

Closing the Gap Between PM Training and PM Performance

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Introduction

Enterprises and Government agencies have spent hundreds of millions of \$USD over the last 20 years in Project Management training—just in the USA. Such a stimulus package! **What do we have to show from this “investment”?** Too many 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 20 years ago. **What return on investment is that?**

This article explores a secret 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 Performance-Competence Baseline, rather than a Knowledge guide.

The Difference 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. 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.*”

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). Non-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 a outcome-focused process, and Performance is the expected result. The upshot, poor planning blocks the learning, resulting in *Yet Another Worth Less Training*. The 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 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.

Here is another 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 in the workplace. Improved performance is measured and evaluated in the workplace.



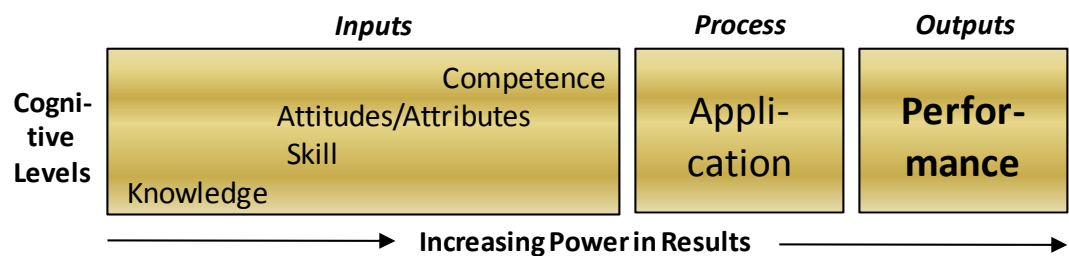
The difference between Training and Learning may be whether you are throwing money away or investing it. In addition, while many organizations are wisely investing in PM Learning, a much larger number is merely sending people away to PM training (or bringing it in-house), with fuzzy outcomes.

The PM Performance Progression

The author has frequently published and presentedⁱ about the progression from PM Knowledge to Skill, to Attitudes and Attributes, to Competence, and then on to PM Performance. To recap a refrain, while **Knowledge** is a great foundation, it is like Potential Energy: By itself, it accomplishes nothing! And, this Knowledge *must be applied* within 6 weeks of acquisition (the half-life of un-applied new Knowledge). **It must be applied** to achieve anything, in which case it can begin to become a Skill.

Skill evolves from multiple applications of new learning, so 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 moves the progression to Competence (which is still an input). Then, stepping back to assess how one's actions contributed to project success is an indicator of **Performance**, the first measure of output. The figure below illustrates this Performance progression. Given this progression, which would you rather have in your Program and Project Managers: Knowledge or Performance?



Yet still today, many Managers believe that Knowledge is an end unto itself. They may even send people to classes that cover rote memorization of processes, formulae and definitions; they obtain knowledge-based certifications. They measure results based on hours or days in classroom chairs, and not in the 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 ultimate outcome, or result.

To more-clearly illustrate the importance of moving beyond Knowledge, especially when some find it convenient to assert that *“Knowledge is a competence”*, 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 Performance Competence baseline, rather than a Knowledge guide.**

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 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 training:

Train the Right People. PM CompModelⁱⁱ, ProjectExperts' 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.

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 assessment; note that some vendors list only their class topics, and one cannot readily identify from this information what Learners will be able to do after the class. The author has used SNAP, Skills Needs Assessment Processⁱⁱⁱ for over 25 years to target Learner needs before the class, populate classes with participants having similar levels of learning needs, modify class timings for each audience's needs, and assess progress six weeks after the class—with follow-on recommendations for coaching or other interventions, where needed.

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's^{iv} levels 2 Measured Learning; 3 Behavior Change; and 4 Results: benefits for the organization. Apply them all!

Engage Managers in Preparation and Follow-Through. You cannot send someone away for a day or a week and expect a transformed person to return. You must manage expectations before any training about the areas where improvement will help the most, then evaluate and coach during the 6+ week period after the class to fine-tune or redirect the learning. 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.

