



Faculty Development Series

Theory of Performance

by Don Elger, University of Idaho

The Theory of Performance (ToP) develops and relates six foundational concepts (*italicized*) to form a framework that can be used to explain performance as well as performance improvements. To *perform* is to produce valued results. A *performer* can be an individual or a group of people engaging in a collaborative effort. Developing performance is a journey, and *level of performance* describes location in the journey. Current level of performance depends holistically on 6 components: context, level of knowledge, levels of skills, level of identity, personal factors, and fixed factors. Three axioms are proposed for effective performance improvements. These involve a *performer's mindset*, *immersion* in an enriching environment, and engagement in *reflective practice*.

Rationale for a Theory of Performance

Humans are capable of extraordinary accomplishments. Gandhi led a nonviolent revolution that liberated India from colonial rule. On September 12th, 1962, JFK challenged the country to “*go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills...*” Wonderful accomplishments also occur in day-to-day practice in higher education. An advisor inspires students to follow their dreams. A teacher magically connects with students. A researcher continually asks the quintessential questions that lead to revolutions in thinking. A dean inspires an entire college to collaborate and attain wonderful outcomes.

Since worthy accomplishments are produced from high-level performances, a theory of performance (ToP) is useful in many learning contexts.

Traditional Contexts

A ToP informs learning in classrooms, workshops, and other venues that are traditionally associated with learning.

Non-traditional Contexts

A ToP informs learning in contexts that are not traditionally conceptualized as learning environments. Examples of these contexts include academic advising, self development, departments, academic committees, professional research groups, colleges.

Organizational Learning

A ToP informs learning by organizations through the idea of examining the “level of performance” of the organization.

Performance

To *perform* is to take a complex series of actions that integrate skills and knowledge to produce a valuable result. Examples of performance are shown in Table 1.

In some instances, the performer is an individual. In other performances, the performer is a collection of people

who are collaborating such as an academic department, research team, committee, student team, or a university.

Level of Performance

Performance, as the adage goes, is a “journey not a destination.” The location in the journey is labeled as “*level of performance*.” Each level characterizes the effectiveness or quality of a performance.

- As a lawyer improves her level of performance, she can conduct legal research faster, more thoroughly, and more in-depth.
- As an academic department improves its level of performance, the members of the department are able to produce more effective student learning, more effective research, and a more effective culture.
- As a manager advances his level of performances, he is able to organize people and resources more effectively and to get higher quality results in a shorter time.
- As a teacher advances his levels of performance, he is able to produce deeper levels of learning, improved levels of skill development, and more connection with the discipline for larger classes while spending less time doing this.
- As an actor improves his level of performance, he is able to learn parts quicker, play more varied roles, and produce an deeper and more meaningful impact on audiences.

Performance advancing through levels is shown in Figure 1 where the labels “Level 1,” “Level 2,” etc. are used to characterize effectiveness of performance. That is, a person or organization at Level 3 is performing better than a person or organization at Level 2. As shown on the right side of Figure 2, performing at a higher level produces results that can be classified into categories:

Quality increases—results or products are more effective in meeting or exceeding the expectations of stakeholders.

Table 1 Performance Areas and Examples of Performances

Performance Area	Primary Domain	Examples
Designing	Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Re-designing automobiles for fuel efficiency Writing an original song or composition for an orchestra Creating an integrated and aligned curriculum
Problem Solving	Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizing key issues that are negatively impacting a university and taking actions that reduce these issues to a level of insignificance Figuring out why a particular stretch of highway has a high fatality rate and taking actions that reduce the fatality rate by 70%
Selling	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Selling a computer system to a company Convincing a college dean to invest in faculty development
Presenting	Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presenting closing arguments to a jury Presenting a research paper at a technical conference
Life Management	Affective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comforting a friend whose wife has died in a traffic accident Helping a colleague who has been denied tenure or promotion understand that the evaluation was fair Confronting unprofessional behavior from a colleague or a supervisor
Playing a sport or a musical instrument	Psychomotor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playing in a golf tournament Playing clarinet in an orchestra

Cost decreases—amount of effort or financial resources to produce a result goes down; amount of waste goes down.

Capability increases—ability to tackle more challenging performances or projects increases

Capacity increases—ability to generate more throughput increases

Knowledge increases—depth and breadth of knowledge increases

Skills increase—abilities to set goals, persist, maintain a positive outlook, etc. increase in breadth of application and in effectiveness.

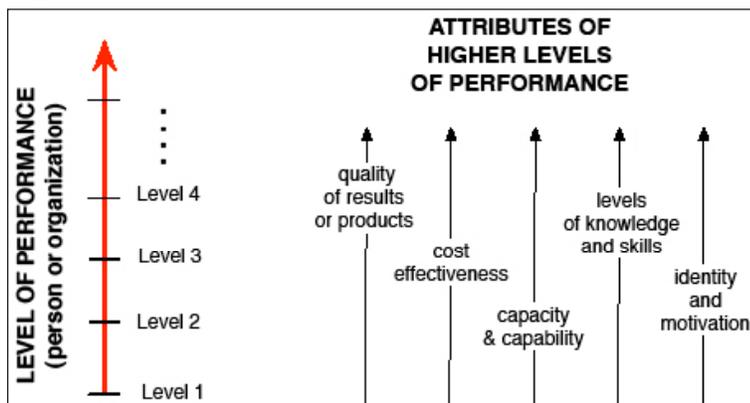
Identity and motivation increases—individuals develop more sense of who they are as professionals; organizations develop their essence.

Components of Performance

The performance of a system, for example a home entertainment system, depends on the components of the system and on the interactions between these components. Similarly, level of performance of an

individual or an organization depends on the components described in Table 2. Each component is described using rules and exemplars. An exemplar is a lucid example of a component. The rules in column four are guidelines to define the component.

