

Delivering Masterful Performance Consulting: A Framework for Success

By Dr. Karen McGraw and Dennis Mankin, CPT

Performance consulting was once a small niche business practice that was primarily the domain of management consulting firms. Now it is a function that crosses business units of organizations worldwide. This article introduces readers to the field of performance consulting and the Performance Consulting Framework, a guide to help practitioners deliver masterful performance consulting.

Introduction

Has your job role recently changed to reflect the title or responsibilities of a performance consultant? If so, you are not alone. Although the field of performance consulting is not new, it may be new to your organization. Performance consulting has been a subset of management or organizational consulting for many years. Prior to that, Thomas Gilbert, the father of the field of Human Performance Improvement (HPI), used the words 'human performance technologist' to describe a similar role. More recently, other leaders in the field such as Judith Hale,¹ have described the performance consultant's role and helped to increase the acceptance of performance consulting among learning organizations.

Today, learning and development (L&D) professionals are actively transitioning into performance consulting roles and identifying both training and non-training solutions to improve performance and business results. HPI and performance consulting is now the norm, not the exception, in most competitive organizations. As L&D organizations look for new ways to align themselves more closely with business units, many of them are offering performance consulting services. But simply a new job title does not a performance consultant make!

The transition from L&D professional to performance consultant is not easy; it requires significant change.² There are new competencies to attain and new processes and tools to learn.³ Even more challenging is the fact that the performance consultant must be able to influence clients' attitudes about non-training solutions to address a performance problem. These new competencies and the ability to influence others to take action are critical to performance consulting success. Yet, some L&D organizations fail to invest in attaining them because they fear they cannot get support to implement non-training solutions.

Some people attain the skills and try to act as performance consultants, but still offer primarily training solutions. Even when the performance consultant understands that training is not the only answer, the organization's leaders may not yet grasp why other solutions are offered. It is not because these leaders don't know the importance of achieving their organizational goals. For years training has been the 'go to solution' to get things fixed. Consequently, leaders may continue to see the newly-minted performance

¹ Hale, J. (2007). *Performance Consultant's Fieldbook*, 2nd Ed. San Francisco CA: Wiley/Pfeiffer.

² Phillips, J. (2006). *Performance Analysis and Consulting*, 2nd Ed. American Society for Training & Development.

³ Rothwell, W. (2013). *Performance Consulting: Applying Performance Improvement in HRD*. John Wiley & Sons.

consultant as a trainer (i.e., ‘new wine in old bottles’). It can be difficult to change business leaders’ perception of the trainer-turned-performance consultant. Changing their perception will require that the performance consultant have strong influencing skills, take new approaches to address the problem, be able to demonstrate the value of appropriate non-training solutions, and deliver project outcomes that produce real business results.

The purpose of this article is to examine the field of performance consulting to help both new and more experienced performance consultants enhance their capabilities and the business results they deliver for clients.

What is Performance Consulting?

Performance consulting has been defined in many different ways. In fact, Hale (2007) contends that performance consulting means something different to every person and organization. This certainly complicates the job of the performance consultant! We must be able to explain our field and what we do in order to gain acceptance and begin the process of becoming a trusted advisor.

Definitions

Here are some different definitions from the literature. Key words are highlighted to illustrate their commonality, even though the definitions themselves vary.

1. It is the **process** in which learning organizations **partner** with internal or external clients to achieve **results** through the optimization of workplace performance to support **business goals** (Corporate University Exchange).
2. It is a **systematic** and data-driven **process** that helps consultants and business managers make sound decisions about people and their **performance** in the organization (D.G. Robinson and J. Robinson (2008), Performance Consulting).
3. It is the **practice** of taking a disciplined approach to assessing individual and organizational effectiveness, diagnosing causes of human performance problems, and recommending a set of **interventions** (J. Hale, 2007, The Performance Consultant’s Fieldbook, 2nd Ed.).
4. It is an approach to closing measurable gaps between “is” and “should” results by applying a **results** improvement **process** and using **thorough, rigorous** performance **analysis**. (Rummler, G., 2007, Serious Performance Consulting According to Rummler).

