

Managing: for performance



Human performance improvement as methodology can assist managers in fulfilling its ultimate responsibility, i.e. the firm's performance. Performance improvement requires attention to the total performance system, in a methodical way to ensure that the root of deficient performance is uncovered and consequently rectified.

In the previous article the question was posed whether management is still relevant given the volatile environment in which firms operate. Nowadays it would seem that management is treated dinosaurian like in favour of the so-called progressive phenomenon leadership.

It was established that management still plays a significant role today especially in addressing the unique competitive challenges facing South Africa by ensuring performance.

To achieve this, it was suggested that firms focus anew on management development (both the management as well as leadership facets) and performance.

The purpose of this article is to share a performance improvement methodology in contributing to successful management.

Performance improvement

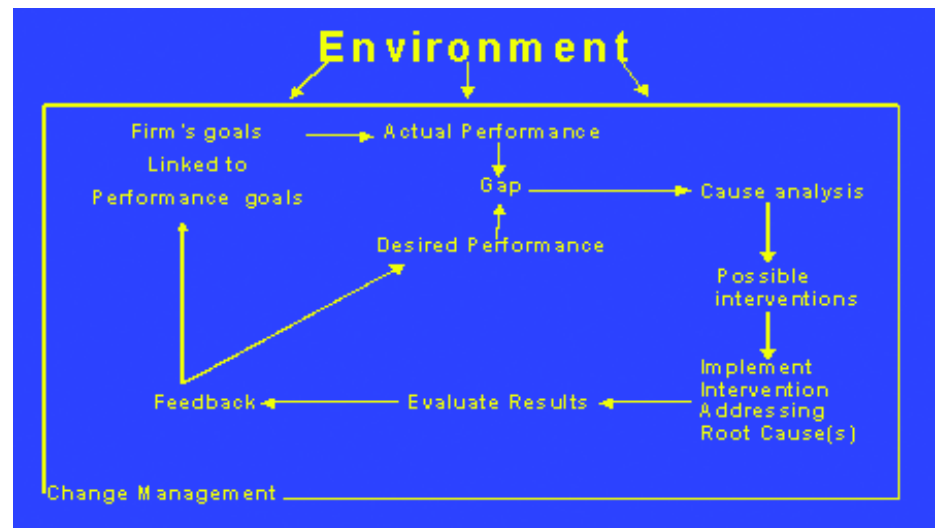
The primary responsibility of management is the firm's performance. Performance, in essence, constitutes value creation for all stakeholders (see previous article). The methodology shared here, aims at exactly this.

The human performance improvement methodology is defined as a systemic, systematic approach to identify barriers to performance, preventing people from achieving top performance – the key to the firm's success – and creating solutions that will quickly and effectively remove these

barriers to ensure improved performance and consequently that the staff achieve their full potential. This definition suggests that knowledge, skills and attitudes of staff are insufficient to guarantee top performance.

This means that barriers may be anywhere in the performance system or the environment in which the performance system functions, that influence performance. All components of the system should function in harmony to ensure optimal performance.

Figure 1: A human performance improvement model. Adapted from ASTD Certificate in HPI Course 1, Module 2-4, 2002.



This view is congruent with the exposition of management in the previous article. A human performance improvement model is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

The figure shows that a human performance improvement model exists within the environment and itself and comprises a number of components. The environment represents the broader system in which the performance system functions.

The broader system embeds a multitude of variables such as economic, political and social factors, that impact the performance of the firm. The environment includes the customers and their expectations of performance. Therefore, the firm, as performance system, cannot be viewed in isolation.

Figure 1 also illustrates that human performance starts with the firm's goals that are translated into performance goals. In other words staff should only be involved in those 'activities' that will lead to fulfilling the firm's goals.

Furthermore, the performance goals set the norms according to which performance should be measured and judged. When the actual and desired performance differs, there is a gap. However, the gap is only significant when the deficient accomplishment has a negative impact on performance.

Generally, the gap is caused by a behaviour or task that is incorrectly performed, for example:

- ❖ the firm's goals are inappropriate given its environment and/or
- ❖ and inaccurate translation of the firm's goals to performance goals and/or
- ❖ incumbents possess incorrect/insufficient knowledge, skills, attitudes to perform successful and/or
- ❖ processes or structures are not most favourable for achieving the stated goals and/or
- ❖ policies and procedures could be inadequate or ambiguous to guide top performance and/or
- ❖ rewards and incentives may be unsatisfactory to spur optimal performance and/or
- ❖ resources may be inadequate or misallocated to guarantee best performance.

