

# Let's start from scratch

Critical thinking is a vital skill for trainers to have, says **Barry Johnson**

**I** read an article by Phil Rosenzweig, professor of strategy and international management at the International Institute for Management Development in Switzerland<sup>1</sup>. The fact that I understood much of what he wrote and agreed with every word of it indicates either he is a brilliant writer or I didn't *really* understand.

He wrote about senior corporate executives seeking superior performance for their organisation and how they mess this up. Anyway, I decided to adopt the principles he was espousing because they resonated with the way I see the world (that is a synaesthesia – kinaesthetic/visual) and apply them to the scale we trainers of managers in the behavioural domain might meet. I say at this point I have stolen and simplified conceptual chunks of what he wrote but that's okay because he says I can. I suggest everybody reads his book *The Halo Effect* – mind blowing, although I leave the halo effect to another article.

I make the bold assumption that a quest of every trainer is to find the keys to superior performance for herself and the participants in her learning events. (Let's just assume all trainers are women. Nearly all the best trainers I have worked with are women anyway.) Achieving satisfactory performance is hard enough but excellence – given the rapidly changing business scene with consequential shifting requirements – is even more difficult. At the same time, trainers are under enormous pressure to deliver required outputs and keep the participants and the participants' sponsors happy, let alone all the other stuff to do with culture, organisational boundaries and norms, and the limitations that usually come in the form of budgets and time.

No wonder trainers constantly search for ways to achieve what they are achieving now with less stress, or improve performance with the same level of stress. The great advantage trainers have is that it is a great and enjoyable profession in which you can often see success and don't have to check whether



you have succeeded or failed from some numbers on a computer screen.

Many trainers, despite their good intentions, look in the wrong places for the insights that will deliver an edge. Too often they reach for books and articles that promise a reliable path to high performance. Over the past decade, some of the most popular training books and articles have claimed to reveal the “blueprint for outstanding success”, “the way to move from good to great” or “how to plan your way to success” or to motivate Gladys to be a star or... well, you have read this stuff and I bet, like me, sometimes you have believed it. If you are as cynical as I am, you might have believed only some of it.

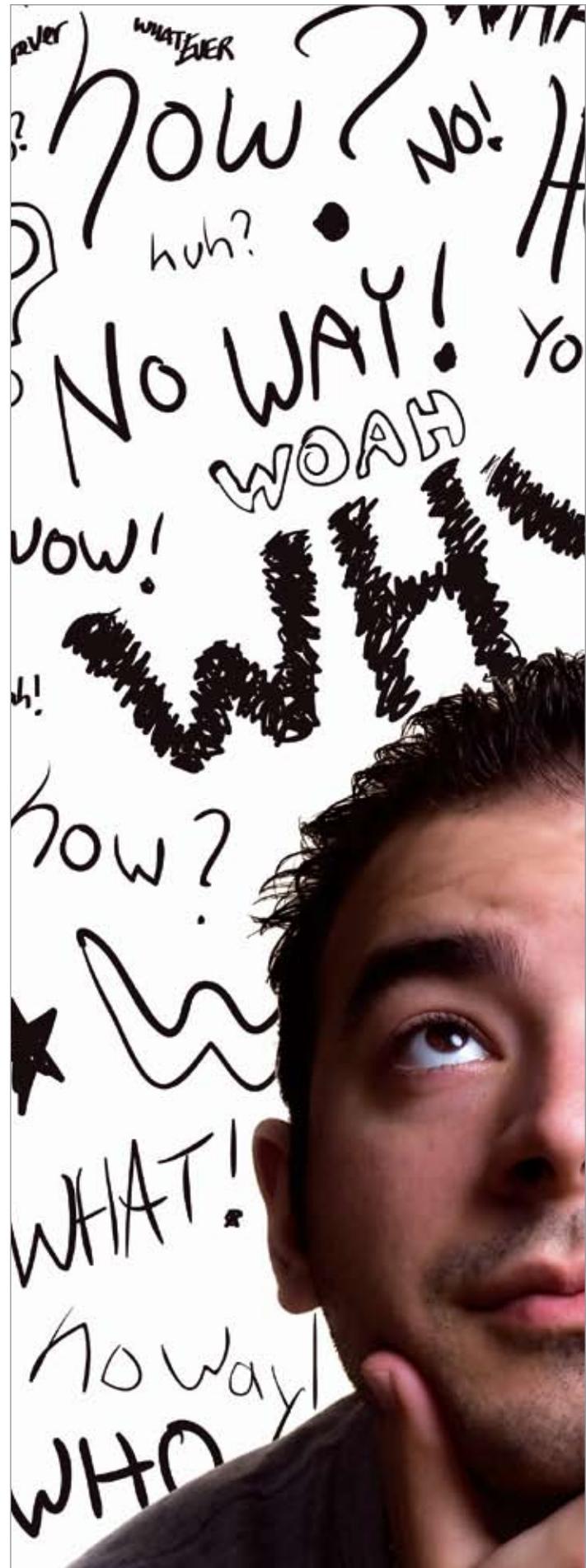
At first glance, many of the pronouncements in such works look entirely credible. It is often claimed they are based on extensive data and, in the best of them, the statements made appear to be the result of rigorous analysis. Thousands of trainers read them, eager to apply these keys to success to their own trainer’s tool kit.