We’ve taken the best ideas to craft the definition of Performance Consulting that follows:

The practice of taking a systematic approach to assess individual, process and organizational performance to identify performance barriers and facilitators in order to recommend, design, develop, and implement the most appropriate solutions to close performance gaps.

Let's break the definition down to focus on some key points:

It is a *practice*. We've used the word practice to convey that the work requires the *application* of knowledge and validated methods, rather than being a simple theory about consulting.

It is *systematic*. We've used this word because performance consulting is done according to a reproducible method or approach, rather than disorderly or haphazard steps.

It is *thorough and rigorous*. During performance consulting, we are not just assessing and analyzing what individuals do to find ways to improve. We focus on three different levels (Performer, Process, and Organization) to identify and remove barriers to success. We also examine, recognize and identify ways to reinforce and extend the factors that already are facilitating high levels of performance.

It requires that we *recommend*. Performing assessments and analyses won't solve the client's problem if we do not know how to make appropriate recommendations and influence client decision making. We may not be the ones designing, developing, and implementing *every* solution (rarely is this the case), but we must be able to recommend the correct and complete solution set.

It is *results-based*. The goal of the performance consultant is not just to complete a good analysis or study—it is to close performance gaps to improve organizational results.

What Do Great Performance Consultants Do?

Anyone who has been a part of a large organization probably has seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of performance consulting. One way to think about what makes a performance consultant great is to start with "what not to do." Consulting failures have been well documented, in fact, you and your organization may have experienced some of these:

- There was the consultant who asked the client for advice on what to do next.
- There was the consultant who ignored the client who brought them in, climbing over them to work directly with his or her boss in a "power play."
- There was the consultant who put off telling the client bad news, forgetting that bad news does not get better with age.
- There was the consultant who bid a low price to win the project, then hit the client with successive change orders until the project was way over budget.
- There was the consultant who promised extensive expertise, but once the project started, all the client saw onsite were newly minted, fresh-out-of-college 'consultants.'

As these examples suggest, not all performance consultants are equal. In fact, some consultants quickly forget that they really are in the customer service and trust business. That is, we are there to serve the client and help make them, their project, and their organization successful.

Performance Consultant Outcomes

So, what do great performance consultants *do*? Here is a list of the primary job outcomes that great performance consultants produce as we work on projects:

1. Improved business results that enable the organization to achieve its goals.
2. Performance gaps that are identified, analyzed and measured to determine if they are worth closing or fixing.
3. Performance gaps closed using the most appropriate solutions.
4. An increase in the percentage of exemplary or key performers in the target job role being examined.
5. Trusted advisor status that enables the performance consultant to make appropriate recommendations with objectivity and transparency.
6. Streamlined organizational, team, and individual projects that take a systems view of performance and identify both positive influences that drive performance, and barriers to performance.

Differentiators

How do performance consultants produce these kinds of outcomes? Here are a few things that differentiate the great performance consultant from the average performance consultant.

Great performance consultants follow **HPI Principle 1—*take a results-based approach***⁴ to solving all organizational performance problems. This approach guards against the ‘shiny object syndrome’ and the solution *du jour* (i.e. recommending the hottest new thing or trend, regardless of whether it is the best solution). Taking a results-based approach also means we steer our client away from a simple “want” or a perceived “need” that may be quick, but won’t solve the problem. Instead, it means understanding the business need or goal and the performance gaps that need to be closed. It requires that we take the time to conduct an analysis and gather the right kind of data from the right people. Good data enables us to determine what should be done to deliver the desired results.

