

HPT: The Culture Factor

by Roger M. Addison and Klaus D. Wittkuhn

Over the past four years, participants from North America, South America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Australia have attended the International Society for Performance Improvement's (ISPI) Institutes. They have left with human performance technology (HPT) tools and techniques to use around the world. We hear success stories from the United Kingdom, Germany, Portugal, Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Canada, and other countries. While the fundamentals of HPT remain consistent, one thing becomes clear as we reflect on these success stories: Culture makes a difference.

International mergers and acquisitions are increasing. Companies are going global. Our colleagues are being assigned to posts overseas, leaving their familiar culture behind. We are exchanging phone messages, emails, and data files worldwide. We are learning new ways of communicating and working in different time zones.

Working with colleagues from other areas of the world can be stressful because we face different values and behaviors. On the surface, everything might look the same, but the way we experience work

may be totally different from culture to culture. This can have far-reaching consequences. If a manager goes to a production site in a foreign country, he or she can no longer be sure that the management techniques he or she has found successful will work in another culture.

How do we identify and prepare for these differences, and how can we adapt our behaviors and methods for success?

One management challenge is to simultaneously manage performance across national cultures and within fast-changing corporate cultures. How can HPT support managers to meet this challenge? Can HPT be successfully adapted to different cultures? We have found that two HPT tools—the culture audit and the systems model—can help performance consultants understand different cultures and provide the basis for successful management action.

What Is Culture?

What do we mean when we say “culture”? There are many definitions:

- “The totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought characteristics of a

community or population” (Morris, 1970).

- Schein tells us, “ Culture is the way in which a group of people solve problems” (1985).
- Trompenaars states, “Every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems. It is convenient to look at these problems under three headings: (1) those which arise from our relationships with other people; (2) those which come from the passage of time; and (3) those which relate to the environment” (1992).
- Kotter and Heskett say that culture is shared values and group behavior norms (1992).
- The American anthropologist Margaret Mead has suggested that culture is “a preferred way a group of people behave” (1965).

FOCUS	SAMPLE AREAS	SAMPLE QUESTIONS
The Worker: Individual or Teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Followership • Motivation • Incentives • Learning • Information • Heroes, past and present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name three people in your group whom you consider leaders. What makes them leaders? • How do employees get information? • What motivates employees in your group?
The Work: Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service • Sales • Operations • Line groups • Staff groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the service-level agreements for your group? • What feedback do employees receive about the processes they are responsible for? • How do things get done around here? • How do things get measured?
The Workplace: Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision • Values • Structure • Environment • Technology • Leadership practices • Management practices • Rites • Rituals • Brand image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the three most important values of your organization? • Tell me about your organizational brand and how it is used. • What advice would you give me on how to be successful in this organization?

Figure 1. Structure of a Culture Audit.

In organizations, culture can also be defined as “the way things are done around here.” This is a useful way to think about culture because it opens two avenues for interventions:

- Change culture and you change the way things get done.
- Change the way things get done and you change culture.

Culture Audits

If you are a performance consultant, you frequently find yourself in new environments. As an internal consultant, your assignment may be in the finance department one day and human resources the next. You may work at a central level or be assigned to the field. If your organization is multi-national, your territory may be global.

As an external performance consultant, your clients may be local, national, or global. Each assignment presents its own challenges.

Whatever the venue, your success or failure as a performance consultant requires you to get to know your client organization’s language, customs, values, beliefs, management practices, policies, procedures, stories, legends, and taboos. Savvy performance consultants use the culture audit to quickly get to know a new organization.

The culture audit supports the systematic approach performance consultants use to identify performance issues and opportunities in an organization’s work, workers, and workplace. It also assesses the values of an organization’s customers, owners, and employees.

Figure 1 is a sample chart that structures the culture audit and suggests the kinds of questions to ask to learn the most about the critical components of every organization: the work, the workers, and the workplace.

It is also helpful to read an organization’s annual report, letters to stockholders, newsletters, web pages, news articles, financial statements, business analysis statements, and training materials. In addition to the suggested questions in the chart, develop questions around customer values, owner values, employee values, organizational taboos, sensitivities, perceptions, and rumors.

Here are some questions to ask your client to help you design your next culture audit:

- Who are the stakeholders?
- How is your organization organized?
- What are the profiles of internal and external customers?

- Who would you interview?
- What questions would you ask?
- What observations would you make?
- What resources would you review?

The findings from a culture audit will prove invaluable as performance consultants identify possible interventions/solutions to performance problems. A successful implementation of any intervention must consider the organizational culture to be successful.

