

Knowledge Worker

Serendipitous Performance Consulting

(August 2020)

When it comes to the professional practice of human performance technology and performance improvement, the late Geary Rummler was an unquestioned master. And Geary's book, *Serious Performance Consulting*, should be taken seriously. But there is a lighter, easier side to all this. Often, appreciable improvements in performance and productivity can be had quite quickly, easily and inexpensively. And you don't have to be as accomplished as Geary Rummler was to realize them; we ordinary mortals can accomplish a great deal. At the end of this month's column I'll point you to five illustrative cases drawn from my consulting experience.

Some Principles and Conclusions

"Okay, Fred," you might be saying to yourself. "That's all well and good for you, but how do I make this notion actionable on my part?" That's a fair question and following are some answers, mostly in the form of principles useful in guiding action, not procedures to be followed.

Keep Your Eyes and Ears Open. Opportunity abounds. I have yet to go into an operation where I couldn't identify at least one significant opportunity for improvement in a fairly short period of time. Sometimes I spot it on my own. On other occasions, the people who do the work are anxious to tell anyone who will listen – and, sadly, on too many occasions their own management isn't interested.

Ask Questions – Especially Why Questions. In all five cases I'll point you to later, I was a newcomer and an outsider. I was not expected to know about or understand the work or the operations in great detail. Consequently, I could ask all kinds of questions, even the so-called "dumb" questions. Especially useful are "why" questions: Why do you do that? Why do you do it that way? Why is that requirement so important? Exploit your status as a newcomer or outsider. and remember this: "An ounce of curiosity is worth a pound of expertise."

Listen Past the Answers. You will generally find that people are not only anxious or at least willing to answer the questions you ask, they will also give you answers to questions you didn't ask. They will tell you things you didn't ask about and those often contain the nuggets of gold you're seeking. So, don't get too enamored of your questions. And make it a habit to listen past the answers to them.

Seek and Ye Shall Find. In other words, go looking for those opportunities you're seeking. It dawned on me many years ago that even if it is sometimes true that opportunity comes knocking, it is always true that it will answer the door if you do the knocking. Don't wait for opportunity to present itself, search it out.

Tweaking Trumps Reengineering. I've been responsible for efforts that led to the complete overhaul or reengineering of operational processes and I've led some that were much more modest in scope and scale. For my money, "tweaking" is a process that trumps reengineering almost every time. If what you're looking for is a huge and dramatic improvement in performance,

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reengineering might be your only option. But improvements on the order of 10, 20 and even 30 percent don't necessarily require the reengineering of a process. "Tweaking" it, that is, making modest changes, can produce such improvements. Moreover, tweaking a process doesn't incur the cost or the resistance you can encounter with reengineering. Besides, if you make two or three modest improvements, they add up to a very sizable one.

Keep It Simple. I'm well aware of sophisticated process mapping and operational analyses software but I've never used it or had any use for it. Nor would I introduce it to a client. Why? Because, most of the time, it adds an unnecessary layer of complexity. The kinds of improvements I'm talking about here are the kind that are easily and inexpensively had. Why make them esoteric and expensive? For the most part, I find that hand-drawn flowcharts are sufficient for my purposes and that easy-to-use graphics programs like Visio or SmartDraw are adequate for producing finished drawings for report purposes. Don't try to impress your clients with your technical know-how and software savvy; instead, show them that you understand their processes and that you've spotted opportunities that have escaped their attention.

Summary & Recap

Quick, easy, cheap and painless. That's the essence of "Serendipitous Performance Consulting." Of course, it's not for everyone. It does require that you keep your eyes and ears open, that you ask a lot of what some view as dumb questions, and that you leap on opportunity when it presents itself and that you go looking for it. It does not require exhaustive analyses or a level of professional ability comparable to the late Geary Rummler's; it's something we average practitioners can do – and we don't have to get into conflicts with our clients about what is or isn't a training problem or a performance problem to do it. You just do it. One especially nice thing about it is that its payoffs are usually so large and so obvious that no one wants to look stupid as a result of asking you for the ROI – and there's another monkey off your back.

Further Reading

For five easy to read and understand cases illustrating how serendipitous performance improvement occurs, see my article bearing that title: [Serendipitous Performance Improvement](#).

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](#).