Great performance consultants follow **HPI Principle 2—*focus first on outcomes***⁵ and measurable business results when analyzing performance, and only later on behaviors. An outcome is a product produced by a job performer that has value to the organization, is measurable, and can be seen or measured even when the performer is not present. Job outcomes provide the link between what performers do, and organizational goals. They give performance consultants a context in which to determine the behaviors that are important, enabling them to use precious analysis time on what needs attention.⁶ This allows them to streamline their approach, use their analysis time wisely, and keep them from getting ‘analysis paralysis.’ Great performance consultants recognize that there are behaviors that have little impact on the production of valuable job outcomes. They start with job outcomes, focusing time and effort on the behaviors that produce the outcomes that matter.

⁴ **HPI Principle 1: HPI Use a Results-Based Approach**, from ATD’s *Improving Human Performance* course

⁵ **HPI Principle 2: HPI Focuses First on Outcomes**, from ATD’s *Improving Human Performance* course

⁶ McGraw, K. and Mankin, D. (2015). “All About Outcomes,” ATD.

Great performance consultants also follow **HPI Principle 3—*organizations are systems***⁷. They apply systems thinking—a holistic, disciplined approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system’s constituent parts interrelate, and how systems work over time. They also must consider 3 levels within a system when conducting an HPI analysis: the *Organization Level* (e.g., strategies, goals, competitiveness, market position, etc.), the *Process Level* (e.g., workflow, job design, inputs and outputs), and the *Performer Level* (e.g., hiring, promotion, individual goals, job responsibilities and standards, feedback and coaching, support and rewards).

The most successful performance consultants ***partner with internal or external clients and stakeholders*** to address the real issues and find the right solutions. Partnering is essential, because the client organization is going to have to live with the solutions put in place. Successful partnering is about collaborating openly, ensuring a two-way flow of information (i.e., having a true dialogue), and establishing trust. In the best situations, clients come to understand and trust that the recommendations the performance consultant makes are in the best interest of the project and organization.

The best performance consultants ***add value*** to the client organization by finding the most reasonable ways to make the organization work more effectively and efficiently. *Any* consultant can come in recommending the newest piece of software, a new team building program, or their leadership development program. The *great* consultants find the best ways to enable the organization to perform better and use their people assets more wisely. One of the primary ways performance consultants add value is the thoroughness and completeness of their approach. They not only can conduct the front-end work of business and performance analysis effectively, but they also can assist in designing, developing, implementing, and evaluating the solution on the back-end of the process. And because they have supported their client throughout the project, they are able to help the client manage change and evaluate the project’s results against the original performance gap.

Finally, the best performance consultants ***provide excellent judgment*** to help their client organizations decide how to move forward. They provide empirical evidence for the recommendations they make. They bring a unique perspective and specialized skills to tackle a client’s performance problem. (They often provide skills that the organization does not want to permanently employ, which can lead to substantial savings when compared to employing someone full time for a very specialized task.) The great performance consultant is not only an expert in his or her field, but also knows how to be objective and facilitate discussion that builds consensus within the organization. At the end of the day—or in this case the project—the great performance consultant recognizes that it is their judgment that the client is buying.

Simple in Theory, Complex to Perform

This probably all sounds quite reasonable. In reality, it is simple in theory, but it can be very complex to perform and get right. All too often the supposed performance consultant is more likely to resemble either a “firefighter” or a training person who has simply taken on (or been assigned) new job responsibilities.

⁷ **HPI Principle 3: Organizations are Systems**, from ATD’s *Improving Human Performance* course

Many performance consultants ask, “What are the qualifications for this job role?” An online search reveals that organizations are looking for performance consultants who can meet the following set of qualifications:

- Demonstrated ability to act as a strategic business partner and apply human performance principles to solve problems
- Experienced in every phase of a consulting process or life cycle (from starting the project to implementing solutions and evaluating results)
- Demonstrated commitment to improving measurable results and using a validated, robust methodology for achieving desired results
- Demonstrated ability to take full ownership for the delivery of a project, or at least for a major phase of a project
- Demonstrated ability to manage projects and others during the analysis, development, and implementation of solutions
- Demonstrated ability to make contributions that are valued by clients
- Demonstrated ability to build and cultivate relationships with clients at all levels of the organization, and with external vendors
- Acts as a change agent, leading and influencing others.

