

Creating a High Performance Culture



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By William Peterson

I think that talking about performance management just after we have discussed “difficult conversations” is rather appropriate. As you read this next article you can most certainly keep the ideas and principles of the previous article in your “rear view” mirror.

The first time I encountered performance management was in my first job when my manager gave me about two weeks to prepare for my review discussion. She provided me with all the necessary documentation explaining the meaning and value of each section. She even told me that I could rate my own performance. She explained that I should also think about where I wanted to be in my career in the next 18 months.

Well, having recently graduated from university and still harbouring old behaviours of last minute assignment and exam preparations and believing that working under pressure was the elixir of a student’s work ethic. Working in corporate I still held the same approach and outlook. Consequently, in the performance review discussion my manager could see that I was not prepared at all. She stopped me dead in my tracks as I was about to wind up my engines to “wing it” yet again. She said these words which I will never forget, “until you are ready to take yourself, this job, this organisation, its customers and my role seriously we do not have a discussion. When you are ready please let me know.” Of course, within three days I was ready and I had one of the

most profound performance review discussions of my career.

Performance management is **not** an event which happens only once a year involving wads of paper with information no one really takes seriously after filling it in. Competitive organisations and top performing managers all have internalised the indispensable value of a performance manage culture, process, practice and mindset. Managers who do not espouse and practice this may not be aware that they are performing below the true potential of their teams, departments and organisations.

They are allowed to omit this important competence from their leadership repertoire because those above them may also not have understood the true value of performance management. Performance management applied with discipline and passion really gets the job done through others successfully.

The team members/staff in this process are:

- motivated,
- enabled to see the big picture,
- allowed to participate in co-creating solutions,
- encouraged to give their input without fear,
- enabled to work according to clearly explained and established values, and
- allowed to challenge the process so as to continuously improve.

Implementing and executing a Culture of Performance Management is an indispensable part of any manager’s

contract. It is a privilege to lead others to their best people, no matter the level of the leadership you are operating from. This applies to those in Government as well as Corporate and NGO sector etc. The servant leader understands this calling all too well. The tyrant leader abuses this opportunity.

Dr Sukhwant Bal PhD: a corporate psychologist for the past 20 years famously said that:

“Firms are beginning to realise that the only thing that can sustain corporate innovation, sustain high levels of customer satisfaction and generally differentiate one firm from the next is the quality of its workforce.”

An organisations’ true competitive edge is therefore through the quality of its workforce. Given the ongoing war for talent as a result of the scarce skills phenomenon especially in South Africa we have to grow our people through a culture and discipline of performance management.

To borrow from a Chinese proverb:

“If you want 1 year of prosperity, grow grain. If you want 10 years of prosperity, grow trees. If you want 100 years of prosperity, grow people.”

In the 2002 movie “What Women want” starring Mel Gibson opposite Helen Hunt, one of the messages of the movie is that

men do not have a clue about what women want. Could this message also be true of managers and leaders?

Have a look at this interesting piece of research...the source is unknown but I think elements of it still holds true if not in the detail then at least in its message.

In comparing related rankings of both employees and supervisors, the typical supervisory group ranking of what they believe employees want is given below:

Supervisors

1. High wages
2. Job Security
3. Promotion in the company
4. Good working conditions
5. Interesting work
6. Personal loyalty of supervisor
7. Tactful discipline
8. Full appreciation of work done
9. Help on personal problems
10. Feeling of being in on things

However, when employees are given the same exercise and asked what affects their morale the most, their ranking follows this pattern:

Employees

1. Full appreciation of work done
2. Feeling of being in on things
3. Help on personal problems
4. Job security
5. High wages
6. Interesting work
7. Promotion in the company
8. Personal loyalty of supervisor
9. Good working conditions
10. Tactful discipline

TIPS ON MANAGING PERFORMANCE

Key Considerations:

- ✓ Formal Performance Reviews must be conducted at regular intervals during the year.
- ✓ Formal quarterly reviews are recommended.
- ✓ Every team / staff member must have a final performance review at year end.
- ✓ Values / behaviours must also be discussed at every formal performance review, as well as performance against targets and overall performance.

Don't forget this...

- The motivation / reason for regular Performance Reviews is that continuous improvement is only possible if performance is **reviewed regularly**. Best practice is 3 or 4 times per year.
- Coaching with respect to performance is part of the day to day leaders' responsibility and is one of the best ways to **develop continuous performance improvement**.
- The emphasis should be on the **quality of the discussions** (and application of coaching skills) rather than on the bureaucratic filling in of forms or getting to a rating.
- Staff/team-members should be encouraged to assess their own performance and **become active agents for changing and improving their performance**.
- There should be **no surprises in a final review** if performance issues have been dealt with as they should have been – during the year.
- Focus each individual's contribution on **output that is clearly aligned with Company performance and results**.
- **Differentiate performance** through performance ranking and reward.
- Identify and develop those **competencies directly related to successful individual and team performance**.
- Individuals must **take a shared responsibility** in assessing their own learning needs.
- **Identify competence gaps** that will drive the learning and development plan.
- The **learning plan must be aligned** with Business and department strategy.
- Line Managers / leaders are responsible for **creating a climate** in which learning can occur.
- In instances where both performance and competence exceed job requirements, plans of action should be geared towards **developing the employee for new challenges**.

About Targets and Reviews

- Targets, performance standards and measurements must be set up front and recorded to form part of the performance contract at the beginning of the year/performance cycle.
- Targets must be assessed one at a time, commented on and actions recorded.
- Any problems in achieving agreed targets or standards of performance must be identified.
- The reasons for such problems, including factors beyond the individual's control, as well as those which can be attributed to the individual's behaviour must be identified.
- Any problems relating to work and the individual's relationships with their managers, colleagues (and subordinates) must be discussed.
- Individuals must be encouraged to fully contribute to the discussion.

In Summary

- Be prepared.
- Create the right atmosphere.
- Work to a clear structure.
- Focus on performance **not** personality.
- Invite self-assessment.
- Encourage analysis of performance.
- Ensure clarity of overall level of performance.
- Handle negative elements with encouragement.

