

THE PERFORMANCE DIAGNOSTIC PLAYBOOK

When Training Is — and Isn't — the Right Intervention

For Whom

L&D Professionals
HR Business Partners
OD Consultants
People Managers

What You Will Get

A structured diagnostic framework
Root cause identification tools
Decision-making checklists
Practical intervention mapping



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SECTION 1 | THE CORE PROBLEM

Why Training Alone Fails

When performance drops, training is almost always the first intervention organisations reach for. It feels proactive, measurable, and actionable. But this reflexive response misses a fundamental question:

Is the performance gap caused by a lack of knowledge or skill — or is something else getting in the way?

Training addresses capability gaps. It cannot fix process failures, role confusion, environmental obstacles, or motivational issues. When training is deployed as a universal solution, organisations waste resources and — critically — leave the real problem untouched.

The Mager & Pipe Principle

Robert Mager and Peter Pipe articulated this in their classic performance analysis model: before designing any intervention, ask whether people could perform if their life depended on it. If yes — the issue is not training. This playbook builds on that foundation with a practical, modern framework.

The Four Most Common Misdiagnoses

01	Process Ambiguity	Unclear workflows mean people default to guesswork. Training cannot substitute for clear process design.
02	Frequent Change Without Support	Constant change creates confusion and fatigue. Employees know what to do — but the goalposts keep moving.
03	Lack of Role Clarity	When responsibilities overlap or are undefined, performance gaps appear that look like skill gaps.
04	Absent Manager Reinforcement	Skills learned in training decay rapidly without on-the-job coaching and positive reinforcement.

SECTION 2 | THE DIAGNOSTIC FRAMEWORK

The 5-Lens Performance Analysis

Before recommending any intervention, examine the performance gap through five lenses. Each lens uncovers a different category of root cause. Only after completing this analysis should you move to intervention design.

**LENS
01****KNOWLEDGE & SKILL**

- Could the person perform correctly if required to right now?
- Have they ever been able to do this task successfully?
- Do they know the required standard or expectation?
- Is the gap new or has it always existed?

**LENS
02****ENVIRONMENT & RESOURCES**

- Do people have the tools, time, and information needed to perform?
- Are there conflicting priorities that prevent the right behaviour?
- Is the physical or digital environment enabling or hindering performance?

**LENS
03****PROCESS & STRUCTURE**

- Are processes clearly documented and consistently applied?
- Are roles and responsibilities unambiguous?
- Have recent changes been communicated and embedded effectively?

**LENS
04****MOTIVATION & CONSEQUENCES**

- Is desired performance recognised and rewarded?
- Are there unintended incentives for poor performance?
- Do people understand the 'why' behind the required behaviour?

**LENS
05****LEADERSHIP & CULTURE**

- Do managers model and reinforce the required behaviours?
- Is there psychological safety to surface problems?
- Does the culture support learning and development?

SECTION 3 | DECISION TOOL

The Training Decision Checklist

Use this checklist when a training request lands on your desk. Work through each question systematically. The pattern of your answers will indicate the right intervention pathway.

Part A — Performance Gap Verification

Question	YES	NO
Is this gap materially impacting business outcomes?	Continue	Reassess priority
Has the desired standard or expected behaviour been communicated clearly?	Continue	→ Communication fix
Can the gap be attributed to an identifiable group or role?	Continue	Broaden analysis

Part B — Root Cause Identification

Question	YES	NO
Could the person do this task if their role depended on it?	Not a training issue	Training may help
Has the person received clear instruction on how to perform this task?	Not a knowledge gap	→ Training needed
Do they receive timely, accurate feedback on their performance?	Not a feedback gap	→ Feedback system
Are processes, tools, and resources readily available to support performance?	Not an environment gap	→ Environment fix
Do managers actively reinforce desired behaviours?	Not a leadership gap	→ Manager coaching
Has the desired behaviour been explicitly recognised or rewarded?	Not a motivation gap	→ Incentive review

SECTION 4 | INTERVENTION MAPPING

Matching Root Cause to the Right Solution

Once the root cause is identified, the intervention should match the cause — not the symptom. Use this reference table to translate diagnostic findings into targeted actions.