Figure 1



Improving Performance

While some factors that influence improving performance are immutable, other factors can be influenced by the performer or by others. The factors that can be varied fall into three categories.

Table 2 **Components that Holistically Interact to Establish Level of Performance**

Component	Description	Exemplars	Classification Rules
Level of Identity	As individuals mature in a discipline, they take on the shared identity of the professional community while elevating their own uniqueness. As an organization matures, it develops its mission, its way of doing business, and its uniqueness.	A student uses disciplinary slang to describe engineering design activities. A teacher examines his performance through the lens of student learning. A college dean holds herself accountable for her leadership. A research team evolves its identity as a performance organization.	associated with maturation in a discipline or culture associated with maturation in life internalized by person or organization—the individual or organization takes on the shared identity
Levels of Skills	Skills describe specific actions that are used by individuals, groups, or organizations in multiple types of performances.	making assumptions persisting being humble setting goals observing	describe an action action is relevant in a broad range of performance contexts
Level of Knowledge	Knowledge involves facts, information, concepts, theories, or principles acquired by a person or group through experience or education.	Facts/information—names of states, conversion factor between feet and inches Concepts—democracy, chair, force, Principles/theories—relationships between the tilt of the earth and the seasons; law of conservation of energy	derives from human experiences can be communicated or recognized
Context of Performance	This component includes variables associated with the situation that the individual or organization performs in.	The performance of an academic department is coupled with the organizational effectiveness of the host college. Learning of a student is coupled with the organization of a class.	relates to circumstances associated with the performance applies to multiple performance within the context—not a personal factor.
Personal Factors	This component includes variables associated with the personal situation of an individual.	Performance of a teacher is impacted when he or she is ill Performance of a dean is impacted when his or her spouse dies A student's performance is impacted by the quality of his or her home environment	involves life situation of an individual
Fixed Factors	This component includes variables unique to an individual that cannot be altered.	Performance in basketball is impacted by height Genetic factors influence performance	involves an individual immutable; cannot be altered

Performer's Mindset. Performer's mindset includes actions that engage positive emotions. Examples include setting challenging goals, allowing failure as a natural part of attaining high performance, and providing conditions in which the performer feels a right amount of safety.

The *Accelerator Model* module provides insights on maintaining a performer's mindset.

Immersion. Immersion in a physical, social, and intellectual environment can elevate performance and stimulate personal as well as professional development. Elements include social interactions, disciplinary knowledge, active learning, emotions (both positive and negative), and spiritual alignment. The section on *Creating Quality Learning Environments* outlines strategies for fostering immersion.

Reflective Practice. Reflective practice involves actions that help people pay attention to and learn from experiences. Examples include observing the present level of performance, noting accomplishments, analyzing strengths and areas for improvements, analyzing and develop identity, and improving levels of knowledge. The section on *Assessment* offers a variety of strategies for cultivating reflective practice.

Conditions for optimal performance and improvements in performance can be synthesize in three axioms: *Axiom 1*—engage the performer in an optimal emotional state (*performer's mindset*). *Axiom 2*—immerse the performer in an enriching environment. *Axiom 3*—engage the performer in *reflective practice*.

The ToP presented here is similar to other constructs in the literature. The Parallel Curriculum, advocated by Thomlinson et al. (2002), advocates four parallel curriculums that reinforce the four adjustable components in Table 2. The core curriculum and the curriculum of connections focuses on knowledge construction. The curriculum of practices emphasizes context and promotes skill development. The curriculum of identity focuses on development of the individual as a member of a professional community. Support for the three axioms can also be found in writings by Caine et al. Relaxed alertness aligns with the performer's mindset. Orchestrated involvement in complex challenges and supportive experiences aligns with immersion. Active processing of experiences aligns with reflective practice

Additional support for the axioms can be found in the work of Bransford et. al's (2000). Their model for effective teaching/learning includes knowledge-centered, learner-centered, assessment-centered, and community-centered components. The learner-centered component involves the performer's mindset. The knowledge-centered and community-centered components connote immersion in an enriching environment, while the assessment-centered component embraces elements of reflective practice. The importance of having a well-founded conceptual model, appropriate methods for data collection, and reliable and robust system for making inferences about observations is well-established in the work or Pellegrino and Glaser (2001), and this under girds reflective practice in organizational contexts.

Concluding Thoughts

We all want to be high performers: "be like Mike," the Nike add suggests. The ToP is a challenge to educators—by improving our own performance, we empower ourselves to help others learn and grow (*Becoming a Self-Grower*). As advocated by Harvard's Project Zero, performance is closely related to learning-for-understanding (Wiske, 1998). Therefore, building performance capabilities is rightfully a central theme in the *Guidebook*. When people learn and grow, they are empowered to create results that make a difference (*Creating an Assessment Culture*). Working and learning together in ways that make the world better has been a primary goal of higher education throughout the ages.

References

- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., Cocking, & R. R., eds. (2000). *How people learn*. Washington DC: National Academy Press. (also available online at www.nap.edu).
- Caine, R. N. & Caine, G. (1997). *Education on the edge of possibility*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Caine, R. N., Caine, G., McClintic, C., & Klimek, K. (2005). *12 Brain/Mind Learning Principles in Action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Tomlinson, C.A., Kaplan, S. N., Renzulli, J. S., Purcell, J., Leppien, J., & Burns, D. (2002). *The parallel curriculum: A design to develop high potential and challenge high-ability learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Pellegrino, J., Chudowsky, N., & Glaser, R, Eds. (2001). *Knowing what students know: The science and design of educational assessment*. Washington DC: National Academy Press.
- Wiske, M. S., Ed. (1998). *Teaching for understanding: Linking research with practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.