

## **Closing a Gap in Performance for Supervisors**

by Jennifer Budveit, Susan W. Benson, Brad Inderbitzen, and Kimberly Betty

*Tales from the Field, a monthly column, consists of reports of evidence-based performance improvement practice and advice, presented by graduate students, alumni, and faculty of Boise State University's Instructional and Performance Technology department.*

### **The Problem**

Expeditors International of Washington, Inc. is a global logistics company based out of Seattle, WA. Most new employees are hired right out of school with no prior experience in the industry and must be thoroughly trained to obtain the knowledge and skills required for their job. The culture of Expeditors is one of promoting from within. As a result, agents move their way up in the organization to become “super agents.” Some of these super agents are rewarded for their performance and promoted to supervisor. However, the role of a supervisor requires different skills, and except in rare cases, new supervisors do not perform to the same level of excellence as they did when they were super agents. To resolve this problem, a “Supervisor Curriculum” was designed and released in 2009. However, information gathered from branch training managers and the Director of Training and Personnel Development (TP/D) during the second quarter of 2010 indicated that a gap in supervisor performance still existed. Branch training managers spoke with supervisors within their districts and also analyzed training requests received from supervisors in the field. The TP/D spoke with 30 supervisors about training needs for their teams. When analyzed, this combination of information from the director and branch managers indicated that supervisors were not effectively or efficiently analyzing performance problems within their teams or departments. Instead, when they are faced with a problem, supervisors routinely solicit assistance up the leadership ladder. The problem is then presented to the Corporate Training team, regardless of whether training is needed to solve the issue. This method of responding to performance problems has both financial and performance effects. Time, money and resources are spent to develop training courses and additional time, money, and resources spent in attending the training, all with little effect on performance within the team. One result is lowered customer satisfaction, which decreases revenues for the organization.

To close this gap in supervisor performance, Expeditors management sanctioned a new training course, entitled “Analyzing Performance Problems.” The goal of the course is to teach supervisors how to resolve performance problems at the team level, which will allow them to focus on other business objectives, such as increased productivity, enhanced customer service leading to increased customer loyalty, and revenue generation. Helping teams focus on these business objectives will help the Expeditors International meet its mission – “To set the

standard for excellence in global logistics through total commitment to quality in people and customer service, with superior financial results.”

### Training course design

Generally speaking, the audience for the new course would be comprised of supervisors who have two to five years of experience with Expeditors International and are either new to the role of supervisor or about to be promoted into that role. They are unfamiliar with Carl Binder’s “Six Boxes,” the version of Gilbert’s “Behavioral Engineering Model” (BEM) that Expeditors uses as a tool for analyzing performance problems (Binder, 1998; Gilbert, 2007). In a survey conducted with prospective learners, 14 out of 15 stated they would be highly motivated to apply what they learned about analyzing performance problems to their daily responsibilities as a supervisor.

Based on this learner analysis, the instructional design team, comprised of graduate students from the Instructional and Performance Technology Department at Boise State University, used the Bronco Instructional Design (BID) model in conjunction with Merrill’s “first principles of instruction” to develop the course. The BID model, shown in Figure 1, emphasizes the early stages of a project (Analysis and Design) to avoid the more costly revisions that can result in the Development stage.

