
IPMA Education and Training Series¹

Closing the Gap between PM Training and PM Performance Part 2: Closing 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

Causing Learning, Versus Just Doing Training

Does training accomplish nothing? *Au Contraire*; **poor training** accomplishes nothing. Training that merely prepares for an exam accomplishes even less. Training that conflicts with your organizational standards and unique methods *will damage performance*. On the other hand, there are many ways your Learning and Development initiatives can productively involve training in your quest for improved PM Performance. Among the actions you should consider, for all PM learning:

A. Train the Right People. PM CompModel¹, Stacy’s PM competence assessment and development planning process and tool, helps identify the competence or performance gaps of all key project stakeholders. It does little good (for example) to send a Senior Project Manager to advanced PM training if the real project problem is Sponsors or Resource Managers who demonstrate significant competence gaps. Assess your project team to reduce risk and improve project performance. Assess your department to reduce risk and improve project performance. You get the idea. Note: We made this tool available to all of IPMA in 2006.

B. Assess Learning Needs for each selected learning event based on participant strengths and weaknesses against Targets. Use class Learning Objectives as the criteria for this

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.

assessment; note that some vendors list only their class topics, and one cannot readily identify from this information what Learners will be able to achieve after the class. The author has used SNAP™, Skills Needs Assessment Processⁱⁱ for over 30 years to target Learner needs before any class, populate classes with participants having similar levels of learning needs, modify class timings for each audience's needs, and assess progress and results six weeks after the class—with follow-on recommendations for coaching or other interventions, where needed.

C. Use Kirkpatrick's Four Levels of Workshop Evaluation; the primary evaluation of too many organizations is the “smile sheet”, the Level 1 immediate post-course reaction form. While useful in probing participant attitudes and determining whether the chairs were comfortable, there are much more effective measures of learning. Savvy Learning Managers also add Kirkpatrick'sⁱⁱⁱ levels 2 Measured Learning; 3 Behavior Change; and 4 Results: benefits for the organization. Apply them all!

D. Engage Managers in Learning Preparation and Follow-Through. You cannot send someone away to class for a day or a week and expect a transformed person to return. Before any training, you must manage expectations about the areas where improvement will help the most, then evaluate and coach during the two+ week period after the training to fine-tune or redirect the learning. Of course, this does suggest that managers must understand the business needs, the training objectives and content, and how that training will support learner development enroute to filling those needs. And, the first time the Learner tries to apply new skills, it may take a bit longer; Managers must allow for that learning to occur, or it will be stifled.

Complementing Learning With Coaching and Products

Years ago, a few PM Consultancies offered a differentiator. Rather than just performing “hit and run” training, they added a suite of products and services. This idea began with the observation that learners left a class filled with excitement and eagerness to try out their newfound learning. Back in the “real world”, learners found it difficult to consistently apply the tools and techniques they had studied. In addition to Learning, the consultancies added Products, such as PM Methods and supporting tools for e.g.: Project Estimating, plus Coaching in how to use the methods and tools correctly. See the resulting *Three Legged Stool* model below.

One interesting outcome of these post workshop learning support efforts was the insight that “*One size doesn't fit all.*” While the 1980s was the era of *Big Bang* methodologies in Information Technology and other disciplines, the author spent significant effort scaling down commercial methodologies for the medium and smaller projects most customers most-often managed. We understood that using too-large (or too-small) a PM methodology can cause more harm than using none at all.



From these insights came additional methodologies, including universal, minimum, agile, and scalable methods; even adding thin staffing methods. Of course, we also developed iterative, adaptive multi-path PM Methodologies. Based on those methods and product successes, some PM consultancies added more

sophisticated project coaching services, including Rapid Initial Planning™, risk assessment and response planning, project audit services, competency center development, PMO establishment, methods improvement, and project interventions. Thus, an entire PM consulting industry evolved from 1982-1990.

The net results were stunning, significantly improving post-class application, support from Managers, and best of all, PM Performance. Participating clients embraced the “Three Legged Stool” for improved PM Performance. Today this approach would be no surprise, but 30 years ago, it was monumental. This history also helps explain why PRINCE2® is a fast-growing PM training and certification program today: It combines knowledge, standards, a methodology, support services, and most-importantly, a training/coaching network.