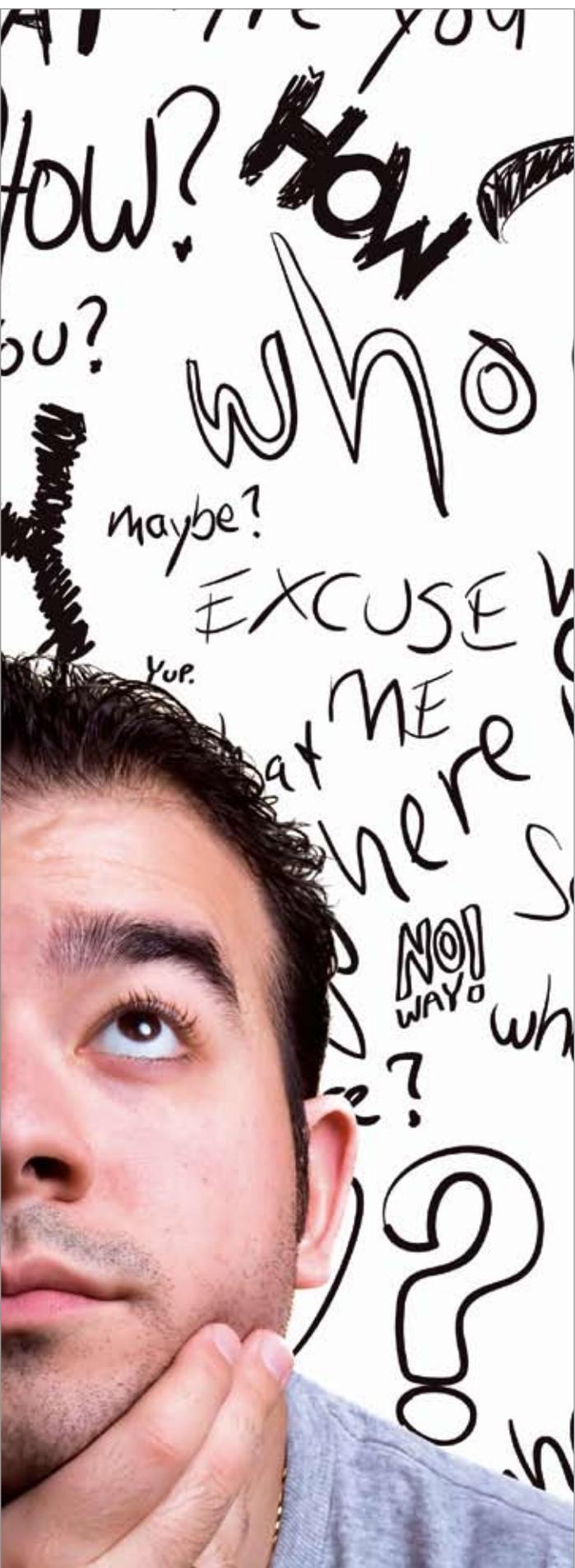
“Unfortunately, many of the studies are deeply flawed and based on questionable data that can lead to erroneous conclusions,” says Rosenzweig in his *McKinsey Quarterly* article. This last sentence is the one that rang bells for me even though its target was the writing about managing.

Wow, Barry! Surely we need methods and surely some of the methods proposed are valuable and do lead to improved trainer performance and learners learning? Yes, I agree. I’m agreeing with myself and I hope that counts as valid.

