Winning Every Time: Six Ways to Make Large-Scale Performance Interventions Succeed

by Ray Svenson, CPT

Large-scale performance interventions carry high risk and often fail; some say as many as 70% fail. The reasons for failure usually have more to do with engaging and working with the sociopolitical system and human dynamics than with doing a good job of planning, analysis, and design. As performance technologists, we tend to focus on the arts of analysis and design, because these are our special expertise.

I have personally been involved in more than 100 large-scale performance improvement interventions over the past 25 years. Some example categories include:

- Learning and development strategy for the whole business
- Leadership development strategy
- Organization design and business process re-engineering
- Integrating training and development with other human resources processes
- Business strategy implementation

Most of these projects were successful, and some were not.

There are six ways you can engage the sociopolitical system to greatly increase the odds of success on large projects. As I look back on my own work, one or more of these was always missed within projects that failed.

1. Getting power from the power structure
2. Engaging key stakeholders
3. Finding the *natural structure*
4. Building confidence through storytelling
5. Designing conversations to build commitment
6. Managing the predictable mysteries of human dynamics

Getting Power From the Power Structure

Jane is the recently hired vice president of training for a large company. She was hired because in her last assignment she successfully transformed training from a reactive catalog training delivery function to a dynamic, business-driven learning system, and she is expected to do it in this new job on a larger scale.

Jane knows that, even with the vice president title, she does not have much power and will need help from the power structure to accomplish her assignment. She will do three key things:

- Engage an executive sponsor(s).
- Recruit an executive steering team.
- Use the sponsors and steering team in a way that brings the necessary power to bear to ensure success.

Her boss is the obvious choice for an executive sponsor, but he is the head of human resources and does not have any power over most of the key departments that must buy in to the initiative. The president of the company has most of the critical departments reporting to him, so Jane and her boss decide that the president and her boss should serve as cosponsors.

The sponsors appoint the executive steering team. For this team, Jane and the sponsors select vice presidents of functions where the training can make an important contribution to the performance of the overall business. It does not matter that a few of these officers will be hard to sell on some of the ideas the project is likely to propose. She needs these people to buy in, or implementation will fail, so it is better to have them on the team and deal with their issues in that arena.

Once the sponsors and the executive steering team have been engaged, Jane uses them at critical points in the project:

- Approval of the project scope, objectives, deliverables, time line, and cost
- Approval of the analysis findings and the resulting design requirements
- Approval of the design for the new company-wide training system
- Approval of the implementation plan and support for the business case and funding to go forward
- Support for implementation over the next three years.

Jane makes sure that each sponsor and steering team member is interviewed as part of the analysis phase. These interviews allow the sponsors and members to give their business input and to get them thinking about the implications of the project for their own departments and for the business as a whole.

The sponsors chair the steering team meetings and Jane facilitates them. Before each meeting, she makes sure that each sponsor and member has a private briefing to give them a chance to ask questions and raise objections. During the meetings, Jane facilitates the group in order to wrestle with the difficult political and resource issues that she has no power to resolve without them. Between meetings she uses them to help engage people in their own organizations in the various project tasks and to help manage the inevitable political dynamics. The big showstopper issues all get addressed with the power players and get resolved one way or another. Avoiding them is not an option, and Jane and her boss alone lack the clout.

You can see by this little story that there is power in engaging the power structure. Fortunately, there are some easy-to-understand ways to accomplish it.

Engaging Key Stakeholders

Key stakeholders are the people who will be most affected by the outcome of your initiative. You need to engage them to understand and meet their needs and to understand and deal with their most likely objections and resistances.

A number of years ago, my team and I were engaged by a company that operates a major oil pipeline to develop a qualification system for all the technicians and operators in the pump stations and at their marine terminal. The stimulus for this project was an audit by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the federal regulatory body that oversees the pipeline. The BLM found in its audit that the qualification records for technicians and operators were inadequate. The technicians and operators were up in arms because they considered themselves highly qualified professionals and resented the idea that they would all have to re-qualify for their jobs.

There was no way we could develop and implement a new qualification system without the active cooperation of the operators and technicians. Fortunately for us, they organized their own operator and technician advisory board to represent themselves to their management on the qualification issue. Management supported them, and we had an initial meeting to lay out our project approach for developing the qualification system. This meeting got a little hot at times, but it gave management an opportunity to dispel misconceptions and answer questions that were bothering the workers. By the end of the meeting, the group understood that management had no choice but to comply with the BLM requirements, and the system would be most fair and effective if the operators and technicians helped construct it.