While the documented qualifications are useful, they do not necessarily guide our development and practice. All too often, organizations assign the role of ‘performance consultant’ to a well-meaning person without providing the specific process, competencies, tools, or dedicated resources that are required for the job role to succeed. In ATD’s *Master Performance Consultant* program, we teach a framework to help the performance consultant self-assess, practice, and grow in each of the important components of successful consulting.

A Framework for Performance Consulting

While other authors have provided lists of competencies that consultants should have, a framework specific to performance consulting has not previously existed. A framework is important because it acts as a foundation or conceptual structure to help us understand and work effectively in a field. In other words, it becomes a guide for success in a particular field.

For example, the Institute of Management Consultants USA has a defined management consulting competency framework (2009).⁸ Their framework includes:

- Market knowledge and capability—technical disciplines (such as finance, strategy, HR, IT, Marketing, Training) and sector specialization such as transportation, health care, banking, manufacturing, etc.

⁸ Institute of Management Consultants USA, 4440 PGA Blvd., Suite 600, Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33410.

- **Consulting competencies**—business understanding and awareness, managing client relationships, consulting process, practice management, etc.
- **Consulting skills and behaviors**—skills such as effective communications, analytical thinking, emotional intelligence, project management
- **Professionalism and ethics**—the skill, good judgment and behaviors expected from an ethical person who is trained to do the job well.

Performance consulting is similar to management consulting in many ways. For example, both types of consulting require some level of business understanding, client relationship management, communications, analytical thinking, and ethics. But performance consulting is more narrowly focused on projects and solutions that impact human performance *related to producing organizational goals*.

To enable the definition of a standard for performance consulting, Dr. Karen McGraw, an expert in HPI and performance consulting, developed the *ATD Performance Consulting Framework*. (Figure 1). This framework is based on best practices in the performance consulting field, years of research, and professional experience. It describes the ethics, critical skills and consulting competency areas that a performance consultant is expected to understand, apply, and demonstrate. It also provides a set of specializations in which performance consultants may choose to focus their work. The individual tiers or levels in the framework are described in the sections that follow.



Figure 1. ATD's Performance Consulting Framework, Karen McGraw (2014).

Level 1: Professional Ethics

Establishing a foundation of trust is the cornerstone of the framework. Professional ethics are imperative for a viable, long-term performance consulting practice. Ethics impact the types of engagements performance consultants accept, how they gather data, and how they select and implement solutions. Professional ethics also help define a performance consultant's actions when management disregards data-driven recommendations, and do not really desire to hear the 'truth.' As one maxim holds, "Being known for your integrity is the Holy Grail of consulting."

Level 2: Critical Consulting Skills

The effective performance consultant must be able to demonstrate capabilities in a variety of essential consulting skills. These range from exemplary interpersonal skills and communications, to business skills, thinking and inquiry skills, influencing skills, solutioning skills, and the ability to keep a results orientation. The focus here is not just being *trained* in these skills, but being able to *apply* these skills on real projects. Figure 2 summarizes these critical skills.



Figure 2. Critical Consulting Skills

Level 3: Critical Competency Areas

Skills alone do not make a great performance consultant. The critical consulting skills seen in Figure 2 simply form the basic set of a performance consultant’s expected abilities. To be masterful in this field, performance consultants must be able to exhibit the ability to use essential performance consulting processes, models, methodologies, and tools, in addition to being able to manage client relationships. This means ‘real time’ demonstration of these competency areas by the performance consultant over time. It is unlikely that any of these will be accomplished after a single consulting project.