The Role of PM Certifications

In the mid-1990s, resulting largely from William Duncan’s completion of the 1st edition of the PMBOK® Guide, PM certification interest soared—especially among IT practitioners. With this newfound interest in certification, our PM consultancy increasingly encountered a new dilemma. When talking to a potential customer, we frequently had to ask, “Are you performing training or coaching to improve PM Performance, or just to pass an exam?” The reason for the question: the *recommended learning was completely different*, based on the answer. We still feel the learning should be aligned, regardless of the purpose.

Ideally, the *same Learning and Development path* should lead to both improved PM Performance and, where appropriate, certification at some level. This is often the case with IPMA certifications. And, there exist different types of certifications, with different purposes, in the practice of Project Management. Here are two types; there may also be others:

- Entry-level certifications ***test knowledge about project management.***
- Advanced certifications ***assess Performance Competence*** in the actual roles of Project Manager, Senior Project Manager, or Program Manager (or Projects Director).

Note the correlation between entry level and advanced certifications with the PM Performance progression on page 3 of part 1 of this paper (in the June 2014 PM World Journal; see the diagram, Increasing Power of Results): Entry level PM certifications focus on Knowledge about common practice topics, and advanced PM certifications focus on your Skills, Behaviors and Performance Competence in key PM roles.

In the USA, professional PM societies offer entry-level, knowledge-based certifications covering topics in project management. For example, *asapm*, the USA member of IPMA, taps the worldwide prestige of IPMA’s integrated 4-L-C, four-level Competence-based certification program. Its entry level IPMA Level D® uses a multiple-choice and open-essay exam to verify certificant grasp of PM Knowledge from the USA-NCB, the National Competence Baseline for PM. Overall, Knowledge-based PM certifications can provide value by assessing one’s grasp of a recognized PM standard.

Some PM societies also offer advanced Performance Competence-based PM certifications. *asapm* engages professional assessors who evaluate a portfolio of results, and then interview candidates for certified Project Manager or Certified Senior Project Manager, Certified

Program Manager, and Certified Senior Program Manager roles about the way they contributed to project or program success.

PMI® will probably move from entry-level knowledge-based certifications *about* project management to advanced Performance Competence certification *of Project Managers* soon after they figure out how let current knowledge-based certificants know there is more to PM Certification than the PMP®. The performance baseline, that could transform their Learning and Competence development market: *Project Manager Competency Development Framework*, Second Edition, published by PMI in 2007¹. ***This should be PMI's much-needed gap-closing solution***, as prescribed on pages 1 and 2 of Part 1 of this paper.

The bottom line on the role of certification: Certifications do not *improve* competence or performance. They merely recognize grasp or achievement at the level and role specified. Available offerings do have major differences; for example, focusing on Knowledge versus Performance Competence in managing projects. And, speaking of bottom lines: **Executives don't really want PM Certifications: they want PM Performance.**

Learning Providers and Competence Enablers

Thirty years ago, there were fewer than a dozen major PM learning providers. In the 1990s, the number zoomed to thousands; it seemed that anyone who could read a book (or bok) began a PM training program. Many of those trainers do a decent service for their customers. Several PM society-based efforts help Learning Managers find appropriate training talent:

- *PMI's Registered Education Provider* program includes a wide variety of vendors who present a knowledge-based training line of services. The training offerings range from in-depth curricula that supports mastery in project management, to “how to take the test” training options.
- *IPMA's Registration Programme* is for Learning Providers, including trainers and educators, who can map their offerings against the ICB®, the Individual Competence Baseline. Among its advantages, ICB includes Behavioral (interpersonal skills and leadership) and Contextual (business savvy and strategic linkage) competences. These topics have greater impact than only focusing on easy-to-test technical knowledge.

Measures of Success

It is an old line: ***If you can't measure it, you can't manage it.*** How do you measure the outcomes of PM Learning? Do you have baseline performance measures? Progress measures? Project Success measures? Triggers for intervention? You say you have no measurements? That may be why you see embarrassed glances around the table at Project Benefit Realization time.