The operator and technician advisory board, with management support, selected a subset of their group as a design team to work to design the overall system. They also nominated a large pool of master performers and subject matter experts to work with us to develop the qualification instruments for the myriad of critical technical tasks associated with operating and maintaining the pipeline. The people on the design team were some of the strongest skeptics and were informal leaders of the group. We knew that if they supported the design of the system, their peers were likely to support it as well.

After this initial meeting with the advisory board, we got outstanding cooperation from the people on the design team and from the individuals who helped us develop the hundreds of qualification instruments for specific tasks. They took great pride in building the best, most technically sound and operationally practical system they could. When the design and development were complete, we reviewed it with the operator and technician advisory board. The design team, which had been the sharpest critic, helped explain and sell it. In the end, everyone recognized this as a necessary pill to swallow and helped build a system that would add real value in qualifying new hires or people who moved to new assignments.

Finding the *Natural Structure*

The architect for a high school or a church will begin by developing, with the building committee, a list of functional requirements. The architect will then come back with a series of architectural renderings representing different ways the building could be constructed and different aesthetic approaches. The building committee will like some, but not all, of these ideas. They will often like some features of one plan and other features of another plan. The architect will keep drawing new alternatives until the committee agrees on one that the members like. All the architect's alternatives would have met the functional requirements, but the one that is selected is what I call the *natural structure.*

The same idea applies to the architecture of a performance system. There are always a number of different solutions that will satisfy the functional requirements. When I am working with a design team, I use the architect and building committee metaphor. We get agreement on the functional requirements, and then I present a series of straw models representing different approaches that meet the requirements. The design team will usually compare the alternatives and select features they like from more than one. The final design is often none of the original straw models but some hybrid combination.

In the process of developing and comparing alternative designs, the architect or performance system designer is the expert on what will work structurally. A performance system is a complex of processes, practices, organization structure, job and team design, metrics, skills and knowledge, and so on. When I am working with a design team, I take the role of the expert performance systems architect to keep them from selecting a design that I believe will not work or will not work well. The design team members are the experts on what they can make work practically, politically, and aesthetically.

The important issue in the end is that the client must feel comfortable with the design and believe that it is within their capacity to sell it to their stakeholders and to implement it—the *natural structure.*

Building Confidence Through Storytelling

The map is not the territory. The journals of Lewis and Clark give us a more complete understanding of what they encountered than the maps they drew.

When you and your design team design a complex, new human performance system, you are taking people on an exploration into unknown territory (unless you are just making incremental changes to an existing system). Your charts and graphs and descriptions, containing concepts laden with bullet points on PowerPoint® slides, are like Lewis and Clark's maps. They give some idea of where you are going, but they lack the richness of the journals, so people, whether they admit it or not, will have a hard time imagining the new world to which you are taking them. When people cannot imagine the new world and their place in it, they are likely to resist going there. Storytelling is a great way to enable people to imagine the new world. Storytelling, together with the charts, graphs, and slides, gives a complete picture. Lewis and Clark's stories about the rivers, mountains, native peoples, animals, and plants they encountered, plus the sheer adventure of the trip, drew enormous interest from thousands of people who wanted to go and see for themselves.

In addition to being a useful tool for selling people on going to the new world, storytelling is actually a very useful design tool. When I am working on designing a new performance system, I imagine people working and conducting business in the new system. I tell myself the story. If I cannot imagine how people will work in the new system or how the new system will handle the various situations that are likely to arise, I do not have a workable design.

Working with the design team on alternative designs, I will sometimes use the story as a device to test those alternatives. I play the role of various characters in the new world and ask the design team to throw me questions and situations to work through. I stay in the role when answering the questions, and only return to my real role as designer when the exercise is complete. Because stories are about real life in the new world, they are so full of rich detail that you can never tell the complete story; there is no such thing. That is the beauty of having the listeners question the storyteller. It enables you to bring out the details that are important to that listener, not just the parts you thought were important.

Once we have a design with which the design team is comfortable, I like to test the team members' ability to tell the story. If they can tell the story themselves, I know that they understand the new world the design has envisaged and that they can help others to understand it. If design teams and implementation teams do not understand the new world toward which they are heading, the project is headed for a world of hurt.