3.1 Models, Methodologies and Tools

Being able to use a standardized consulting process, model, methodologies, and tools makes it easier to communicate ‘what we do,’ improves team accountability, and enables us to build stronger relationships with senior leaders. The right models, methodologies, and tools also improve our ability to align projects to business results. We advocate the use of the following validated models, methodologies, and tools, some of which have been taught by ATD and applied by thousands of people worldwide. In the *Master Performance Consultant* program we rely on ATD’s 7-Step Consulting Process, ATD’s HPI Model (which is based on the 3 foundational principles of HPI) Performance DNA™, and other tools.

1. **ATD’s 7-Step Consulting Process.** The process of performance consulting represents *how* work and projects get done. Having an established process helps performance consultants communicate better with our team and clients. It is used to help plan and implement projects, and to increase project success rates. Every field has a standard process that is followed, and performance consulting is no different. This process model (Figure 3), is based on best practices and techniques that have been used in the field of performance consulting for many years. This 7-step process guides the performance consultant from the initial contact with the client, all the way through implementing, managing, and evaluating the resulting solution. Key outcomes produced by each step are depicted beneath it.

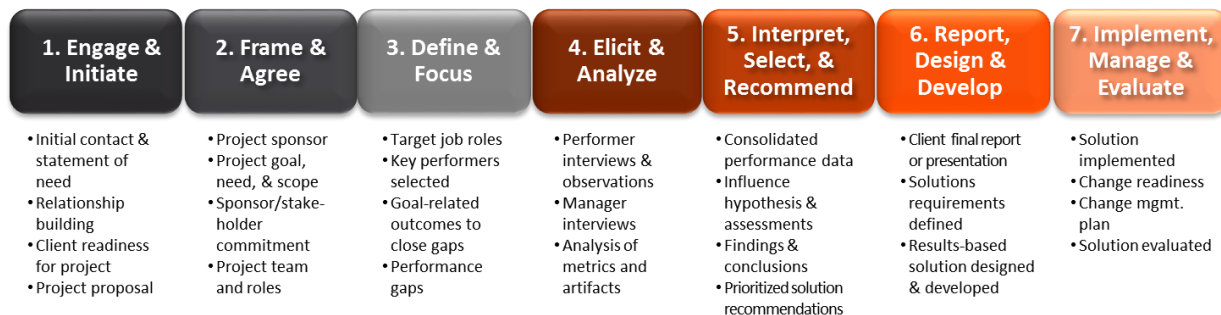


Figure 3. ATD’s 7-Step Performance Consulting Process

2. **ATD HPI Model.** The HPI Model was adapted from a variety of notable sources and represents best practices in the field of HPI. It provides a blueprint for performance consulting. In fact, the *7-Step Consulting Process* was developed to align with the ATD HPI Model (Figure 4).

