I joined the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) in 1969, when the I was an N and the P stood for “Programmed.” My first convention was the society’s seventh. For a long while ISPI was a pretty important part of my professional life, and much of my intellectual challenge came from people I met in the organization. Then I grabbed responsibility for more than training, and my career moved on. For a decade, I lost touch. When I returned a few years back, the mantra was human performance technology (HPT), just the kind of stuff I had been doing in the missing years, applying behavioral technology to organizational issues. To me, the concept of HPT is a natural outgrowth of the work of generations of behavioral scientists, from Thorndyke, Hull, Watson, and Skinner to Gilbert, Kaufman, Markle, Bretherower, Rummler, Harless, and Mager. I’m a believer. HPT deserves a candle at the alter of progress.

Yet, while the ISPI HPT message felt right, something seemed wrong. As if image trumped substance and words disguised reality. As I explored my unease, I searched for a handle, a way to describe what was out of kilter. I am not sure I have it now, but here is my take on the discomfort I feel with HPT in ISPI.

ISPI was born four decades ago because its technological approach to learning clashed with that of other professional training and educational organizations. Those in the movement’s vanguard knew that the message they championed would not, could not, mainstream in the calcified arteries of the then-existing professional bodies. Now, two generations later, having become the premier training organization, ISPI seems to HPT as the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) was to performance improvement: an interesting gene, but one that does not easily fit the code of the culture. Those who recognize the profound importance of HPT, including some mustangs who foaled the maverick NSPI, press for an organizational transfusion, intellectual resurrection, if you will. But, as Saul Gellerman once said, “Resurrection is harder than birth.” Let’s explore why.
First, most of what I hear at the conventions and read in the journal is not technology; it is, at best, anecdote or opinion. Technology by definition is applied science. Good science requires the ability to measure and replicate results. So does good technology. To test this notion, I did a flawed but quick assessment of the topics presented at the 2002 conference. I read the descriptions of the presentations to determine if there was any kind of science or technology supporting the presentation. What I found was that about 75% made no mention of a list of science-affiliated words such as duplicate, duplication, investigation, measure, measurement, outcome, replicate, science, scientific, observation, valid, or validation. There were a lot of high sounding words, a lot of references to performance, but scant mention of actual measurement, even less to proven replicable models. In science, it is not good enough for a personality to report on a finding. Others must be able to duplicate the result. That’s what NSPI was all about, determining if RULEG produced a steeper learning curve than EGRUL and whether 90% of the learners could demonstrate 90% of the targeted skills. Science, not anecdote.

Next I went to the ISPI website and did a word search on the text of What is human performance technology? Of those keywords listed above, the word “measure” was used once. The other key words were not used at all. For me, it is hard to think in terms of science without these words. NSPI (with P for Programmed) was built on applied science. It is what made this place different from other organizations concerned with learning. As we migrate to HPT we also seem to be emigrating from the science in our heritage.

Second, setting aside the technology part, I believe we are pitching HTP to the wrong audience. Since marketing lingo such as “value proposition” seems to be the vogue, let’s look at the market to which we address our propaganda which, incidentally, derives from propagation of the faith.

In marketing terms, if our product is a technology, then it is made of ideas and practices, applications, so to speak. When learning technology was our product, the market was training directors, people who make decisions about learning. The market for, or end user of, the HPT product, in organizations, is the people who make decisions about performance. My long and bloody experience as both practitioner and consultant tells me that these decisionmakers are not the training people. And, though they often seem to have more say in this area, neither are the human resource or organization development people. But, having started our journey with training people, they remain our market even though the product has changed.

The real performance decisionmakers are the operations people: CEO, COO, plant manager, business unit head, and so on. They are the ones who deploy resources. More importantly, they are the people who can deliver consequences in organizations. Remember our old Skinnerian mantra, “Behavior is controlled by its consequences.” I would venture that most ISPI consultants (our second largest constituency and the members who make a living by actually marketing applications and who are effectively dealing in HPT rather than learning related applications) are dealing with the operations, rather than human resources, people and rarely with the training people. It would seem to me that if ISPI’s core technology is human performance, then we need to be more directly working with those who deliver consequences in organizations. Unfortunately, operations people are not the core, nor even the periphery, of our membership. To make them so would be akin to Phoenix rising, a resurrection of sorts.

Third, if the charge is to affect human performance in organizations, the scope of the society membership remains too narrow. The original scientific core of NSPI was modern learning theory. I continue to believe that this is the core science of HPT. At best, training is a stimulus, not a consequence. It provides the skills and knowledge that enable performance. What Skinnerian behaviorism added to the craft of training was the scientific notion that things like feedback, step size, chaining, successive approximation, and consequences affect learning. It worked. The effect on learning could be tested, replicated, and refined. When we transfer modern learning theory to performance in organizations, we see an array of consequences, things like pay raises, promotions, interesting work assignments, days off, a pat on the back, a good evaluation, bonuses, overtime, and so on. By and large, these things are outside the domain of the training folks. But there are others in organizations who control or influence the distribution of these consequences. Most work in operations, but a good number are in staff positions such as recruitment, placement, compensation, selection, staffing, quality, labor relations, or human resources. They are as much, if not more, of the consequence architecture in organizations as training specialists are. But the people populating these functions are not now, nor have they ever been, a significant part of ISPI.

In my view, we cannot have an effective HPT until we understand the applied science inherent in these functions. What, for instance, is the effect of a formal evaluation on performance? A promotion? A raise? A demotion? What is the effect of an incentive promised but not delivered? Does a participative, team-based organization affect productivity? How much? In which direction? Does change increase or decrease productivity? How much? For how long? These questions are inherent in a performance technology. But we will not begin to learn the nuances and inter-relationship of these practices on behavior until we invite others who control or influence them into the tent.

HPT is a brand that ISPI clearly owns. Check the web and there is virtually no mention of HPT that is not linked directly or indirectly to ISPI. But the thing about a brand is that it defines and differentiates the product. Usually, that is
a good thing. But sometimes, a great brand name is wasted on the shadow of its promise. When that happens, the market rejects, then punishes the brand and its maker. Unless ISPI can deliver on the marketing promise, it risks becoming the Enron of professional societies.

Nonetheless, HPT has a ring to it. Clearly it is about people, and about doing things, useful things, and about the application of science. The implication is that HPT has no boundaries other than those defined by its very name. It does not say “humans” who happen to work in organizations; it says any human. It does not say “performance” as an adjunct to training; it says any performance. It does not say “technology” as defined by ISPI; it says any technology, which, of course, means any science, however applied. But the definition of HPT adopted by this society is a stone tied around the ankle of a child that will limit its movement far beyond its birthplace. It is too narrow, too confining, too tied to a training audience.

ISPI is clearly capable of renaming itself. Whether it can reусh science as its core, whether it can escalate its influence to those who control or influence consequences, whether it can attract the broad range of practitioners who add operational and intellectual diversity into its ranks may be beyond its capability. ISPI, like most constituencies, is a hard beast to kill. It will go on. Whether it can fulfill the promise of HPT, as it is now constituted though, is questionable.

Those of us who have been here for a while will age with ISPI regardless of its success or failure. We are too tied to the organization to make a break: too little time, too many friends, too much memory. But still, might it not be better to let ISPI mellow into old age while a new organization—rooted in applied science, aimed at the consequence brokers, and embracing all disciplines that touch human performance—is conceived and born? Birth is easier than resurrection. And us old guys (for the politically correct, the word is defined as applying to either sex), we may still be mustangs.

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