Root Cause Category	What It Looks Like	Recommended Intervention(s)
Skill / Knowledge Gap	<i>Cannot perform — never learned, outdated skills, new role requirements</i>	Targeted training, coaching, mentoring, on-the-job practice, job aids
Process Ambiguity	<i>Inconsistent outputs, workarounds, frequent errors at handoff points</i>	Process redesign, SOPs, workflow documentation, process owners
Role Clarity Gap	<i>Duplication, dropped tasks, confusion about accountability</i>	RACI mapping, role redesign, team alignment sessions
Feedback Absence	<i>People don't know how they're performing against expectations</i>	Real-time feedback systems, regular 1:1s, performance dashboards
Environment / Resource Gap	<i>Right intent, wrong tools or missing information</i>	Systems improvement, resource allocation, workspace redesign
Manager Reinforcement Gap	<i>Skills are learned but not applied post-training</i>	Manager coaching programmes, leader capability building, check-ins
Motivation / Consequences Gap	<i>Can perform but chooses not to, or inconsistently</i>	Incentive review, consequence analysis, recognition programme
Culture / Safety Gap	<i>Fear of failure, blame culture, low psychological safety</i>	Culture change initiative, leadership modelling, safe-to-fail pilots

The Blended Reality

Most performance challenges involve more than one root cause. A training component may well be part of the solution — but it is rarely sufficient on its own. The most effective interventions combine process clarity, manager reinforcement, and targeted capability building together.

SECTION 5 | STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

How to Diagnose — Not Just Discuss

The quality of your diagnosis depends on the quality of your stakeholder conversations. The goal is not to validate the training request, but to genuinely understand what is getting in the way of performance.

Who to Speak With

Stakeholder	Key Focus Areas
Line Managers	What behaviour gap are you seeing? When did it start? What have you tried? How do you currently reinforce performance?
Frontline Employees	What gets in the way of doing your job well? What do you need more clarity on? What support is missing?
HR / OD Partners	What does the data say? Have there been recent org changes, restructures, or process changes?
Senior Sponsors	What does success look like? How will you know if performance has improved? What are you prepared to change?

Power Questions for Diagnostic Conversations

- If you could only fix one thing to improve performance, what would it be?
- Can you show me a recent example where this performance gap caused a problem?
- What happens when someone performs well? What happens when they don't?
- Have there been any process, system, or organisational changes in the past six months?
- If we ran training tomorrow — what would stop people applying it back at work?
- What would tell us, three months from now, that this problem is solved?

Red Flags That Signal a Non-Training Issue

What You Hear	What It Often Means
<i>"They just don't care"</i>	Motivation / consequence issue
<i>"The process keeps changing"</i>	Change management / process clarity gap
<i>"Nobody knows who owns what"</i>	Role clarity or governance issue
<i>"They were trained but still aren't doing it"</i>	Reinforcement or environment barrier
<i>"It worked in one team but not others"</i>	Leadership or culture inconsistency

SECTION 6 | WHEN TRAINING IS THE RIGHT ANSWER

Training Works — When It Fits the Problem

This playbook is not an argument against training. Training is one of the most powerful tools available to organisations. The goal is precision — deploying it where it will genuinely make a difference.

Training Is the Right Intervention When:

A genuine skill or knowledge gap exists

The person has never been taught the required skill, or their knowledge is outdated.

The expectation is clear but the capability is not

People know what is expected but lack the ability to deliver it.

New roles, tasks, or systems have been introduced

Onboarding, upskilling, and system adoption are classic training needs.

A consistent standard needs to be established

Compliance, safety, and quality require reliable, embedded capability.

Performance data confirms a capability pattern

Analysis shows the gap is consistent across people, teams, or roles.

Maximising Training Effectiveness

Even when training is the right intervention, its impact depends heavily on the conditions surrounding it. Use this checklist before and after any training initiative:

Before Training	After Training
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Confirm the skill gap with data or observation – Align managers on expected outcomes and their role – Set clear performance targets for post-training application – Remove environmental barriers that would block transfer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Schedule manager check-ins within two weeks – Create opportunities to practise the new skill – Measure application, not just completion or satisfaction – Adjust based on what the performance data shows

SECTION 7 | PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Your Diagnostic Action Plan

Use this one-page summary every time a performance or training request arrives. The five-step process keeps the diagnosis rigorous and the intervention targeted.

STEP 1	PAUSE BEFORE PRESCRIBING Resist the immediate pull toward training. Acknowledge the request, but commit to understanding the root cause first. This earns credibility and saves resources.
STEP 2	DEFINE THE GAP PRECISELY What is the specific observable behaviour that is missing or incorrect? By how much? In which roles, teams, or contexts? Without precision here, you cannot measure impact.
STEP 3	RUN THE 5-LENS ANALYSIS Systematically examine the performance gap through all five lenses: Skill, Environment, Process, Motivation, and Leadership. Use stakeholder conversations and available data.
STEP 4	MATCH CAUSE TO INTERVENTION Use the Intervention Mapping table (Section 4) to select the right solution — or combination of solutions — for the identified root cause.
STEP 5	BUILD IN MEASUREMENT Define what success looks like before you begin. What will change in performance? How will you know? Set a review point at 30, 60, and 90 days post-intervention.

The Central Principle

*Training is powerful. But the most important work is often not designing the intervention.
It is diagnosing the problem first.*

The Performance Diagnostic Playbook | True North Consulting | Amol Kshirsagar