

Closing the Gap Between PM Training and PM Performance

By Stacy Goff, ProjectExperts CEO

Introduction

Enterprises and Government agencies have spent hundreds of millions of \$USD over the last 25 years on Project Management training—just in the USA. Such a stimulus package! *What do we have to show from this “investment”?* Most 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 recent discussions with Executives, the perception is that programs and projects are significantly **much-less successful today** than they were 25 years ago. And Executives ask: *“What return on investment is this?”*

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 Gap 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).



Source: iStock photo, © by Brian A. Jackson

Well-meaning managers who were not learning or development 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 an *outcome-focused process*, and Performance that *produces business benefits* is the expected result. The upshot: poor planning blocks the learning, resulting in *Yet Another Worth Less Training*.

The learning 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 a Performance 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.

At the right we show a smarter way of looking at the distinctions: 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 with coaching** in the workplace. Managers measure and evaluate improved performance in the workplace.

The gap (or chasm!) between Training and Learning may show whether you are throwing money away or investing it. In addition, while many organizations are wisely investing in true PM Learning, a much larger number are merely sending people away to generic PM training, with fuzzy outcomes, and no follow-up.

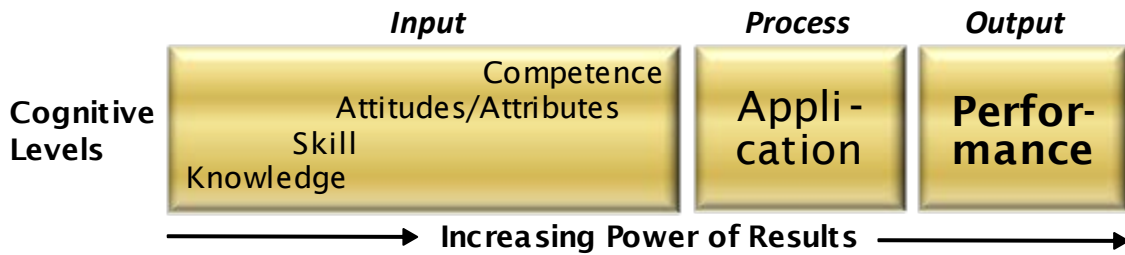
The PM Performance Progression

The author frequently publishes and presents¹ about this *Closing the Gap* progression. In effective learning, one moves from PM Knowledge to Skill, to Attitudes and Attributes, to Competence, and then on to PM Performance. To repeat our familiar refrain, while **Knowledge** is a great foundation, it is like Potential Energy: By itself, it accomplishes nothing! And, this Knowledge *must be applied* within two weeks of acquisition (the half-life of new Knowledge not applied). **It must be applied** to achieve anything, in which case it can begin to form the foundation of a new Skill. This is consistent with both Bloom's and Kirkpatrick's insights.

Skill evolves from multiple applications of new learning, as 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 help to move the progression to Competence (which is still an input). Then, stepping back to assess how one's actions contributed to project success is a key indicator of **Performance**, the first measure of output.

The figure below illustrates this Performance progression. Given this progression, which would you rather develop in your Program and Project Managers: basic Knowledge or true Performance?



Yet still today, many Managers (and worse, many trainers!) believe that Knowledge is an end unto itself. They even send people to classes that cover rote memorization of processes, formulae and definitions. They focus on passing knowledge-based certifications. They measure results based on hours or days in classroom chairs, and not in needed 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 benefit producing *result*.

To more-clearly illustrate the importance of moving beyond Knowledge, 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 an exam about project management topics, 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. ***Thus our Gap-closing secret: You should base your PM Learning on a 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 your 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 learning:

A. 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 and all key stakeholders to reduce risk and improve project performance. You get the idea.

B. 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 achieve after the class. The author has used SNAP™, Skills Needs Assessment Processⁱⁱⁱ for over 30 years to target Learner needs before any class, populate classes with participants having similar levels of learning needs, modify class timings for each audience’s needs, and assess progress and results six weeks after the class—with follow-on recommendations for coaching or other interventions, where needed.

C. 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—to maximize your learning benefits!

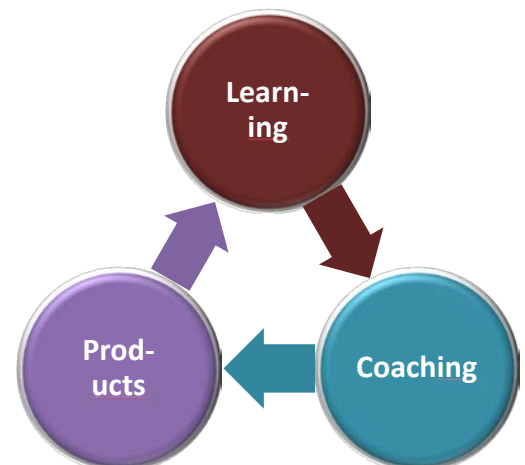
D. Engage Managers in Preparation and Follow-Through. You cannot send someone away for a day or a week and expect a transformed person to return. You must manage expectations before any training about the areas where improvement will help the most, then evaluate and coach during the two-six+ week period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

Years ago, some PM Consultancies offered a differentiator. Rather than just performing “hit and run” training, they added a suite of products and services. This idea began with the observation that learners left a class filled with excitement and eagerness to try out their newfound learning. Back in the “real world”, learners found it difficult to consistently apply the tools and techniques they had studied. In addition to Learning, the consultancies added Products, such as PM Methods and supporting tools for e.g.: Project Estimating, plus Coaching in how to use the methods and tools correctly. See the resulting *Three Legged Stool* model below.

