IPMA Education and Training Series[1]

Closing the Gap between PM Training and PM Performance Part 1: Understanding the Gap

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Introduction

Enterprises and Government agencies have spent hundreds of millions of $USD over the last 25 years in Project Management training—just in the USA. Such a stimulus package! ***What do we have to show from this "investment"?*** Most people find it difficult to answer this question, because they cannot show improved PM Performance; nor can they even show the improved competences they hoped for. In fact, based on discussions with Executives, the perception is that programs and projects are significantly **much-less successful today** than they were 25 years ago. And Executives ask: ***"What return on investment is that?"***

This article, presented in two parts, explores secrets all Managers can use to *Close the Gap* between PM Training and PM Performance, improve PM Learning and Development methods, increase stakeholder PM Competence, improve PM Performance, and establish the success measures needed to prove you have done so. *The secret:* Base PM Learning on a Competence Baseline, rather than a Knowledge guide.

Part 1: Understanding the Gap
Part 2: Closing the Gap

The Gap between Training and Learning

Just what is the difference between Training and Learning? First is the objective: are you merely trying to complete a set of training contact hours, or are you trying to improve performance? You would be surprised at the number of people who aim for the former, both on the practitioner side and on the Manager side. For these individuals, the BiC (Butt In Chair) count is their measurement.

Source: iStock photo, © by Brian A. Jackson

Few look for any meaningful change, with the possible exception of Managers who place their people in PM classes on a "just too late" basis, after they *fouled up big time*, and *"we cannot let this happen again."*

[1] This series of articles is provided by the IPMA Education and Training (E&T) Board on the subject of project management education, training, careers and related topics. More information about the IPMA E&T can be found at http://ipma.ch/education.

This situation started in the 1980s, as Human Resource (HR) Managers encouraged line Managers to acquire much of their own unique training (a result of increased HR workload with less staff, plus willingness of Managers to assume the role).

Well-meaning managers who were not learning or development professionals became a primary channel for PM learning, without knowing the difference between training and learning: Training is what you *do to people*, Learning is an *outcome-focused process*, and Performance that *produces business benefits* is the expected result. The upshot: poor planning blocks the learning, resulting in *Yet Another* ***Worthless*** *Training*.

The learning planning errors include:

- Training that will not soon be applied.
- The wrong level of learning for the Learner (too advanced, or not advanced enough).
- Training merely to pass an exam, against a knowledge, rather than Performance Competence baseline.
- Training against methods or standards that conflict with Organizational practices or standards.
- Training with no expectations for follow-up or evaluation of outcomes.
- Failing to get participants' Managers into the learning reinforcement-and-support-loop.
- Smorgasbord training, selecting generic and inconsistent training from indistinguishable yet widely varying providers.

At the right we show a smarter way of looking at the distinction: Training is an input. The effectiveness of this input depends on a wide range of other input and process factors, including (in addition to the above errors) Learner readiness, his or her opportunity to apply the learning back on the job, support of relevant methods, and other factors.

Example: An organization's Managers decide to *improve assignment estimating performance*. They conduct training in Estimating prerequisites, inputs, steps, and formulae. The learning begins in class, and **continues with coaching** in the workplace. Managers measure and evaluate improved performance is in the workplace.

The gap (or chasm!) between Training and Learning may show whether you are throwing money away or investing it. In addition, while many organizations are wisely investing in PM Learning, a much larger number are merely sending people away to generic PM training (or bringing it in-house), with fuzzy outcomes.

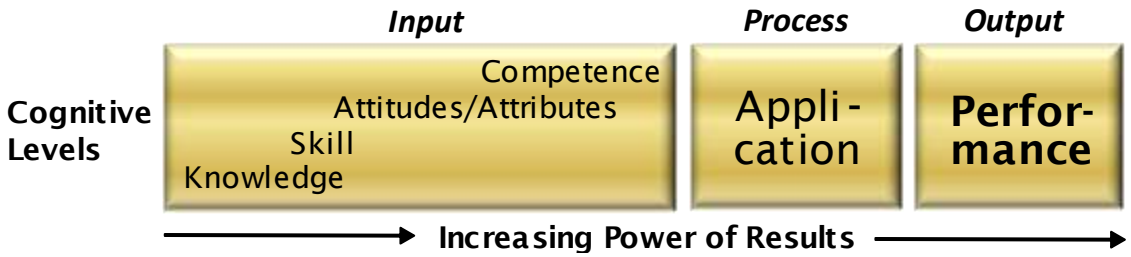
The PM Performance Progression

The author frequently publishes and presents[i] about this *Closing the Gap* progression. In effective learning, one moves from PM Knowledge to Skill, to Attitudes and Attributes, to Competence, and then on to PM Performance. To repeat our familiar refrain, while

Knowledge is a great foundation, it is like Potential Energy: By itself, it accomplishes nothing! And, this Knowledge *must be applied* within two weeks of acquisition (the half-life of new Knowledge not applied). ***It must be applied*** to achieve anything, in which case it can begin to form the foundation of a new Skill.