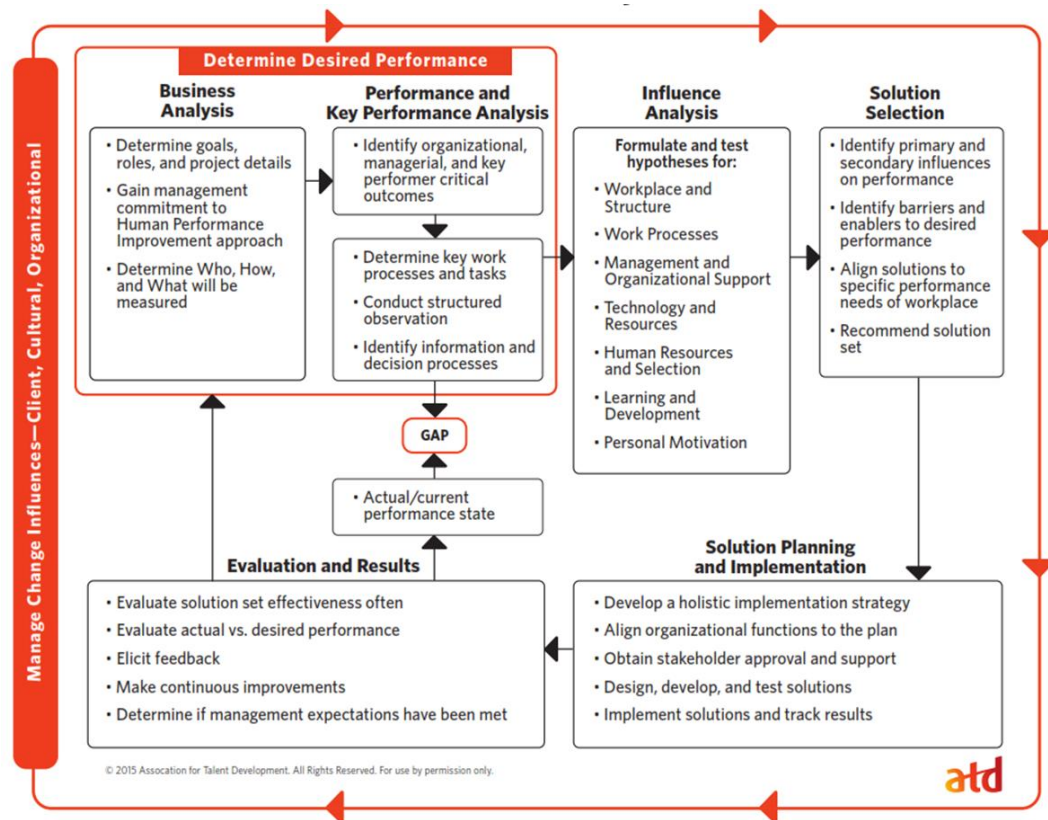


Figure 4. ATD's HPI Model, © Dennis Mankin (2014).

ATD's HPI Model consists of 7 interrelated phases:

- **Business Analysis**—The objectives of this phase are to identify organizational goals and pain points, build a strong relationship with the client, and begin project management.
- **Performance & Key Performance Analysis**—The main objectives of this phase are to identify the desired and actual performance levels to calculate the gap, select performers and managers to interview and observe, and capture critical outcomes and how they are produced.
- **Influence Analysis**—The objective of this phase is to identify and confirm the positive and negative influences on performance.
- **Solution Selection**—The objectives of this phase are to assess and prioritize possible solutions based on their ability to close the gap, and select the right solution or solution set to recommend to your client.
- **Solution Planning & Implementation**—The objective of this phase is to successfully plan and implement the solution and roll it out.
- **Evaluation & Results**—The objectives of this phase are to ensure the quality of the solution and ensure that the solution produced the desired impact.
- **Change**—The objectives of this phase are to help the organization prepare for and adapt to the changes that are triggered by the solution.

3. **Performance DNA.** Finally, every performance consultant needs an analysis methodology, and there are over 200 in use today. The Performance DNA analysis methodology is a people-focused, systematic, results-based methodology used to analyze human performance to improve organizational effectiveness. Performance DNA was developed by human performance experts based on 40 years of best practices in the field of human performance engineering.

It was designed specifically to align with the ATD HPI Model and enable performance consultants to achieve organizational goals and close performance gaps. Unlike traditional methodologies that examine poor performers to find ways to improve results, Performance DNA targets exemplary performers. It provides tools and job aids to determine the things that facilitate superior performance, and the things that get in the way. In Performance DNA, finding what is 'right' and already working in the workplace is far more important than creating a long laundry list of what is 'wrong' and attempting to fix everything on list.

3.2 Client Relationship Management

Client relationship management helps the performance consultant build and maintain relationships with clients long term, not just on a single project. It involves activities such as building rapport and trust, keeping the client informed (even when there are problems), delivering what was promised, and sharing knowledge and expertise. In the end, most senior leaders want to know the truth, even when it hurts, and they eventually trust and respect those people who bring them the truth.