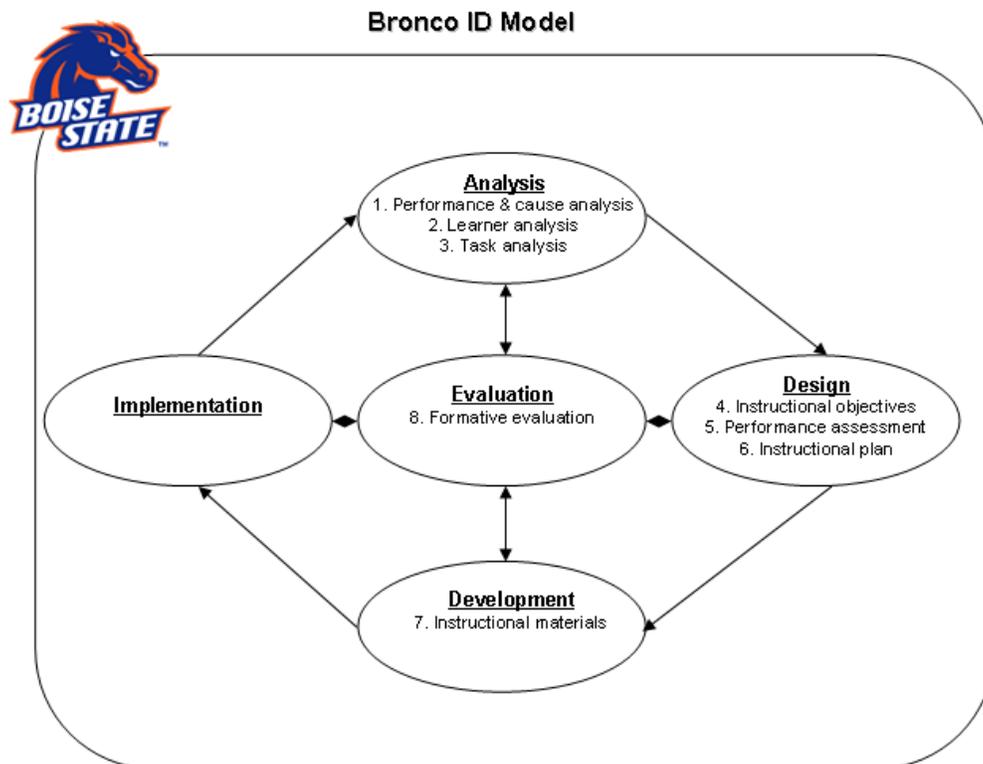


Figure 1: Illustration of the Bronco ID Model

Merrill’s first principles of instruction provide an instructional framework, shown in Figure 2, in which learners:

1. Work with real-world problems (problem).
2. Recall relevant previous experience (activation).
3. Are shown how to perform the task (demonstration).
4. Try out their new skills (application).
5. Transfer their new skills to the job (integration).

The centerpiece in this framework is asking learners to solve “real-world problems,” defined by Merrill as whole tasks that represent the kinds of tasks the learners will encounter on the job.

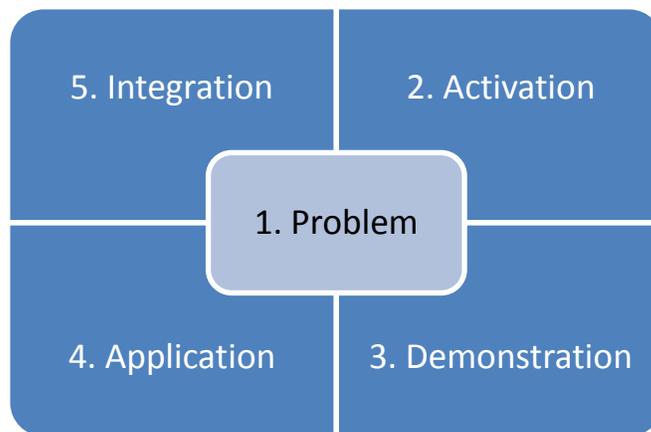


Figure 2: Merrill’s First Principles of Instruction

**Application of Merrill’s “first principles”**

Table 1 describes how each of these “first principles” was incorporated into this training course.

Table 1. Integrating Merrill’s First Principles of Instruction

Principle	How the principles are integrated into the instruction
Problem-centered	The participants (supervisors at Expeditors International) analyze real-world performance problems they regularly face. They are assigned to come to the class with a few examples of existing performance problems that they are facing in their teams. Therefore, learning is promoted by being engaged with real problems in the organization.
Activation	Participants are asked to share performance problems they have experienced on their team. By activating the participant’s existing knowledge of performance problems, these mental models can be modified and applied to new knowledge (how to resolve performance problems at the team level), increasing the effectiveness of the instruction.

Demonstration	<p>The facilitator guides the participants through an interactive demonstration of analyzing a real-world performance problem that could occur in their own team (such as accounting errors or sales performance), using a performance analysis worksheet and checklist to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine if there is a performance gap.</li> <li>• Determine if the performance gap is worth closing.</li> <li>• Specify how success will be measured.</li> <li>• Determine the cause(s) of the performance gap.</li> <li>• Determine possible solutions that will reduce the performance gap.</li> <li>• Determine if it is possible for the supervisor to implement the solution.</li> </ul>
Application	<p>Participants practice analyzing a common performance problem using the performance analysis worksheet and checklist with guidance from the facilitator. A second practice scenario is completed without support from the facilitator or other participants. After completing the second scenario, participants split into groups to check each other’s work for accuracy and compare notes. Completing a second scenario and receiving feedback on their performance from a peer provides the participants with additional reinforcement that they can successfully apply the performance analysis principles they are learning within their own teams.</p>
Integration	<p>A final assessment takes place on-the-job after the course concludes. Having the final assessment after the class is a requirement of Expeditors International, and credit for the course is given only after the final assessment is complete. This requirement is a way to ensure that the participants apply what they learn to a workplace situation. In the final assessment, participants return to the workplace and analyze an actual performance problem that has occurred within their team. The goal is to have the participants return to solve a performance issue that they brought to the class as a pre-assignment. They then meet with the course facilitator to review their work and show how they applied their new skills to this on-the-job performance problem.</p>

## Results

The “Analyzing Performance Problems” course has been submitted to the Global Training Design team for final review and approval. The feedback received to this point has been positive. The course successfully fills a gap in supervisor skills and knowledge and is designed and developed in a way that is consistent with other training courses created by the Global Training Design team. Scheduling and final arrangements are underway to add this course to the Supervisor Curriculum in the near future.

## References

Binder, C. (1998, July-August). The Six Boxes™: A descendent of Gilbert’s Behavior Engineering Model. *Performance Improvement*, 37(6), 48-52.

Gilbert, T. F. (2007). *Human Competence: Engineering worthy performance* (Tribute ed.). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.

## About the Authors



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