The issue is that, in promoting ideas, authors obscure a more basic truth – namely that, in the organisational world, success is the result of uncertainty and shaped, in large part, by factors outside our control (well that is my experience). In one major international company that was unfortunate enough to employ me for 16 years, we called it “living with ambiguity”; the less kind called it “the blind leading the blind”. In this real world, given the conflicting dynamics, even seemingly good choices didn’t always lead to favourable outcomes.

Rather than succumb to the hyperbole (crap) and false promises (lies) found in some misapplied behavioural and management writing, we trainers, perhaps, would do far better to improve our powers of critical thinking. Wise trainers should be able to think clearly about the reality of claims and the reality of their application in specific environments and in the different environments we face on what appears to be the same learning event. Because something works in one place, even if the claim that it worked is true, it does not mean it will work anywhere else.





Indeed, the capacity for critical thinking is, I believe, an important asset for any trainer — one that allows the trainer to shift ground and adopt a totally different approach to the group of participants before her, embracing instead a more realistic understanding of behavioural success and failure. A major irritant of mine was when other managers (normally in the HR function) asked me who else had done something when I was innovating. It was as if somebody else had to do the something before us for us to even try it. Line managers tended not to do this, perhaps because, often erroneously, they thought I knew what I was doing.

As a first step, it's important to identify some of the misperceptions and delusions commonly found in the training world. Then, using these insights, we might replace inappropriate thinking with a more acute method of trying realistic approaches and decisions. I often read stuff in modern articles giving the universal solution that I read 30 years ago, which did, in some circumstances, within a particular organisational culture, with a given participant profile, actually work. Universal application of that approach was, to look kindly on the proposal, stupid.

The fact is that many everyday concepts in an organisation — including leadership, values, culture, competences etc — are ambiguous and difficult to define. We often infer perceptions of them from something else, which appears to be more concrete and tangible, like financial performance. It follows that, when words are used, professional trainers will seek the definition used rather than assume it is the same as their definition.

When reading articles, it is advisable to attempt to define what the writer means by the words he is using. If we can't, perhaps we have no basis of understanding. Let me give an example. I was working with a well-known training company. It became clear that its definition of 'training' was what occurred in a training room and 'development' was other learning that occurred outside of the training room — simple. This was very different from my definitions but, if I hadn't sussed out its definition, we could have been at cross-purposes and not even have known.

What I have noticed is that people who are worth paying attention to define the subject words they are using. An example that has stuck with me over the years is "a manager is a person who is accountable for more work than he or she can do alone and who gets some or all of it done through the people in his or her care" (Brown and Jaques). Now, you don't have to agree with this definition but it does create clarity in their writing and is the one I apply to the word 'manager' in this article.



## In a dynamic learning environment, performance is fundamentally relative, not absolute

You will also note that this definition does eliminate the notion of inter-changeability between manager and leader so the two concepts can be considered separately. "A leader is a person who has followers of their own volition" and that definition may be equally applicable to a manager or to a person who is not a manager.

The application of one's own definitions or views of the world can have devastating consequences. I have met with a situation in which a change of one senior manager in an influential role destroyed a whole structure of training, development and assessment built up over years because she was not in tune with the company's managers. The managers ceased co-operation with her and the damage to the structure was done. This new, very experienced, senior manager had not rigorously analysed why the training, development and selection systems and processes were as they were; what the managers wanted from the training and development department, and why they co-operated so enthusiastically with it. She lacked critical thinking but was an extremely knowledgeable professional.

### Critical thinking

Having fuffed around the edges and said that words being used should be defined, let's have a crack at it.

Critical thinking, in general, refers to identifying and questioning assumptions. It is a way of deciding whether a claim is true, false, or sometimes true and sometimes false, or partly true and partly false. Critical thinking is an important component of most professions. It is a part of the education process and is increasingly significant as students progress through higher education.

It is not a pure approach but requires the application of intelligence, logic, challenge and shifting our perspective to gain a different view of what is being said. It requires that the readers understand their own criteria for making judgment and the context of their application of what is being suggested. Simple questions may be *does this article*

*apply to me or to my operational environment? What are the unstated assumptions and values?* I believe it might be useful for the reader to apply these two questions to what I have written.

