

# THE MISSING LINK IN PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

*A road map for powering your pull-through to produce results*

Where does the power come from in Tiger Woods' golf swing? Ask Woods and he'll tell you it's what happens after he hits the ball that counts. "*Full extension down to the target line,*" is how Woods describes<sup>1</sup> the part of his golf swing more commonly known as *follow-through*. Woods' follow-through is where his talent, skill and practice come together to produce his phenomenal results. In areas of development follow-through is referred to as *pull-through*.

Like Woods, organizations invest in talent and skills development to produce performance improvement in the field. They focus on training to develop new skills, but many don't have the processes in place to *pull-through* development into results on the job.

You could say they're missing the link between developing skills and achieving actual results on the job.

## Is your performance improvement stuck in first gear?

In over a decade in helping Fortune 1000 organizations achieve performance improvement, we've seen how difficult it is for employees and managers to *pull-through* the investment in developing skills to on-the-job results. We've seen that many managers and their direct reports don't know how to translate their skill development needs identified by assessment (as well as those from formal training) into workable development plans that can help them spot and take advantage of opportunities on the job to improve performance.

Moreover, managers and their direct reports are often uncomfortable talking about the specific goals and behaviors a development plan should include. Direct reports, no matter how well intentioned, often don't know how to use smart-goal setting. They are unable to identify specific on-the-job opportunities for practicing new skills, and they often find themselves in a support vacuum because their managers don't know how to provide the individual coaching and feedback direct reports need to keep their development plans on track. Moreover, managers many times aren't sufficiently supported or motivated by senior management to provide the leadership and support employees need to *pull-through* skill development into results.

## Is your development process top down?

A major barrier we've seen to successful *pull-through* is a failure to involve all levels of leadership in the development effort. Many organizations understand the need to focus on training the managers who supervise front-line employees. But what are the responsibilities of the second and third tier managers? Do they know how to motivate, support and inspire frontline managers to coach and mentor frontline employees?

### Success factors: Leadership as an example

Companies spend billions of dollars every year to train and develop talent. Leadership development initiatives are a prime example, and studies that have analyzed their successes and failures provide insight into the critical success factors we believe *all* performance improvement programs should include.

A major global benchmarking study of leadership development efforts at 900 organizations worldwide<sup>1</sup> involving more than 4,500 individuals in leadership positions identified the following critical success factors:

- Senior-level management participation in development and *pull-through*
- The creation of specific opportunities to practice new skills on the job
- Personalized feedback, mentoring and support
- Management accountability for development *pull-through*

Support at the individual level emerged as a powerful factor for development success in the study's findings. More than half of the managers in leadership positions reported they use a personal mentor or coach for "an individualized diagnosis of needs, feedback, development planning, one-on-one training, and tracking of results."<sup>2</sup>

Another study of leadership development programs found that companies with the most success focus on execution and hold managers accountable for performance improvement.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, an analysis of leadership development programs and why they fail published in the *MIT Sloan Management Review*, concluded that "Companies that excel at building leaders don't rush to buy quick-fix products, they know that panaceas are a myth, and they invest in process excellence rather than a multitude of programs."<sup>4</sup>

## The missing link: Pulling it all together

We've seen from our work that engaging managers at all levels of the organization is essential to *pull-through* development into results.

Senior level management support is needed to help second-tier, third-tier and frontline managers provide the leadership, feedback and coaching individual employees need to succeed. Managers, if sufficiently involved in the *pull-through* process, can be a critical link to not only establishing individual employees' development plan goals, but also then providing the support, opportunity and coaching individual managers need to help their employees achieve development goals.

Moreover, successful development initiatives are a process, not a one-shot deal. The process continues after formal training has occurred and should include the creation of specific opportunities to practice new skills on the job, candid feedback, and regular assessment.

**In short, the missing link in many performance improvement initiatives is a process for getting leadership to buy-into, participate in, support and motivate *pull-through*, so investment in development produces measurable results in the field.**

## Discover your 'Talent Equation'

At Corporate Insights we have developed a model for identifying, developing and sustaining talent within organizations. We call it *The Talent Equation*.

First we identify the *critical factors* needed for success within a given job. We call this competency modeling. Second, we create assessment tools so the organization can spot which employees have or don't have the critical factors for success. We call this assessment. Third, we help the organization implement these assessment tools as the foundation for developing and mentoring talent. [We call this development.] The equation looks like this:

$$\{\text{Competency Modeling}\} + \{\text{Assessment}\} + \{\text{Development}\} \\ = \text{Promoting Talent/Performance Improvement}$$

In our work with organizations, our #1 objective is to uncover *The Talent Equation* specific to each organization and job. We build *The Talent Equation* by first understanding your business strategy and direction and challenging assumptions about what's needed to get there. Then we identify the critical competencies for success in each job and build and deploy assessment tools capable of uncovering, developing and sustaining talent.

But our process doesn't stop there, which is where development initiatives often get stuck. To empower managers and employees to engage successfully in *pull-through*, we deploy *five essential steps* so the organization has a process for turning newly developed skills into performance results.



## A Five-Step Plan for *Pull-Through* Success

Our Five Point Plan is built upon the fundamental realization that the organization's leadership must take an active role in *pull-through* for it to succeed.