Because PM Performance improvement is a project, you need to decide how you will measure progress and success. Measurement is especially difficult in this case, because PM Performance improvement can be a never-ending quest. *Example:* Among top-performing PM Enterprises, each time they achieve their targets, they identify ways to continue to improve. Thus, the gap widens, between those who measure and manage PM Performance, and those who merely send people off to training.

Implementing PM Performance Improvement Measurement programs is another entire article (or book), but your path forward, if you intend to get results from training, should be as follows: If you view PM Learning and Development as an investment, show your Executives the returns. Otherwise, invest elsewhere.

Sad to say, that despite the earlier-mentioned hundreds of millions of \$USD spent on PM training in the last 20 years, the reports of consistently failing projects, from IT to Construction, to Government, have increased, rather than decreased. Perhaps it is time for a dose of PM Performance, the true stimulus for our ailing economies.



Summary

This two-part article explained the gap between training and performance, and offers insights into ways Executives, Human Resources or Learning Managers, Functional Managers and Project Managers can “close that gap.” It explains the differences between PM training and learning, the PM Performance progression, suggestions for maximizing benefits of scarce learning funds, and other topics. These topics are very familiar to HR Managers; yet in the world of PM, too many still fall short in Performance.

Despite good intentions, and in the absence of involvement by HR or Learning Managers, too many have squandered training budgets and their participants’ time. They have spent hundreds of millions of \$USD on a wide variety of poorly-focused PM training, with little to show from their efforts. In fact, as asserted in this article’s Introduction, PM performance has declined. Part of the problem is that they failed to close the gap between training and learning; they sought Knowledge, rather than Skill, and “*quick fix*” cramming rather than PM Competence; the outcome: they failed to attain PM Performance.

Buyers who don’t understand the differences may continue to pursue PM training that has no impact on PM Performance. Meanwhile, savvy Executives, Managers and PM practitioners will continue to increase the Performance lead between themselves and their competition.

Which group will you be in, and how will you measure and evaluate your results? This article contains tips that can guide you to essential first steps in closing the gap between generic PM training and PM Performance. Apply these tips to improve your Learning Return on Investment, boost PM Competence in all project Stakeholders, and increase PM Performance throughout your organization. *Wouldn’t you rather achieve as a PM?*

Trademark Acknowledgements

- *asapm* is a registered trademark of American Society for the Advancement of Project Management, the USA member of IPMA.
- IPMA is a registered trademark of the International Project Management Association in Switzerland and other countries.
- PMI, PMP and PMBOK are registered trademarks of Project Management Institute in the USA and other countries.

References

- i. PM CompModel, developed over a 30-year period and aligned to the asapm National Competence Baseline and the IPMA Competence Baseline (plus other versions) is available at the StacyGoff.com website. One purpose of PM CompModel is to identify the best use of learning activities (and funds) to select the right participants for the right learning experiences, with the right objectives for performance improvement. Another purpose is to help prioritize and list the actions of the Competence Development Plan that moves each project stakeholder from their greatest Competence gaps to their needed areas of PM Performance.
- ii. Another service of Stacy Goff, see the SNAP (Skills Needs Assessment Process) overview and sample results at https://StacyGoff.com/assets/SNAP_TNT.pdf. Given selection of the right participants for the right learning experiences (using PM CompModel or other processes) SNAP supports Learning Objective-level pre- and post-class evaluation by Learning Managers and participant's Managers. It helps establish Learner needs, topic timings, and identifies post-class follow-up actions needed to maximize the value of the learning experience.
- iii. Donald Kirkpatrick's articles and 1975 book, *Evaluating Training Programs* are foundations of learning measurement. His 1998 book, *Evaluating Training Programs: the Four Levels*, is clearer, and even more useful.

About the Author



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Stacy A. Goff, *the PM Performance Coach*, is owner of a US-based, global Program and Project Management coaching, consulting, methods, tools and learning organization. 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, Project, and Personal Performance. See Stacy's website, at <http://StacyGoff.com>.

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.