Skill evolves from multiple applications of new learning, as the Learner begins to master it. Skills have a longer learning decay curve than Knowledge. When that Skill is recognized and rewarded by others, the Learner starts developing reinforcing ***Attitudes***, which help perpetuate the new Skills. They also help overcome any interpersonal skill gaps, and trigger improvements in the ***Behavioral Attributes***.

Continued rewards and reinforcement, plus opportunity to apply the new insights in varying situations help to move the progression to Competence (which is still an input). Then, stepping back to assess how one's actions contributed to project success is a key indicator of ***Performance***, the first measure of output. The figure below illustrates this Performance progression. Given this progression, which would you rather develop in your Program and Project Managers: Knowledge or Performance?



Yet still today, many Managers (and worse, many trainers!) believe that Knowledge is an end unto itself. They even send people to classes that cover rote memorization of processes, formulae and definitions; they focus on passing knowledge-based certifications. They measure results based on hours or days in classroom chairs, and not in needed behavioral changes or project outcomes. Why? Perhaps because those are easy measures. But they are all *inputs*, and have no impact on PM Performance, the benefit producing *result*.

To more-clearly illustrate the importance of moving beyond Knowledge, consider the following scenarios:

- Would you be willing to fly as a passenger in a plane piloted by two *"Air Academy"* graduates who passed their final exam, but have never taken off or landed a plane (not even in a simulator)?
- Would you consider "going under the knife" for brain surgery by a surgeon who has attended all the classes, read all the books, passed the exams, but has never wielded a scalpel?
- Would you allow a lawyer to represent you in a criminal case, who, while having passed the bar exam, has never practiced before a jury?
- Would you trust your most-important strategic project to a project manager who has passed a project management exam, but has never managed an entire project?

In the above cases, your answer is probably **no, you would not**. In each case you would prefer (if you have a choice) to move beyond Knowledge, beyond Skill, beyond Attitudes and

Attributes, to experience-driven Competence and proven PM Performance. ***This is the Gap-closing secret: You should base your PM Learning on a Competence baseline, rather than a Knowledge guide.***

Editor's Note

You are reading Part 1 of this article. Understanding the Gap. Part 2, Closing the Gap, will be available soon.

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About the Author

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Stacy A. Goff, *the PM Performance Coach*, is owner of a USA-based Program and Project Management consulting, methods, tools and Learning consultancy. A co-founder of *asapm*®, Stacy has been the USA representative to, and an officer in, the International Project Management Association IPMA®. He has also contributed to the success of the Project Management Institute since 1983.

A Project Management practitioner since 1970 and PM consultant since 1982, he improves Enterprise or project team PM competence, efficiency, and Performance. Mr. Goff speaks at industry events, offers coaching and consulting services, and presents workshops of great interest to Executives, Managers, Project Managers and leaders, technical staff, and individual contributors.

His Project Management tools and methods are used by Government Agencies, Enterprises, Consultancies, and individuals on six continents. He combines his PM Process insights with wide-ranging experience in projects and programs, and with sensitivity for the human aspects of projects. The result: Measurably increased ***PM Performance***-- Portfolio, Program, Project and Personal Performance.

About This Article

I originally published this article in 2009, as global economies were struggling to recover from "the Great Recession." Five years later, many nations are still struggling with this recovery. For some nations, and for some organizations, competent and performing Project and Program Managers (with their organizations' leadership support) have helped accelerate their recovery.

In this update, there are a few changes from the original article, but the most important change concerns the mention of the "half-life of learning that is not applied." For years, we had used 1980s research that showed that half-life to be six weeks. In the last several years, more recent research has shown that half-life of learning that is not quickly applied to be just two weeks, instead.

What does this say for learning experience participants who spend the two weeks after their session just catching up with the work that piled up on their desks in their absence? An exacerbating factor: today, pressured managers have even less time to prepare workshop

participants for learning, then evaluating their results and coaching them afterwards. Today, in many organizations, things are getting worse, not better.

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[i] The author presented a paper on this subject at the IPMA World Congress in Shanghai in 2006. See *Distinguishing PM Competence in Training and Development* in the Articles section of our StacyGoff.com website.