### **Step One:** Involve Managers in Assessment Feedback

Carefully conceived metrics and accurate assessment of employees' strengths and weaknesses have much more value if managers and employees agree on what the results mean. Without this mutual buy-in, *pull-through* becomes impossible because managers and their direct reports will lack the common ground needed to engage in mentoring, coaching and following up on performance results.

Therefore, we integrate managers into individual employee assessment feedback sessions. Participation in assessment feedback brings employees and their managers into alignment so that managers can provide coaching and feedback and employees can benefit from it.

### **Step Two:** Bring Managers into Development Planning

It surprises when we see the assumption that managers and employees know how to translate their development needs into specific development goals. The thought is that if skills assessment is accurate, the development plan will write itself. The opposite is actually true.

To begin with, managers and employees don't automatically agree on what changes are needed in spite of seeing the same assessment results, and are naturally uncomfortable discussing specific development goals. The hesitancy to discuss goals is not surprising if you consider that performance improvement goals are usually focused on what the person doesn't do well.

The second step of our five-point plan brings managers and employees together in the creation of the employee's development plan. This builds the common ground and establishes the lines of communications that are essential for managers to provide candid feedback about performance, and for employees to be clear on exactly what performance improvement should look like on the job.

Because step two brings managers and employees into alignment on what performance improvement should look like, it empowers both sides to identify specific job functions and job opportunities for practicing new skills. Linking the development plan to specific job events gives managers the chance to create specific tasks and projects for employees to try out new skills. It also helps employees to recognize and take advantage of opportunities for growth on the job.

The result is a development plan linked to everyday realities that provides both the manager and the employee with clear-cut opportunities for achieving improvement.

But what about the leader? Shouldn't he or she have her own development plan?

### **Step Three:** Coach Managers to Lead

Our five-steps create a cascading involvement of management in the *pull-through* process from the top down. It recognizes that managers need leadership skills, which is why the third step of our program focuses exclusively on managers' skills at communicating a vision and inspiring direct reports with coaching and mentoring.

Step three begins with a *parallel development plan* for the manager, based upon an assessment of his or her leadership skills. Following assessment of the manager's skills, the development plan targets opportunities for them to:

- Develop their coaching and mentoring skills
- Improve their ability to speak openly, directly and frankly about performance issues
- Provide frank, supportive and constructive feedback
- Identify and create specific opportunities for the employees to practice new skills on the job.

The tools we deploy to assist organizations to coach their leaders include regular feedback sessions with managers to help them see where they are in their progress at achieving their leadership development goals.

### **Step Four:** Assess the Team

If management is to succeed at the supporting role it must play in development follow-through, a one-on-one manager-supervisee perspective isn't enough to know if your *pull-through* effort is succeeding. A wider perspective that reveals the dynamics at each level and between levels of the organization is required to really see if a unified and aligned *pull-through* process is occurring.

At step four, we deploy specific tools and metrics for building what we call a "Family Portrait" of the development initiative's progress. This portrait provides managers with the assessment and feedback they need to focus on specific areas of the organization where bottlenecks in the *pull-through* process are blocking or contributing to a slowdown in the achievement of performance improvement results.

## Step Five: Measure Pull-Through ROI

Finally, how do you know if your *pull-through* is producing results? Any effort to create a process for *pull-through*, as well as performance improvement in general must have a way to measure and verify the results. Otherwise, you're flying blind. Investing in skills and a process to *pull-through* those skills to performance improvement will pay even greater dividends if you can accurately measure the results. And if you can accurately measure your results, you have a better change of pinpointing where you can adjust or modify your development process to achieve even better performance.

At step five, we deploy metrics specifically tailored to the organization so management can see where performance is at the start of the development initiative, where performance is at any given time during the initiative, and how much improvement the initiative and *pull-through* are actually producing.

### Power your *pull-through* for performance results

It comes as no surprise to anyone who has set his or her mind to achieving performance improvement that competency modeling, assessment and development planning require *pull-through* to produce results. The difficulty is knowing where and how *pull-through* needs to occur and how to marshal limited resources to where they're needed to power *pull-through*. In our work with organizations, we've seen the results that can be achieved when management's critical role in *pull-through* is acknowledged and empowered. The Talent Equation and our Five Steps for *Pull-Through* Success provide the roadmap, support and tools for producing measurable performance improvement results.

*For information on how The Talent Equation, Five Steps for Pull-Through Success and Corporate Insights can help you identify, develop and sustain excellence in your organization, contact Nino Lamberti at 847-837-8164.*

Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> **Human Resource Planning, June 2006 v29 i2 p31(10)** *Trends in leader development and succession.*  
Paul Bernthal; Richard Wellins. (2006 Human Resource Planning Society)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> **Human Resource Planning, September 2005 v28 i3 p18(6)** *Growing great leaders; does it really matter?*  
Marc Effron; Shelli Greenslade; Michelle Salob.

<sup>4</sup> **MIT Sloan Management Review, Spring 2003 v44 i3 p83(6)** *Why leadership-development efforts fail.*  
Douglas A. Ready; Jay A. Conger. (2003 Sloan Management Review)