Cause analysis establishes the root cause of the gap, i.e., the missing or inadequate influences on performance. Alternative interventions that could close the gap, i.e. influence to add or fix, should be investigated.

Generally interventions are classified according to root causes e.g.

- ❖ ability (knowledge and skills) based (training),
- ❖ motives (recognition),
- ❖ resources (ranging from ergonomics to automation),
- ❖ structures/processes (work flows to scheduling) and/or
- ❖ information (effective communication systems including feedback).

This classification of interventions reveals that knowledge, skills and attitude related inadequacies is, but one of a number of categories, all of which are within management direction to rectify deficient performance.

The one(s) that would close the gap, effectively and efficiently, should be implemented. In implementing the interventions, due regard should be given to, *inter alia*, co-ordinating the logistics, timing, contingency planning, communication and milestones to ensure success.

The results of the implemented interventions should be closely observed and evaluated to determine the value of the intervention. Feedback should be given to the system on the efficacy of the implemented intervention.

Simultaneously, change management – in essence explaining why the change was required and guiding the change effort – should support the implemented intervention to ensure success.

It is clear from the above description that the human performance model, as illustrated in Figure 1, addresses the total system in a methodical way to ensure performance improvement.

The key is that barriers to performance can be anywhere in the system or the environment. People/staff and their knowledge, skills and attitudes are only one possible area where obstacles to performance could

be located. The goals, values, climate, standards or expectations of the organisation may hamper performance in a given situation.

This is equally true for information or rather the lack of information including clear performance expectations, feedback on adequacy of performance as well as relevant and clear guides on how to do the job.

Finally, other factors that may obstruct performance include inadequate access to resources (be it tools, equipment, other supplies or access to the 'leader'), lacking incentives (be it pay or non-pay) and lastly the incumbents' capacity (a mismatch between employee's abilities and positions' requirements).

It is important to note that factors hampering performance may be in any of these areas or a combination of these areas. Most importantly, all of these barriers are within the direct scope of management direction.

Management and performance improvement

Knowing the barriers to performance, as explained above, necessitates action to create solutions that will remove the barriers and ensure improved performance. A number of persons within the firm are, in differing degrees, responsible for taking action to come up with solutions to improve performance.

It is clear that both management and leadership, although leadership is only implied, play a vital role in performance.

However, the appointed managers are primarily charged with this responsibility, as they are ultimately accountable for the performance of the firm. In applying this performance improvement methodology (illustrated in Figure 1 on the previous page) managers create an environment in which employees can perform to accomplish the purpose of the firm, i.e., delighting customers efficiently.

In so doing managers give effect to the definition of management, as stated in the previous article, as:

- ❖ They get the opportunity to check whether the firm's goals are realistic and thus achievable, given prevailing environmental conditions. If not, they have the opportunity to provide inputs to the system to ensure that the goals are adapted.
- ❖ They have the opportunity to ensure that the firm's goals are clearly trans-

lated into performance goals. This means that there should be a correlation between what employees are expected to achieve and the simultaneous accomplishment of the firm's goals. Furthermore, these performance goals should be realistic, possible to carry out and the execution thereof should be traced to ensure success.

- ❖ They should contract these performance goals with staff. In doing so it is their responsibility to ensure that the incumbents understand what is required of them.
- ❖ In contracting, the requirements with the incumbents, they should be aware of the resources required to succeed ranging from information, systems, equipment, supplies and incentives as well as knowledge, skills and attitudes. Therefore the manager should ensure that the incumbents are equipped to perform according to the contract.
- ❖ And the incumbents should agree on monitoring performance to ensure that corrective action is timely undertaken. This monitoring may include a variety of ways such as customer satisfaction surveys (this could be an external and/or internal measurement) and climate studies (internal measurement) to highlight areas for improvement.

Conclusion

Human performance improvement as methodology can assist managers in fulfilling its ultimate responsibility, i.e. the firm's performance. Performance improvement requires attention to the total performance system, in a methodical way to ensure that the root of deficient performance is uncovered and consequently rectified.

Both 'hard' (goals, structures, policies etc) and 'soft' (behaviour, motivation, leadership style, etc) issues are involved in performance improvement. It is clear from the above explanation that both management and leadership, although leadership is only implied, play a vital role in performance.

Above all this approach to performance improvement allows managers to balance the driving force for performance between the extremes of being 'directive' (setting performance goals) and 'empowering' (enabling staff to perform).

This flexibility would permit each employee to achieve top performance – the key to the firm's success – demonstrating management's relevance today. ■

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