In my experience, design teams and implementation teams gain enormous confidence when they realize they understand the new world by being able to tell the story themselves and being able to stand up to cross-examination about the story. The executive steering team and sponsors also gain understanding and confidence by listening to the storytelling and being able to do some of it themselves in their role as sponsors and implementation champions.

Designing Conversations to Build Commitment

Niccolo Machiavelli said something like, "Let the reformer beware, for he will have enemies of all those who profit by the old order and only lukewarm supporters of those who stand to profit by the new. This is because the old order is established and the new order is an uncertain thing which may never come to pass." If this is true—and my experience often suggests it is—what is to be done about it? The best approach I know involves designing a series of individual conversations with people whose commitment to the new world is essential but whose actual commitment is absent, questionable, or lukewarm.

The first duty is to determine whose commitment is essential to success. This is not a one-shot issue, since the answer will change as you move through the various phases of a complex project. Next, you need to find out the commitment of the essential players and work to increase their commitment level where needed. You may think members of a design team, an executive steering team, an implementation team, or sponsors are committed, but you do not really know until you put them on the spot and ask for their commitment or hear what they are saying to third parties about the project. Do not get too excited about public support until you have validated it in private and through third parties.

Now let us assume that you have a sense of the level of commitment of some key player, and you need to get that key player to a higher level. If you are to approach this through conversation, the questions to answer are: who should have the conversation, what is the appropriate content, and what the process for the conversation will be. Maybe the best person to have the conversation is one of the sponsors, a member of the executive steering team, the person's boss, a member of the design team, or the lead designer. Choose people who will have the most influence and the greatest ability to reduce the person's level of skepticism. Doing so will help the key player see that his or her own self-interest is served by commitment, or that the greater good of the business is at stake.

The process and content of the conversation should get at the source of the lack of commitment and work toward raising the commitment level. The common objections usually fall into one or more of the following categories, which are often politically incorrect to discuss:

- If this is implemented, my team or I will lose something I value.
- If it is implemented, it will not work.
- It cannot or will not be implemented, so why should I support it?

Questions rather than statements are often more helpful in these conversations. Questions break the "yes, but" cycle. They will help keep the questioner from being defensive. Below are some questions that might prove helpful:

- If your objections x, y, and z could be addressed, then would you support the proposal?
- If this could somehow be accomplished, would you then support the proposal?

Your goal is to have their support for the proposal with the assumption that their objections could somehow be addressed. Do not get caught up in figuring out how to address their objections until you have the answer, "Yes, I will support your proposal." If they will not give their support, even with all their objections addressed, now you know the brutal truth and can decide if it is worth proceeding. Sometimes you can get a "yes," but the list of objections is so long and difficult that it becomes clear that the future of the project is at risk. It is only after you have the stakeholders' support for the proposal that you begin, with their help, to address the objections. You can save months this way. The private and public conversations about commitment need to be well orchestrated and handled with brutal honesty.

If all these efforts fail and you do not have the commitment you need to move forward, you need to ask if the project should be stopped or if some key individuals need to be moved out of the way. Many projects that failed had lukewarm support and continued anyway. Why do we not listen to the weak commitment and stop these projects? We fall in love with our solutions; we feel that stopping the project would be personal failure, not a lack of commitment; we do not have the will to move people out of the way; and so forth. The short-term pain of stopping or moving somebody seems more threatening than the longer-term likely failure of the project. Cut your losses as early as you can in the project if you believe the commitment is unobtainable.

Public and private conversations—sometimes multiple conversations with the same individual—are often the best way to uncover weak commitment and work toward gaining higher levels of commitment. Without these conversations you are playing a high-risk game, because you may not even know where you stand with key players until it is too late.

Managing the Predictable Mysteries of Human Dynamics

Here is what I expect when I get into a major performance system project. The human dynamics tend to be different in each phase of the work.

- During *project planning,* somebody—maybe the executive sponsor, maybe the people I will have to work with—will want to rush to action; they are impatient with a systematic process and the time line being laid out for solution and implementation.
- During the *analysis phase,* there will be attempts to avoid the brutal truth about the current situation and especially about current capabilities.
- During *design,* there will be conflict over organizational design issues, politics of winners and losers, and fears about new ways of managing implied by the design.
- During *implementation planning,* there will be impatience with a multiyear implementation time line and attempts to deny the resources and control structure necessary for successful implementation.
- During *implementation,* which is where a lot of detailed design happens, there will be a lack of continued management support because management has gotten bored and gone on to the next big thing; team members cling to sacred cows; there is intra- and inter-team conflict; and there are sponsorship failures.
- During *transition to the new system,* the affected workforce becomes disoriented and productivity drops (temporarily); there is resistance over letting go and fear over learning or adopting the new; there is denial over design flaws; and executive attention shifts elsewhere.

