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## Improving Performance – Make it Better, not Bitter

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If there are managers and leaders reading who are asking themselves how they can help to improve their employees' job performance while keeping them motivated, I have one immediate suggestion: the first thing that they should ask themselves is whether the question doesn't provide its own clue?



The second question should be to ponder how your employees' performance could be improved by reducing their motivation. It can't, of course, and that simple understanding should provide a second clue. Any approach to 'performance management' (and I'll come back to the language of the issue shortly) that doesn't maintain, or better yet *enhance*, motivation has already fallen at the first hurdle. Indeed, in its own way it is an example of underperformance by those conducting the PM process.

The old-school approach to managing performance – the formal session conducted on a regular but relatively infrequent basis in which the employee is informed of areas that need greater work, effort or application – is almost designed to invite demotivation. Handled poorly or thoughtlessly, it can leave the employee feeling like a puppy that wants the family to adopt, love and nurture it, gets little guidance for six months, and then gets whacked around the ear for 30 minutes out of the blue. The analogy might be trite, but many puppies receive more attentive – and productive – performance management than their owners.

At the core of the problem is the manager's or leader's view of the purpose of performance management. Although the degree to which they are defined will vary, any role or position will have expected levels of performance. The purpose of performance management is not just to assess performance against a set of criteria. It's about more than scorecarding or benchmarking: it's about aiming for commitment and excellence and about maximizing both potential and engagement. Performance management that focuses on compliance is setting its aim too low – and quite probably helping to keep it there.

### A rose by another name might smell sweeter, and bloom more profusely

The language traditionally used may be a contributory part of the problem. The traditional periodic meeting is frequently labelled as an 'appraisal', framing it in terms of a judgement being not just passed but handed down. Refocusing it as, for example, a Performance Discussion Review illuminates where its purpose should lie: the process should be a conversation that leads to something positive for both parties.

In a similar vein, it helps to think in terms not so much of managing performance but of *leading* it. At one level, modelling the behaviours and attitudes that you wish to see in your team is both more effective and more motivating than 'do as I say, not as I do': it's not just skills and knowledge that your employees learn from your example. At another level, part of your impact as a manager or leader derives from your ability to inspire. The personal impact of a leader is significant across all the facets of their role: employee performance is no exception.

### Performance happens all the time. So should managing it

Effective performance management is not an occasional event: it's an ongoing, continuous process. If performance itself is continuous, then it is best improved by managers who have effective daily interaction with their staff rather than delivering infrequent performance measurement.

Where there are gaps or failures, action taken on them needs to be timely: leaving an employee with the impression that there *isn't* a problem is not the solution. Leaving the issue until the next review helps no-one: the negative feedback will not be timely (and the conversation around it less positive as a result), and individual and team performance will have suffered unnecessarily in the meantime. Working relationships may well have been damaged too. While a challenge should be direct, it should be neither aggressive nor so conciliatory that the under-performance remains unchallenged. These conversations need to be undertaken in a constructive and relationship preserving fashion that delivers results.

Three important PM skills for managers and leaders are objective setting, skilful feedback (both giving and receiving) and coaching – factors that provide the fuel for effective performance. In the context of a process that is drawn as a dialogue rather than a monologue, individual employee's objectives can be genuinely 'agreed' – an important factor if they are not to be seen as either randomly imposed or the outcome of a process that lacks real meaning to them.

On-going skilful feedback provides a further vital strand, by offering timely small interventions that can highlight possible errors or failings and inject encouragement that both maintains momentum and provides recognition and reward where it is deserved and earned. It's also important to recognise that feedback is a two-way process. Conversations around performance issues that allow the employee to voice their own concerns, issues and anxieties don't just enable the manager to identify and address external factors positively. They also mean that the manager can become aware of aspects of their own behaviour or management style that might be preventing performance from improving further. As with any aspect of management, there is more to the process than just 'telling'.

Indeed, this is an important point in relation to the third strand: performance coaching. While some managers are excellent coaches, others are realistically offering their employees what we might call 'sympathetic telling'. Telling has its place and is an important part of a manager's repertoire, but it isn't coaching. The manager as coach needs to harness the energy, imagination and enthusiasm of their staff – and to *maintain* it when it is all too tempting for coaching to slip back into telling as the manager becomes absorbed in daily problem solving (a skill that they are more likely to possess and to feel more comfortable in exercising).

The biggest irony of performance management is that it is a skill with which many managers could themselves benefit from feedback, coaching and positive encouragement. If, as a manager or leader, you are uncomfortable with your own PM process or skills – or have concerns about whether it is actually improving either individual or business performance – why not take the opportunity of your next appraisal to raise the issue?

### The bottom line of Performance Management

No individual has ever been developed nor any business grown as a consequence of people delivering a performance that simply complied with their job description. Such a state of affairs probably delivers about 80% of optimum performance: if this were not the case, a 'work-to-rule' would not be considered as a form of industrial action. (Any scenario in which an employee starts to quote clauses from their job description is a pretty clear indication in itself of difficulties – in relationships and engagement as well as in performance.) What bridges the gap is the discretionary effort that individuals apply – inspired and encouraged by the management population. If bridging that gap is the task in hand, the method lies in leading improved performance effectively.

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