The HPT Systems Model: A Tool for Understanding Culture

Most performance consultants have probably never considered that every familiar HPT model was developed in a specific cultural context. That context assures that the “host” culture’s basic assumptions are built into the model. This is not a consciously planned characteristic of a model. For people, living in a culture is like swimming in the water is for a fish: One does not recognize one’s basic cultural values and beliefs as being there. They are the water one swims in. Everything one does takes this water into account unconsciously.

The assumptions, values, and beliefs built into the HPT models we know are those of Western industrialized countries. And even in Western industrialized countries, cultures are very different. This means that we must adapt our HPT models so they can become useful and powerful tools to help our clients.

Let us consider HPT models as generic. They show some general elements and their inter-relationships. This is true of all models, even within the culture where they were developed. To be effective tools, HPT models must be adapted to fit the particular culture in which they will be used.

A basic tenet of HPT is that performance is the result of a system. If we want to understand and manage performance we have to understand this system. Therefore, we must understand the major elements influencing performance and their inter-relationships.

When we read the HPT literature, we find common elements in many models. If we extract the essential ones, we can create a basic HPT systems model that might look like Figure 2.

Understanding performance begins with understanding the customer. There has to be a connection between customers and managers so that management can set objectives that will meet the customers’ needs. Then the workers must meet those objectives by producing the outputs the customer wants. Finally, management receives customer feedback on the outputs via the same loop used to understand customer needs. This is the most important circle in any performance system. If something is wrong within this circle, any improvement outside it is bound to fail.

There are additional elements that influence performance. The quality of the output depends on the quality of the input, on the resources required, and on the workflow design.

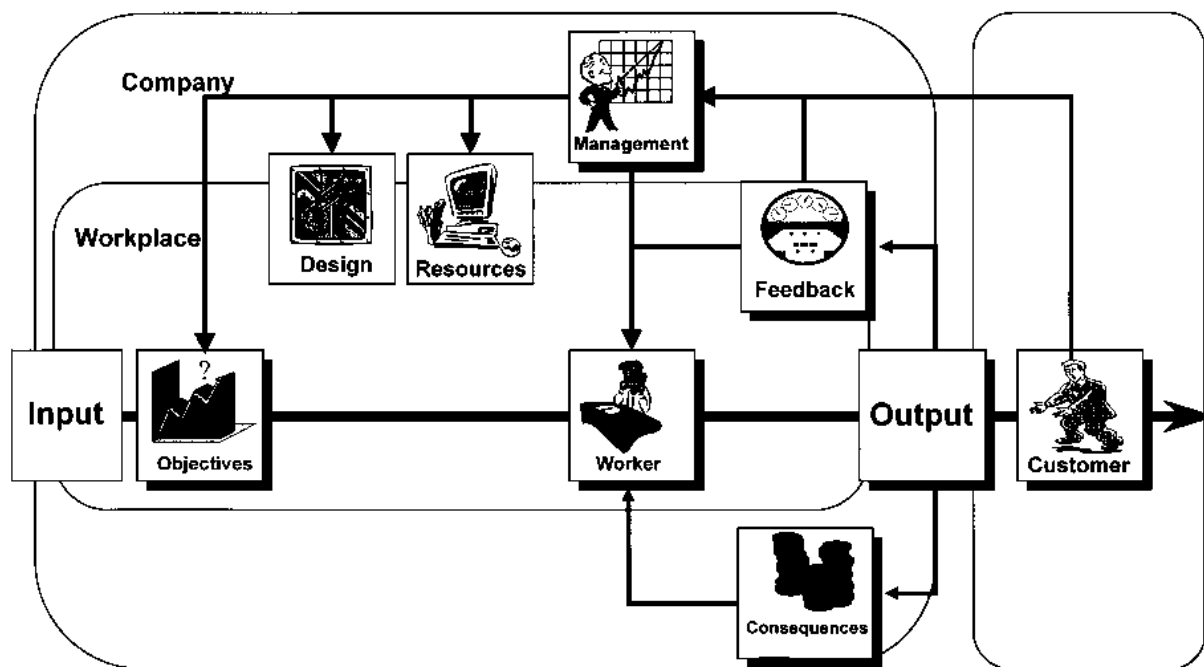


Figure 2. A Basic Performance System.

