Consulting. The members of this group came from a rather eclectic background: Two had formal training in OD, two had strong HPT and instructional systems design backgrounds, and one had extensive experience as an instructor. These five people became the “consultants” in the new organization and also interfaced with five other team members responsible for graphics and message design, audio-visual support, facility

management, internal communications, and department administration.

The initial challenge was to “marry” the various disciplines brought to the table by the five consultants in order to better meet the increasing demands on the new department. As might be expected, there were some passionate discussions at early staff meetings. Each consultant had at least one favorite model (indeed, an early 8’ by 12’ version of the International Society for Performance Improvement’s [ISPI] Performance Improvement Model adorns a wall of the atrium of the corporate “learning center”).

Looking for Common Ground

The new manager of this new department was keenly aware of the fact that to be successful, the group would need to present a united vision to its internal clients. At the time, Bandag was going through a difficult change in direction in order to revive declining sales. Each consultant was assigned to be liaison and support for each of the company’s several core functions: sales, marketing, research and development, manufacturing, finance and administration, and information services. Department members practically became surrogate staff members for these

departments—attending all their normal staff meetings and helping plan and facilitate alignment of their work processes to the new business direction. On many occasions it was necessary for one or more department members to team up to provide integrated performance solutions to clients. This made it critical for department members to approach problems or opportunities in a similar manner while leveraging their unique expertise.

Given the background of the new manager, it would have been easy to simply force fit OD into the new department as the “way we do business.” However, the manager was mindful of the fact that the non-OD consultants had been successful prior to the formation of the new department and that it might be possible to build on the best accomplishments of both fields. He was quick to help the group understand that, in spite of perceived differences, HPT and OD had more in common than not. For example:

- Both were focused on improving organizational results.
- Both took a systems view of performance.
- Both used some form of analysis or diagnosis as an early step in decision making.
- Both focused on how to improve internal processes.
- Both considered the needs of the customer or stakeholder.

In addition to these similarities, there appeared to be some differences, at least in the way the two functions previously worked in the organization:

- OD practitioners tended to work more with senior-level managers, whereas HPT practitioners tended to become more involved with first-line supervisors and managers, as well as general staff and production employees.
- OD was entrenched in the strategic planning process of the organization. HPT practitioners were often charged with helping implement the results of the strategic planning process, although they were seldom involved in the initial process.
- Training requests almost always were funneled to the HPT group, which also housed a curriculum design and development function before the organizational change.
- Team development/facilitation requests were usually handled by the OD members.

An Epiphany

Several members of the Performance Consulting team were able to attend ISPI's 2000 International Performance Improvement Conference & Expo (which occurred about four months after the department was formed). It helped that both HPT practitioners had strong backgrounds with the Society and that one was serving on the Board of Directors. It also helped that the department manager saw this conference as a way to learn more about the HPT field and how the two disciplines might work together.

The highlight of the conference was a standing-room-only joint session by Don Tosti and Geary Rummler on culture and

organizational performance. The department manager's first words after that session were, “That's what OD is all about!” This was countered by the HPT department members, who replied, “That's what HPT is all about!”

Thus, the honeymoon ended and the marriage began.

An Integrated Model

Early attempts at integrating the various models and tools resulted in a simple “open systems” model for the team to build on in working with clients. With the central focus on performance, the model was useful in highlighting the need to identify business and client needs, measure business outcomes and process outputs, and account for major organizational perspectives (business strategy, organizational culture, and work processes) that impact performance. Although simple, the model did not provide common tools nor did it integrate past tools used by the consultants. There were some shared HPT and OD tools and approaches each consultant found useful, but there was no cohesive or unifying framework with which the group could hang these ideas and methods together.

The unifying framework came through exposure to an organizational change process called the Organizational Effectiveness Cycle, developed by a division of Franklin Covey. This model borrows from the broad principles of open systems and from various change models of the last 50 years. Sister models are known as organizational systems design. Covey consultants modified this model to integrate with their personal and interpersonal management materials.

The model focuses on the inter-relationship of four factors that affect success of an organization and the processes and systems that support each: personal, interpersonal, managerial, and organizational behavior. The model provides a framework for conducting what is referred to as a “4DL” process: diagnose, design, develop, deliver, and learn.

In application, this process proved to be very similar to the ADDIE model with which most ISPI members are familiar (analyze, design, develop, implement, evaluate.) A significant benefit of using this process was that at face value it appeared to satisfy the interests of members of the department with both HPT and OD backgrounds. The model helped the group look at the way it approached its business and determine how best to integrate and maximize the talents each person brought to the table.

