

Human Performance Consulting: Transforming Human Potential into Productive Business Performance

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Special Note to Managers

This book contains a formula for solving many of the organizational challenges you face in your work. It will help you as a manager to make changes that directly improve operational performance and workforce productivity. And it will help you receive more helpful support from human resource, organization development, training, and other organization support functions. There are no huge capital expenditures, high-profile programs, or major upheavals to endure. Perhaps the greatest challenge is simply that it is probably new to you.

Why this special note to managers? Because you are the critical human resource in any enterprise. Anything material that happens in organizations generally happens with the encouragement and support of managers. Though all employees can make important contributions to an enterprise, we know there is always a manager involved—encouraging or preventing, supporting or rejecting these contributions. By reading this book, you will be prepared to weigh in on discussions of employee performance and productivity with new clarity, up-to-date knowledge, fresh insights, and a strategy to make it really happen.

In this book, I outline a strategy and process for better capitalizing on human assets—especially organization members engaged in knowledge- and service-oriented work. Few managers now realize the ease with which they can create financial value through organization-based improvements in operational performance. This approach extends the productivity gains of reengineering by improving the design of individual work roles within operational processes. These improvements are substantial, frequently exceeding a 30 to 50 percent average.

For quick insight into how this approach works, let me ask you a few questions about your own performance as a manager. You'll see that I've answered for you with the kinds of answers I generally receive, having asked these questions of hundreds of managers.

What's your assessment of your performance?

Answer: I'm doing a good job, sometimes great!

What's your potential to improve it?

Answer: I'm already working harder than I want to, but maybe I could improve 10 percent, 20 percent, or even a bit more.

What would you focus on changing if you had the goal of improving your performance?

Answer: I'd focus on improving myself . . . my work habits, a specific skill or behavior, or on somehow trying harder to create the right results.

Can you detect the misconception reflected in these answers? They seem to suggest that the focus for improving work performance should be on improving people. For organizations, this is a very common strategy, but it's not very effective. Managers will be hard pressed to point out major operational improvements or increases in productivity that have resulted from employees improving themselves. Personal improvement may be an option, but it certainly isn't the most effective, fastest, least costly, and most convenient option, and it doesn't make the best use of

current technology. It also lacks certainty and organizational leverage, and it requires uncommitted funding and time to make it happen.

If personal improvement has these disadvantages, why do managers consistently rely on this approach? Generally speaking, they are simply not aware of a good alternative. That's one reason why I am writing this book.

My colleagues and I have learned through years of research and consulting experience in major companies that work behavior is influenced much more by employees' circumstances than by their individual efforts. These circumstances, which I refer to throughout the book as the "work situation," wield this power because of people's natural inclination to adapt their behavior to the conditions that surround their work.

The circumstances or work situation that I speak of is also casually referred to as "the system." Perhaps you have heard the refrain, "In any encounter between an employee and the system, you can count on the system to win." Think of your own work or that of your employees, and you will recognize that this is basically true.

Any employee's performance—even a manager's—is largely defined by the context within which he or she works. Sometimes this reality is obvious, and at other times it is hard to imagine. The fact remains that people naturally work within the limits of the work situation in which they are placed, and only within these limits do they then exercise their capability to achieve.

Explicitly recognizing this law of human nature helps us better understand work performance. Think for a minute about your work situation and the many elements that were not designed with performance in mind—and so become unintended limitations to your performance (information flow, discretion, goal alignment, supportive staff functions, authority, reporting structure, financial resources, information, equipment, and so on).

For some positions that I analyze, I am amazed that the employees accomplish as much as they do. What interests me more, however, is how much better they can perform with a few changes.

If you knew that some element of your employees' work situation was unintentionally standing in the way of improving their performance, you could consider removing or reducing the obstacle based on the marginal payoff for doing so. The problem for managers is that they typically don't know with certainty the things that are most getting in the way of their employees' performance. And even if employees recognize such problems and their causes and have the courage or permission to mention them, they are rarely able to impress upon managers the need to make such changes. As a result, relatively easy opportunities for substantial performance improvement are overlooked, and managers have to try to find work-around methods to get individual employees to improve their performance.

People adapt their behavior in a reasonable attempt to fit into the work situation in which they are placed. They are simply accommodating themselves to the prevailing requirements or standards for behavior. The appropriate behavior may be subtly implied by the organization's culture or dictated by formal policy. The sources are all around: other people's behavior, supervisor expectations, the physical environment, the job description, the available equipment, current business conditions, customer needs, and a myriad of others. People's prior experience or inexperience also plays a part in this adaptation, because people learn the impact of their behaviors through experience.

Ultimately, the process of adaptation determines employee performance. It's our human nature. Regardless of the situation—surviving the first day on a new job, preparing an e-mail message, requesting a budget, serving a customer, or designing a new product—people choose behavior that is consistent with their perception of what's acceptable. Employees face many behavioral cues and constraints in their work situations, and each one requires some sort of adaptation.

Though employees are rarely conscious of this behavior, their first goal is to adapt appropriately, and only then do they try to accomplish their objectives.

Employees are generally not in a position to politically confront constraints in their work situations, even when these situations are obviously unconstructive and unnecessarily restrict their potential for performance. Many who tire of constraints that stand in the way of their performance simply leave when they have had enough. Such departures explain a high percent of the turnover that organizations experience.

Adaptation does not have to be a problem—in fact, it can be just as powerful in guiding people to do what's necessary for performance. Managers can use this natural behavior to design work situations that produce the results they want to achieve. By making changes in the current work situation, managers can improve employee performance—with much greater improvement potential than exists for employees to somehow improve their individual performance. Management is at its most effective when it designs work situations so that high levels of performance are the natural result and are not overly dependent on the efforts of individual performers.

Granted, there is much more that a manager needs to understand to have an accurate knowledge of work systems, the way they naturally operate, and the way they can be designed to produce the desired performance. This book will begin to provide that knowledge, and it will introduce managers to an emerging support role in organizations—internal human performance consulting—that is professionally capable of providing this kind of support.

In the final analysis, this book is about helping managers change the situations within which employees work—in ways that directly improve operational performance and workforce productivity. It is about putting human performance consultants to work for managers in order to create operational value-added.

Jim Pepitone
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