Masters Statement

What defines my mastery?

My mastery is designing and implementing large-scale performance interventions, including business-driven learning and development strategy, organization design, and business strategy implementation.

What advice would I give someone on the path to becoming a master of his or her field?

The advice I would give someone on the path to becoming a master of his or her field includes the following:

- Apprentice with someone who is a master.
- Build your expertise through practice on real projects.
- Build a personal network of others in your field.
- Force yourself to explain your field to others by writing books and articles and presenting at conferences.

How have I passed my wisdom on to others?

I have passed my wisdom on to others by working with teams of my own associates and clients and helping them learn, writing books and articles, and presenting at conferences.

- During the *internalization phase,* there is impatience with the continuing performance dip; some people do not fit in the new world; there is grief over letting go; people cling to old behavior patterns; there may be a failure to institutionalize new management systems; and there are all sorts of problems to be worked out at the interfaces with the bigger system.

The human dynamics of change are the most often-avoided factors for success. Human dynamics involve emotions, behavior, and social dynamics that we often do not address. Leaders tend to think implementation of a new design is a series of operational tasks that, when executed, will give them the results they want. They do not realize that they will face the emotions that go with human dynamics of change unless they have recently been through a major change themselves and remember the discomfort. They are slow to identify the important human dynamics; they underestimate their significance; and they are reluctant to address them directly. Then they are surprised when they do not get the results they expected.

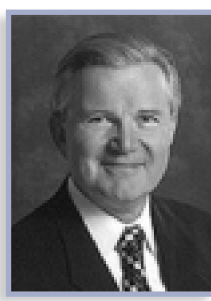
I invite you to see human dynamics as emotional data—data that can be addressed rationally and analyzed to develop tactics to address them. At each phase of your project, you should think through and predict the human dynamics and develop a tactical plan for dealing with them. As an outside consultant, I cannot do this alone; I do not know enough about the players and the organization. I do it with my client, the executive sponsor, and the design teams. Getting more people involved helps with both the prediction and the tactical plan for dealing with the dynamics. You also need ways to deal with the unexpected.

All of the things I have already outlined such as engaging the power structure, conversations to build commitment, engaging key stakeholders, finding the natural structure, and building confidence through storytelling will help manage the human dynamics. Below are a few more suggestions.

- **The brutal truth:** Wherever possible, adopt a posture of facing the brutal truth, whatever it is; facing the brutal truth puts realism in the project and builds credibility.
- **"Detriangling":** People who are having a problem with each other often "triangle" other people into the problem rather than work it out directly, usually complicating the situation. Bringing the parties together, however uncomfortable, is an important conflict resolution tool.
- **Appealing to higher values:** People often get stuck on things that in the end do not matter much. Appealing to their higher values can help them get unstuck.
- **Coaching:** People who are having a problem or are causing problems can often be helped by using the services of a professional coach. Sometimes the coach may even help them see that they do not belong in this situation.
- **Chain of sponsors:** An unbroken chain of sponsors from the top to the bottom of the affected organization is essential to effective implementation. The sponsors are responsible for helping resolve the human dynamics issues.
- **Sensing mechanisms:** Town meetings, or trusted people on the ground in all parts of the affected organization, will help identify otherwise hidden human dynamics so leaders and sponsors can address them early.

Conclusion

My background prior to performance consulting was engineering and engineering management. I loved the planning, analysis, and design work. I chose to ignore the sociopolitical aspects whenever I could. Somewhere along the way, I began to realize that the finest planning, analysis, and design work would not lead to successful solutions unless the sociopolitical system and human dynamics are taken into account and managed.



Ray Svenson, President of Ray Svenson Consulting, Inc., is a recognized leader in business-driven learning and development strategy for major corporations. He has 25 years of experience in this field, combining deep consulting skills with a broad strategic perspective and a systems approach. This leads to learning and development systems that align with business strategy and are simple to understand and implement for people at all levels. His award-winning book, *The Training and Development Strategic Plan Workbook,* is a well-worn desk reference used by learning and development leaders in major corporations. Ray has been a regular presenter at ISPI conferences and has contributed to *PI.* Ray may be reached at raysvenson@qtm.net.