One of the most important components of client relationship management is ensuring that the performance consultant communicates regularly with the client. Having a client feedback loop improves both project results and relationships. It helps ensure that the consultant follows up on anything promised, and answers questions asked. Another component is trust. Good performance consultants never lose sight of the fact that people do business with people they trust and like. Taking the time at the beginning of a project to build rapport and trust, and define accountability can really pay off when the performance consultant has to deliver tough messages later in the process.

Level 4: Specializations

The fourth and final level of the Performance Consulting Framework is specializations. It is impossible to be an expert in every possible performance consulting area. As a performance consultant works on different projects, he or she becomes aware of special interests and gains knowledge and experience crafting solutions for particular types of problems. Over time, this deepening knowledge and experience enables the performance consultant to move from being a generalist, to being a specialist in particular areas. Think about what your own specializations might be.

Closing

In this article we have defined performance consulting as a practice and provided an overview of what makes a great performance consultant. Becoming a true expert in the world of HPI and performance consulting involves many moving parts. In this article we have illustrated the alignment of these parts through the Performance Consulting Framework. The individual components of the framework reflect concepts, models, methodologies, tools, and best practices that have been tested over time by

performance consultants working in the field of HPI. We have defined these different levels in the framework as professional ethics, critical consulting skills, competency areas, and specializations.

The content of this article represents the foundation of ATD's *Master Performance Consultant* program. This program is a robust, application-focused, three-part experience that takes performance consultants interested in assessing and enhancing their skills to the next level. The field of HPI and performance consulting is bursting with opportunities for those individuals with the expertise, skills and tools to do the job professionally.

We encourage you to find out more about the *Master Performance Consultant* program at <https://www.td.org/Education/Programs/ATD-Master-Performance-Consultant>.

About the Authors



Dr. Karen McGraw is the President and Principal Consultant for Silver Bear Group www.silverbeargroup.com in Austin, TX. She is an accomplished organizational consultant and knowledge engineer specializing in human performance improvement, leadership, and change. For over 30 years, she has improved the value of her clients' most important asset—their people—by helping organizations work more effectively. Clients trust her to design tailored solutions that address critical issues, engage stakeholders in project success, and deliver long-term results.

Karen's educational background is in the fields of Cognitive and Educational Psychology and Curriculum and Instruction. In addition, she is certified in the use of tools such as the Golden Personality Profiler and the Myers-Briggs. She is a co-author of ATD's *Performance DNA* methodology and the author of ATD's *Performance Consulting Framework*, as well as the *EASE Change Management Toolkit*. She has published 7 books (including co-authoring the most recent book *Breaking Tape – 7 Steps to Winning at Work and Life*) and over 50 articles in topics ranging from knowledge engineering and human performance analysis, to change management, collaboration, and process improvement. Karen facilitates in ATD's Human Performance Improvement Program.



Dennis Mankin is a Senior Consultant and Managing Partner at Platinum Performance Partners (PPP) in Asheville, NC. He has an extensive professional background in human performance improvement (HPI), including 31 years working with senior management, performing HPI consulting, coaching, and HPI training for organizations worldwide. Dennis' educational background is in behavioral psychology and interpersonal communications. He became one of the first Certified Performance Technologists (CPT) in the United States in 2003 through the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) and his sponsor and founder of ISPI, Dr. Joe Harless.

He is also the co-author and publisher of *Performance DNA* with the Association for Talent Development (ATD), an analysis toolset used by over 7,300 HPI analysts worldwide, and the author of ATD's *HPI Model* the gold standard in HPI. Dennis delivers public and corporate workshops for PPP worldwide and is a sought-after speaker at conferences. Dennis has published over 20 articles in the field of HPI and his work in HPI has been cited in at least 8 other books on human performance. He is the co-author of the book *Breaking Tape – 7 Steps to Winning at Work and Life*. Dennis has facilitated in ATD's Human Performance Improvement Program since its inception in 2001.