The transition from the odd couple of OD and HPT was not necessarily an easy journey, but as this model was applied, there were some key learning points that contributed to the success of the department. These are summarized below.

- Clients don't care what you call yourself. They only want help achieving business goals.

- Both HPT and OD practitioners have more success when they approach clients with the language of business, rather than the jargon of their respective fields. Thus, whatever the department chooses to call itself, it must perform its work using the language of its clients.
- There are several useful diagnostic processes from each field. All could be effective. The task was to match the right process to the needs of the client.
- No one size fits all.
- Work to establish a collaborative relationship with the client; avoid working as a “pair of hands” or “expert” unless absolutely required.
- Get the client involved—if the consultant is doing more work than the client, the ownership isn’t where it should be.
- Play off of each other’s strengths. Use weekly staff meetings to update each other on client needs and work in progress and to gain insight from other department members. Consult in pairs to learn from one another and provide developmental feedback on consulting skills.
- Let go of the individual field of expertise identity—a department member may have an OD, HPT, or ISD background, but to the client, each department member represents “performance consulting.”
- Build on and share in early successes to build momentum and credibility with clients.
- Periodically use your own framework or model to assess your own effectiveness. We called this periodic self-assessment “looking in the mirror.”
- Partner with other functions within your organization, as well as with external consultants, to overcome capability gaps and better achieve results.

The journey is still in progress, but some strong strides have been made. Today, it’s rare to hear anyone in the performance consulting group refer to OD or HPT; it is rarer still to hear those words outside the group. There have been many steps forward and a few steps backward, but for the most part, the direction is positive. Below is a list of the work that has been going on in the past three or four years:

- Developing and implementing a balanced scorecard process
- Helping the senior management team install a replicable strategic planning and business review process
- Developing a process for organizational alignment (linking individual and departmental goals and objectives to business objectives)
- Developing and implementing a companywide performance management process and supporting software system
- Managing the design and development of performance-based training (and measuring the return)
- Implementing high-performance team practices at all levels of the organization
- Designing and implementing a new go-to-market process to support the new business direction.

Masters Statement

What defines my mastery?

Just as the misalignment of tires is not always obvious, the misalignment of people, processes, and systems in organization can be subtle yet equally as destructive to goal achievement. Just as tires become misaligned from hazards in the environment, so do organizations.

I have found it helps to partner with leaders to diagnose performance gaps from a systemic perspective. As the leader of a diverse team of consultants, my challenge is to model the alignment process within the group so that everyone personally experiences alignment by focusing their expertise on client needs. Mastery for the team has been in the areas of systems design (the what) and consulting skills (the how). My advice is to renew yourself by applying the approaches you use when consulting with others to yourself. Becoming a master performance consultant requires continuous self-alignment.

This year’s ISPI President, Guy Wallace, has established a Presidential Initiative Task Force to help define several things: the field itself, how HPT relates to other disciplines, and what these issues mean to ISPI. He has often stated that it is his view that the “umbrella is large”—meaning there is room for many ways to do the business of HPT—and that we have many “sister” disciplines with whom we can link and work together.

Based on the experience of this small internal consulting group, with the right reasons for doing business, we do have many opportunities to build on the best work of different disciplines to enhance our value to our clients. This group has found OD and HPT to be more than merely compatible; it has found the two approaches as complementary. The marriage is definitely working. 🌈

Tim Johnson is a founding member of Bandag’s performance consulting team. He has a master’s in Organizational Behavior from Brigham Young University and 22 years of experience as an external/internal consultant and manager. Three performance consultants provide additional support at Bandag. **Andrew Hall**, also with a master’s in Organizational Behavior from BYU, has a 20-year mix of internal and external consulting. His current focus is on business planning processes, including balanced scorecards and individual accountability. **John Swinney**, CPT, brings a 30-year affiliation with ISPI as well as being a past ISPI president and co-founder and president of the Kansas City ISPI chapter. His current focus is with Bandag’s innovation group in planning and organizational development. Finally, **Mike Vanhala**, who holds a master’s in Curriculum and Instruction from Southern Illinois University, has 10 years of experience as an instructional designer, project manager, and internal consultant. His current focus is on sales force performance and customer service and support. In addition to the consultants, there are five other team members who provide services including learning center management, employee communications, and curriculum/media design.