Knowing yourself is vital. Ask yourself about yourself *what are my patterns of beliefs?* and *are they beliefs that have been passed on to me through environment or authority, or are they based on wider experience?*

### The delusion of absolute performance

To reiterate, it is my contention that following a given formula can't ensure high performance, and for a simple reason: in a dynamic learning environment, performance is fundamentally relative, not absolute. Success and failure depend not only on a trainer's behaviours and processes but also on those of the encompassing environment and other employees, as well as the trainees and the expectations of their managers within their operating environments.

A training department can improve its operations in many ways – better behavioural repertoire and processes are normally implied but also the 'quality' of the trainees ('quality' in this context is difficult to define but concepts of 'target population' and 'entry level performance' are appropriate), lower cost, faster throughput time, superior asset management and more – but if rivals improve at a faster rate, comparative performance may suffer.

But what do we mean by performance in this context? Clearly no accounting measures would suffice. If we live in a real training environment that is meaningful, it is that the person at the completion of training demonstrates the required behaviours that enable the meeting of job accountabilities. As training is a progressive learning process, the requirement is that the learner is meeting the interim levels of required behaviours at each stage of the training.

The delusion of absolute performance is very important because it suggests that a training department can achieve high performance by following a formula or set of formulae regardless of the actions of the organisational constraints, values, culture, support, investment etc. Once we see that performance is relative, and with a training department this is rarely a direct measure but a comparison with some notional set of measures that are unlikely to be specified, it becomes obvious that a training department can never achieve success simply by following certain steps, no matter how serious its intentions.

High performance comes from doing things better than in the past along a series of dimensions that must be measurable and valid. However, the

### Reference

1 Rosenzweig P "The Halo Effect and Other Managerial Delusions" *McKinsey Quarterly* (2007)

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uncomfortable truth recognises that some elements of training performance are beyond our control as trainers. We need to adapt to the dynamics of the open system of the organisation and this is an essential concept that the clear-thinking training manager and trainer must grasp.

What do I mean by open system? Let's start with system. A system is an organised, purposive structure regarded as a whole and consisting of interrelated and interdependent elements. These elements continually influence one another (directly or indirectly) to maintain their activity and the existence of the system, in order to achieve its goal. An open system is one in which more than one element can be influenced by the external environment. An organisation is such an open system in which two or more components are human beings.

For me, performance can only be measured at the individual employee level by that individual meeting his job accountabilities. Although all trainees are in a common environment with a consistent trainer, each one in reality perceives the trainer differently, starts at a different point, learns different behaviours and is required to exercise the learned behaviours in different environments. Thus a consistent meaningful measurement becomes problematical.

### Summing up

Let's just explore what I have said. Above I made the somewhat rash statement that "nearly all the best trainers I have worked with are women anyway". So what criteria was I using to make such a claim? Did I specify what type of training, under what circumstances, what target population and whether entry-level performance was specified prior to the learning events? Was I talking about trainers of young women in a knitwear factory or was I referring to trainers who are training researchers to avoid cetacean contagion where memes may influence the species emitting the behaviour? No, I made an assertive statement of my personal prejudice with no form of specification and no measure of 'best'. Did your hackles rise at my blatant arrogance and my assumptions about you, the reader, and what were those assumptions?

Having read this rambling monologue, do you recognise the need for critical thinking or is it something inherent in your approach? Would such an idea be of use to you and, if you don't have a methodology for critical analysis of your reading now, have you any idea how you are going to achieve it? All I would like to say in conclusion is that I enjoyed writing this article and I hope you enjoyed reading it. **TJ**



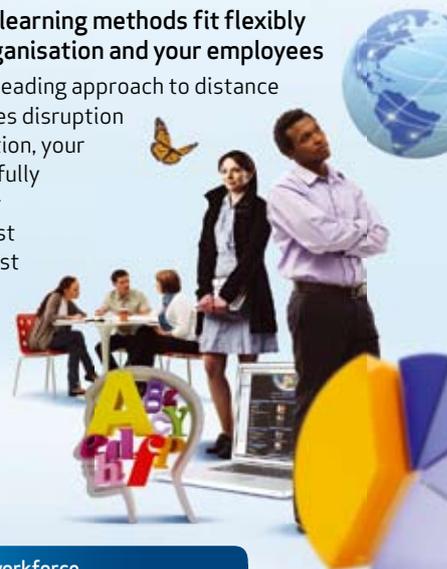
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