Knowledge Worker
Rummler Had It ~~Wrong~~ Right
(April 2020)

Let's begin with the paragraph immediately below, posted on LinkedIn by Guy Wallace in early July of 2019.

"T&D: Who would have thought that 50 years later … here in 2019 … that T&D/L&D would still not have a Performance Orientation? Would be focused on Topics with Face Validity and not on authentic Tasks and Outputs? Would not be improving performance? https://lnkd.in/eNHy35s"

The link in Guy's post is to a foreword Geary wrote for Malcolm Warren's 1969 book, *Training for Results*. In his foreword, Geary said that training departments needed to stop doing what they do and focus on performance instead. Geary's "lament," as it was called, was one of – if not the earliest – in a half-century of ongoing, continuing criticism of training departments.

With all due respect to Geary – and to many others since 1969 – I think he had it wrong. Training departments very much need to keep on doing what they do AND they need to start doing some other things as well. They need to extend their reach, expand their domain, and increase their impact on and value to their organization. But they do not need to stop what they are doing.

Even its harshest critics will admit that training is indeed – at least on occasion – a valid means to the end of improving performance. The training department, then, is a natural place to house, build and expand organization's performance improvement capability. That capability is a steppingstone to incorporating another relevant and related domain: Organization Development (OD). There are other candidate domains as well (e.g., job, task, and work design; process design and improvement; and project management).

Performance improvement doesn't focus only on human performance, it also addresses team, group and unit performance; process performance; the performance of an organization's systems (not all of which are computer-based) and, on occasion, the performance of the organization itself. Moreover, interventions aimed at improving performance, no matter which kind, are invariably accompanied by a valid requirement for some kind of training. I have yet to see a roll-out of a new system or a new product or a new process or a new organizational structure that didn't legitimately require some kind of training. Training is already an integral part of change and improvement. It needs to build on that; it needs to extend its reach.

The training department has the potential to become an important and influential voice in determining how things get done, in figuring out what's wrong when things aren't happening the way they're supposed to, and in figuring out what to do about it. Will the typical training department step up to the plate and realize that potential? Maybe, maybe not, but that's a story for another time. Whether they step up or not, it's time to stop haranguing training departments because they aren't doing what we think they should be doing. They have their

own notions of what they should (and shouldn't) be doing, they have their own turf to protect, they have their own fences to mend, and they have their own axes to grind. Let them tend to their knitting as they see fit. On the other hand, if they do step up, we owe it to them to also step up and hold out a helping hand.

As plainly as I can put it, the goal isn't for training to stop what it is doing, it is instead for training to acquire additional capabilities and to become something more than what it is today.

Most of what I have written above was touched on by Geary in his forward to Malcolm Warren's book; so, if I'm honest, I guess I'll have to reverse my earlier comment and say that Rummler had it right.

Postscript

Thanks to Rick Rummler, those wishing to read Geary's "lament" – titled "We Can't Get There from Here" – can do so by clicking here.

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a toolmaker, a knowledge worker, a solution engineer, a writer, a consultant, and a former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated Chief Petty Officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is *Chief Toolmaker* and *Lead Solution Engineer* at Distance Consulting LLC. His web site is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters and papers. Fred writes this column on a monthly basis. All previous Knowledge Worker columns are accessible by clicking here.