One interesting outcome of these post workshop learning support 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 the rigor and burden of 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 scalable methods; even adding thin staffing methods. Of course, we also developed iterative, adaptive multi-path PM Methodologies. Based on those methods and product successes, some PM consultancies added more sophisticated project coaching services, including Rapid Initial Planning™, risk assessment and response planning, project audit services, competency center development, PMO establishment, methods improvement, and project interventions. Thus, an entire PM consulting industry evolved from 1982-1992.



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 30 years ago, it was monumental. This history also helps explain why PRINCE2® is a fast-growing PM training and certification program today: It combines knowledge, standards, a methodology, support services, and most-importantly, a training/coaching network.

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 interest soared—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: based on the answer, the *recommended learning was completely different*. We still recommend that the learning must be aligned and evaluated against the needs.

Ideally, the *same Learning and Development path* should lead to both improved PM Performance and, where appropriate, certification at some level. However, there are different practices and resulting categories of certifications in the world of Project Management. Here are two categories; there may also be others:

- 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 3: 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, IPMA-USA, the USA member association of IPMA, taps the worldwide prestige of IPMA’s integrated 4-L-C, four-level Competence-based certification program. Its 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. Other organizations offer similar entry-level exams. Knowledge-based PM certifications provide value by assessing one’s grasp of a recognized PM standard.

Some PM societies also offer advanced Performance Competence-based PM certifications. IPMA-USA engages professional assessors who evaluate a portfolio of results, and then interview candidates for certified Project Manager or Certified Senior Project Manager, Certified Program Manager, and Certified Senior Program Manager roles, probing the way they contributed to project or program success.

Others will probably move from entry-level knowledge-based certifications *about* project management to advanced Performance Competence *certification of Project Managers* soon after they figure out how let current knowledge-based certificants know there is more to PM Certification than exams. Consider, for example, a performance baseline that could transform the USA’s PM Learning and Competence development market: *Project Manager Competency Development Framework*, Second Edition, published by 2007 PMI^v. As alluded to earlier, *this could be Project Management Institute’s gap-closing solution*.

Here is the bottom line on the role of certification: Certifications do not *improve* competence or performance. They merely recognize grasp or achievement at the level and role specified. Available offerings do have major differences; for example, focusing on Knowledge versus Performance Competence in managing projects. And, speaking of bottom lines: Executives don't really want PM Certifications: they want PM Performance.

Learning Providers and Competence Enablers

Thirty 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:

- *PMI's Registered Education Provider* program includes a wide variety of vendors who present a knowledge-based training line of services. The training offerings range from in-depth curricula that supports mastery in project management, to "how to take the test" training options.
- *IPMA's Registration Programme* is for Learning Providers, including trainers and educators, who can map their offerings against the ICB®, IPMA Competence Baseline. Among its advantages, ICB includes Behavioral (interpersonal skills and leadership) and Contextual (business savvy and strategic linkage) competences. These topics have greater impact than only focusing on easy-to-test technical knowledge.

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 path forward, if you intend to get results from training, 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 25 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 our ailing economies.



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.

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 Performance Coach, is CEO of ProjectExperts®, a global Program and Project Management consulting, methods, tools and Learning consultancy. A co-founder and past President of IPMA-USA, Stacy has been an officer in IPMA®, the International Project Management Association. In 2015, he was named an IPMA Honorary Fellow. As well, he has 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, Consultancies, and individuals 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 Performance**—Personal, Project, Program, and Portfolio Management Performance.

About This Article

We originally published this article in 2009, as global economies were struggling to recover from “the Great Recession.” Five years later, many nations are still struggling with this recovery. For some nations, and for some organizations, competent and performing Project and Program Managers (with their organizations’ leadership support) have helped accelerate their recovery. During 2014, this updated article was featured by IPMA Education & Training in the PM World Journal, and on IPMA-USA, IPMA and ProjectExperts websites.

In this update, there are a few changes from the original article, but the most important change concerns the mention of the “half-life of learning that is not applied.” For years, we had used 1980s research that showed that half-life to be six weeks. In the last several years, more recent research has shown that half-life of learning that is not quickly applied to be just two weeks, instead.

What does this say for learning experience participants who spend the two weeks after their session just catching up with the work that piled up on their desks in their absence? An exacerbating factor: today, pressured managers have even less time to prepare workshop participants for learning, then evaluating their results and coaching them afterwards. Today, in many organizations, things are getting worse, not better.

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- ProjectExperts is a registered trademark of Goff Associates, Inc., the ProjectExperts.
- IPMA is a registered trademark of the International Project Management Association in Switzerland and other countries.
- PMI and PMBOK are registered trademarks of Project Management Institute in the USA and other countries.

References

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- 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 30-year period and aligned to the IPMA-USA National Competence Baseline and the IPMA Competence Baseline (plus other versions) is available in a free demo version at the ProjectExperts.com 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/assets/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.