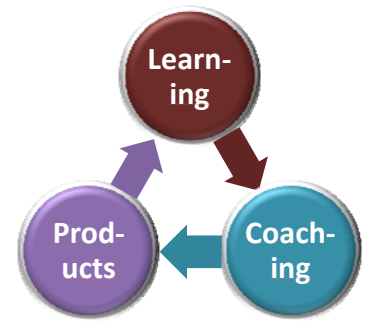
Complementing Learning With Coaching and Products

Many years ago, some PM Consultancies discovered a differentiator. Rather than just performing "hit and run" training, they added a suite of products and services. This innovation began with the observation that participants left a class filled with excitement and eagerness to try out their newfound learning. Back in the "real world", they found it difficult to consistently apply the tools and techniques they had learned. Some vendors added PM Methods and supporting tools, such as for Risk Management and Project Estimating, as well as coaching in how to use the methods and tools correctly.

One interesting outcome of these 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 Small PM Methods; even adding Thin Staffing Methods^v, in addition to classic multi-path PM Methodologies. Based on those methods and product successes, PM consultancies added Project Coaching services, including project kick-off, risk assessment and response planning, project audit services, competency center development, PMO establishment, PM Methods improvement, and project interventions.

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 25 years ago, it was monumental. This history also helps explain why PRINCE2 is the fastest-growing PM training and certification program today: It combines knowledge, standards, a methodology, support services, and most importantly, market momentum.



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 took off—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.

Ideally, the same Learning and Development path would lead to both improved PM Performance and, where appropriate, certification at some level. However, there are different types of certification in the practice of Project Management. There are two categories: 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 2: 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 all provide value by assessing one's grasp of a recognized PM standard.

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 (with Certified Program Manager to come in late 2009) about the way their role contributed to project or program success.

PMI® will certainly move from entry-level knowledge-based certifications *about* project management to advanced Performance Competence certification *of Project Managers* soon after it figures out how let current knowledge-based certificants know there is much more to PM Certification than the PMP®. The performance baseline, that will transform the Learning and Competence development market: *Project Manager Competency Development Framework*, Second Edition, published by PMI in 2007^{vi}. **This should be PMI's much-needed gap-closing solution**, as prescribed on pages 1 and 2 of this paper.

The bottom line on the role of certification: Certifications do not improve competence or performance. They recognize achievement at the level and role specified. They have major differences: Knowledge versus Performance Competence; *about* project management, versus *as a PM* (as a pm = *asapm*). And, speaking of bottom lines: **Executives don't really want PM Certifications: they want PM Performance.**

Learning Providers and Competence Enablers

Twenty-five 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.

A *Registered Education Provider* program includes a wide variety of vendors who present a knowledge-based line. The training ranges from in-depth curricula that supports mastery in project management, to “how to take the test” training options. *asapm’s Competence Enabler* program is for Learning Providers, Coaches and Consultants who know the difference between knowledge and Performance Competence. Perceptive PM Learning buyers can gain value from vendors in these programs, as long as you consider your objectives and have a clear business case for your Learning and Development needs. Of course, you will benefit most by applying the insights mentioned in this article to close the gap. Do so by planning for performance, follow training with needed coaching, and by measuring the outcomes.

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 choice 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 this ailing economy.

Summary

This article offers insights into ways Executives, Learning Managers, Functional Managers and Project Managers can “close the gap” between training and PM Performance. 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.



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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?***

About the Author



STACY A. GOFF, the PM Per4mance™ Coach, is President of ProjectExperts®, a Program and Project Management consulting, methods, tools and Learning company. A co-founder of *asapm*, Stacy is the USA representative to IPMA, the International Project Management Association. He has also contributed to the success of 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 and Consultancies 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 Per4mance™**: Portfolio, Program, and Project Performance.

References

- 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 the ProjectExperts.com website.
- ⁱⁱ PM CompModel, developed over a 25-year period and aligned to the *asapm* National Competence Baseline (plus other versions) is available in a useful (and free) demo version at the *asapm.org* 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.
- ⁱⁱⁱ A service of the ProjectExperts, see the SNAP (Skills Needs Assessment Process) overview and sample results at www.projectexperts.com/services/SNAP_MPM.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.
- ^{iv} 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.
- ^v ProjectExperts has offered these PM Methodologies from 1985 through the present. Together with a range of supporting services, they are featured in the Products and Services areas at the ProjectExperts.com website.
- ^v *Project Manager Competency Development Framework, Second Edition*, published in 2007 by Project Management Institute. The author, involved in PM Competence Development for over 25 years, participated in the PMI project to produce this PMCDF, stating that "we cannot afford to have a result that is as useless as version 1".

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