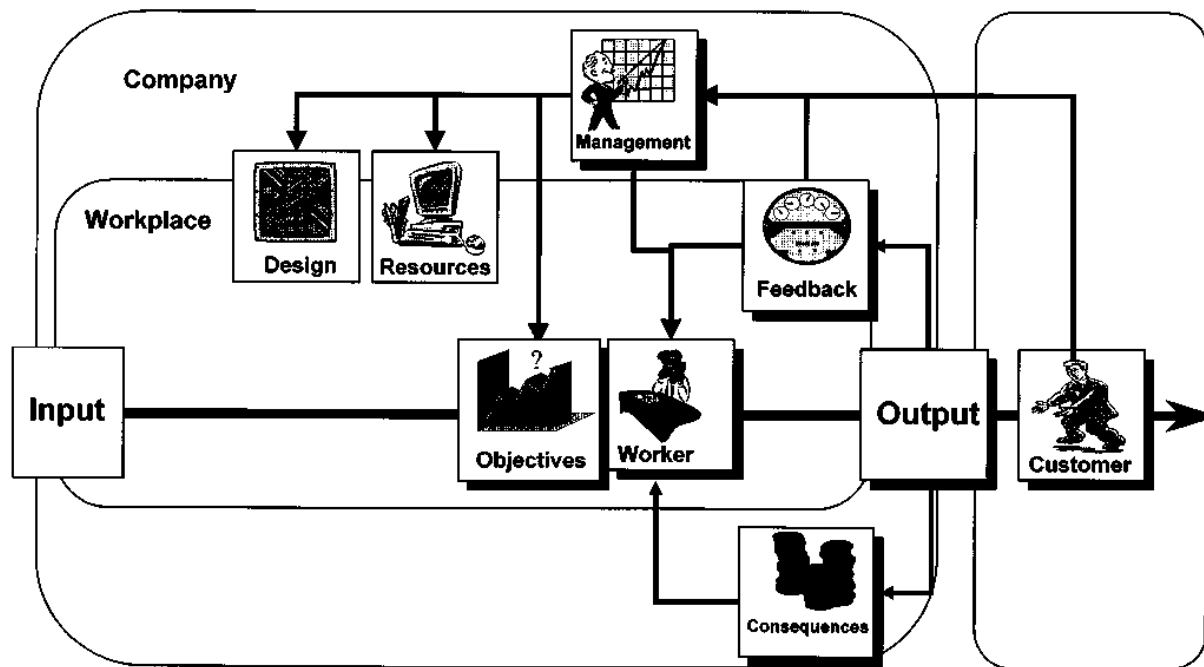


Figure 3. Adaptation of the System to a More Particularist Culture.

Poorly designed workflow usually hurts performance. There is also a feedback loop that connects the output with the worker. If the worker is not on track, he should receive immediate feedback to take corrective action.

Finally, we need a reward system that includes consequences for poor performance. That results in a basic systems model that describes the inter-relationships among the major elements that influence performance. For the purposes of this article, this model is sufficient.

Adapting the Basic Systems Model for Cultural Differences

Managing performance in a foreign culture first means understanding the performance system of that culture. Which elements do we have to add? Which elements change their meaning? Which relationships change?

Let's move our model to a more *particularist* culture, where personal relationships and individual situations are very important. In such a culture, goal-setting is a specific and personal process. Our model must be adapted to consider the relationship between the worker and the worker's individual situation. In this culture, performance objectives and the worker become one. In such a culture, it is not possible to manage performers by setting anonymous objectives for large populations (see Figure 3).


Continuing on our world tour, let's visit a more *collectivist* culture. Here, the individual only exists as part of a social group. Individual performance is not a popular concept in this culture. The value of individual performance is probably

difficult for the people in this collectivist culture to grasp. And, in addition, performance for them depends heavily on the morale and the cohesiveness of the group. Objectives only work through this group consciousness. An adjusted performance system would look like that in Figure 4.

Our last stop is in a more *ascriptive* culture, where the worker's supervisor is connected with everything concerning the worker. Feedback comes only through the supervisor because he or she is the boss. Pay for performance means that if the worker earned a reward, the supervisor would get one also (see Figure 5).

HPT—A Powerful Cross-Cultural Tool

Our cultural "tour" shows that HPT models are powerful tools for understanding and managing performance in foreign cultures when they are adapted to work with different cultural norms. We must simply begin with a slight change in our thinking—to view models as generic and in need of adaptation

 **What defines your mastery?**

When we think of mastery we think of Mager, Homme, Rummler, Tosti, Brethower, Geis, Rossett, Lineberry, Harmon, Jackson, Thiagarajan, Murray, Stolovitch, Binder, Lindsley, Hale, Foshay, Langdon, Kaufman, Valentine, Bullock, Deterline, Harless, Markle, Gilbert, and Skinner.

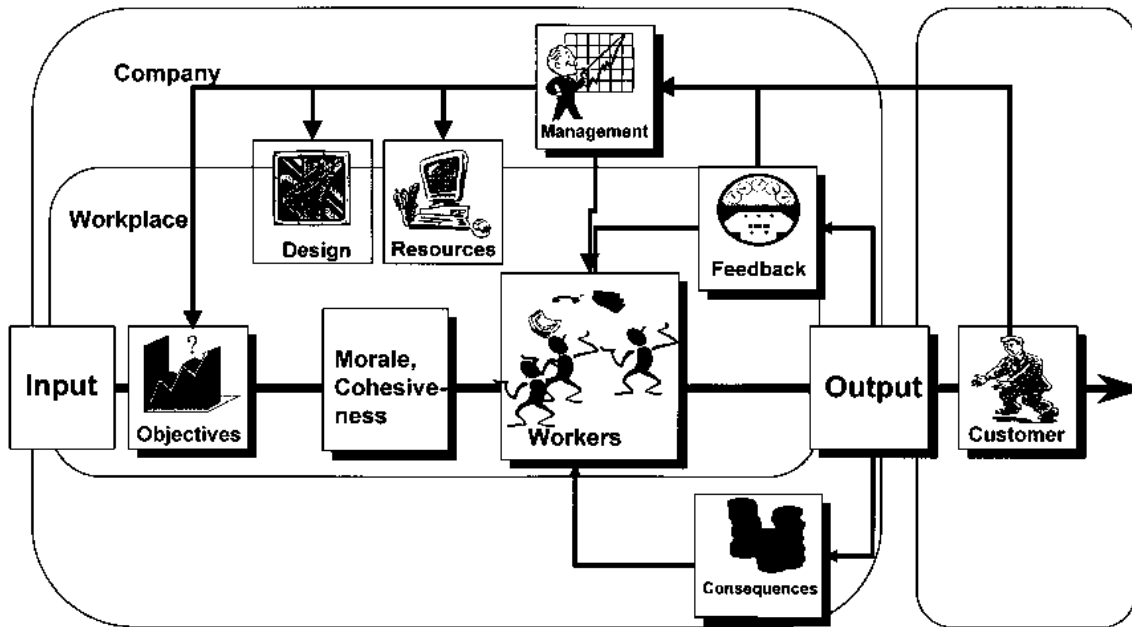


Figure 4. Adaptation of the System to a More Collectivist Culture.

to work successfully in other cultures. Any model is really no more than a working hypothesis that has to prove its usefulness every time.

The performance consultant can best bridge culture differences by reading a lot about culture and by doing the following:

- Adapting generic models to be culture specific for successful analysis in foreign cultures
- Verifying ideas in discussions with “natives”

- Reworking the models constantly
- Starting with a generic model, developing a specific model for the company and culture
- Always taking the model as a hypothesis

Then, as the world shrinks to enable performance consultants to work in different cultures, our proven HPT tools will accompany us and, with a little adaptation, will serve us as well as they always have. 🏔️

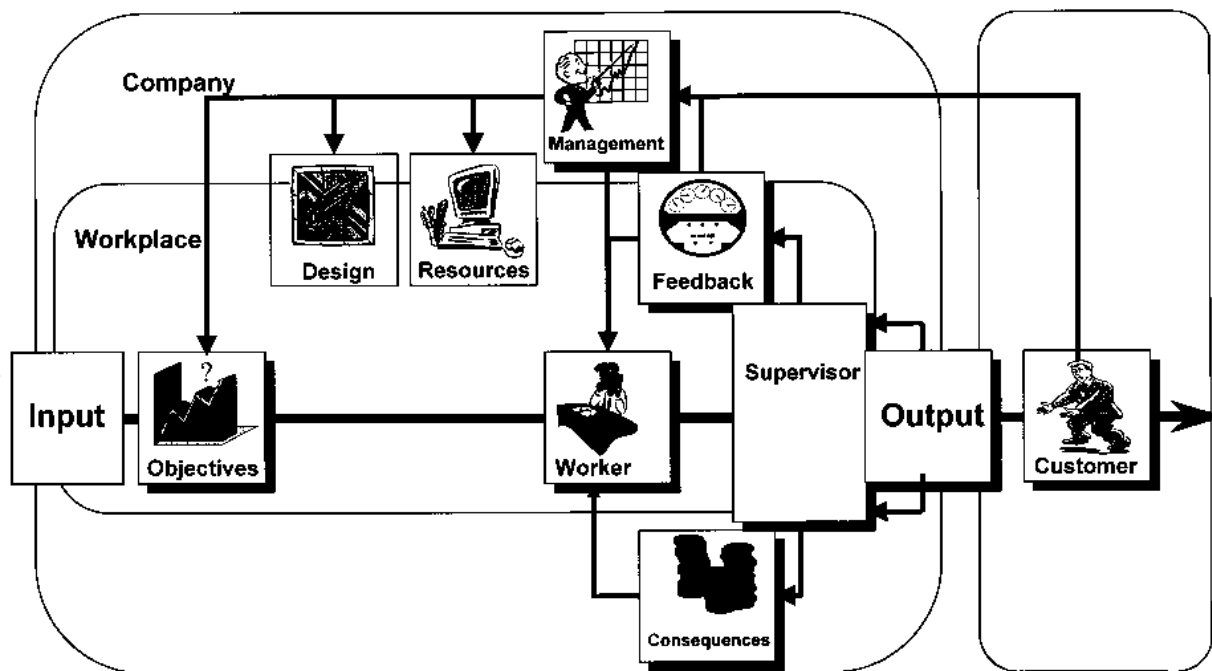


Figure 5. Adaptation of the System to a More Ascriptive Culture.

References

Addison, R.M., & Haig, C. (1999). Human performance technology in action. In H.D. Stolovitch and E. Keeps (Eds.), *Handbook of human performance technology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Brethower, D.M. (1993). "Strategic improvement of workplace competence: Breaking out of the incompetence trap." *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 5 (2), 17–28.

Burke, W.W., & Litwin, G. (1989). "A casual model of organizational performance." In J.W. Pfeiffer (Ed.), *The 1998 annual: Developing human resources*. San Diego: University Associates.

Kaufman, R. (1996). *Strategic thinking*. Arlington, VA, and Washington, DC: American Society for Training and Development and International Society for Performance Improvement.

Kotter, J.P., & Heskett, J.L. (1992). *Corporate culture and performance*. New York: Free Press.

Lineberry C.S., & Carleton J.R. (1999). Analyzing corporate culture. In H.D. Stolovitch & E. Keeps (Eds.), *Handbook of human performance technology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mead, M. (1965). *And keep your powder dry: An anthropologist looks at America*. New York: Morrow.

Morris, W. (Ed.). (1970). *The American heritage dictionary of the English language*. Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc. and Houghton Mifflin Company.

Langdon, D.G. (1995). *The new language of work*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press.

Rummler, G.A., & Brache, A.P. (1995). *Improving performance* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schein, E. (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Trompenaars, F. (1992). *Riding the waves of culture*. Burr Ridge, NY: IRWIN Professional Publishing.

Note: The Authors would like to thank Carol Haig for her review and the suggestions she made to this article. Having Carol as part of our HPT network is one of the strengths and benefits of ISPI.



Dr. **Roger M. Addison** is an internationally respected practitioner of HPT and performance consulting. Currently he is the Director of Human Performance Technology for the International Society for Performance Improvement. Roger was Vice President and Manager at Wells Fargo. His responsibilities included executive coaching and education, change management, and partnering with line managers to improve performance. He consults with Fortune 500 organizations to help them align their business needs with bottom-line results.

Roger is a frequent speaker at ISPI, the International Federation for Training and Development Organisations (IFTDO), and the American Society for Training and Development. Topics include performance technology, performance architecture, re-engineering, information design, mentoring, consulting, project management, and communication networks. Roger is a past president of ISPI and is currently the Chair of the Board for IFTDO. Roger has received ISPI's awards for Member of the Year, Organization of the Year, and Outstanding Product. In 1998 he received ISPI's highest award, Member for Life. As an international delegate to IFTDO and ISPI conferences, Roger has presented and worked in North America, South America, Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East. He may be reached at rogeraddison@earthlink.net or roger@ispi.org.



Klaus D. Wittkuhn is an internationally respected practitioner of HPT and performance consulting. He is the Managing Director of *train*, a German consulting company, and a sustaining member of ISPI. He is the Marketing Associate for ISPI in Germany. Klaus is a board member of the Association for Professional Qualifications, responsible for international relations. Klaus has published and lectured on Culture and Change Management and Performance Improvement in Germany and abroad. In addition, he consults and lectures in post-graduate programs. Klaus has worked and presented in North America, South America, Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. He may be reached at train.koeln@train.de.