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Improving Employee Performance: A Basic Model for Managers

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About the Author

Gerald L. DeSalvo is an international management and training consultant specializing in law enforcement and security issues.

He has more than 40 years of operational, managerial and senior executive experience in U.S. federal law enforcement/investigations/security, municipal policing, military intelligence, training program administration, and management of international police training/assistance programs. His international experience includes 15 years living and working in Latin America, Asia, and Europe.

Mr. DeSalvo has extensive international managerial experience in the following areas: security and law enforcement program planning and management; criminal investigations; executive protection; threat analysis; security risk management; facility protection; anti-terrorism operations and planning; guard force management (including a 600-person armed guard force); training development & instruction; international police liaison; emergency planning; crisis management; crime prevention planning; the development of comprehensive policies, plans and procedures; contract management; special event security planning; Central Station management; and security and law enforcement training academy administration.

He has two graduate degrees. A master's in Criminal Justice Administration and a second in Liberal Studies (with a research emphasis in Training & Development).

His interests include: Training program development and management; the human performance technology/improvement approach to security and law enforcement administration; and program management, oversight and evaluations.

IMPROVING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE:
A BASIC MODEL FOR MANAGERS

Are you having difficulty getting some employees to perform up to expectations and are not sure why? Is it the employee's fault or something else? This report will discuss the wide variety of factors that could be affecting their performance. Awareness and consideration of these factors can help you pinpoint the causes of the performance problems and to focus on those solutions that you can realistically implement.

Factors Impacting Employee Performance

How an employee performs at work is subject to numerous factors such as: individual ability, training and experience (or lack thereof), work attitude, personal circumstances, the organizational design and support systems, the organization's culture, and external influences outside of the work environment. Trying to determine which factors are causing substandard performance can be both confusing and time consuming, as few workplace performance situations involve just one or two influencing causes. In many cases, there may be one prominent cause and many secondary causes for the performance issue (including many that are outside the control of the employee or yourself).

One common mistake managers make when looking at substandard worker performance is to reflexively attribute the cause to a lack of training. This tendency to prematurely identify insufficient training as the underlying cause of a workplace performance deficiency is sometimes due to a lack of understanding of the many *non-training* factors contributing to performance. Other times, this tendency is a result of pressure from superiors or other stakeholders to "do something" quickly regarding the performance problem. Counting "butts in the seats" of a training program provides easily quantifiable proof that the organization is doing *something* about performance issues, even if a lack of training is not the primary cause.

Some Key Factors Influencing Worker Performance

- individual ability
- training and experience
- work attitude
- personal circumstances
- organizational design and support systems
- organizational culture
- external influences on organization

This is not to say, however, that **training**, when *properly developed and delivered*, cannot be an appropriate solution for many performance problems. It is a very effective method for addressing **knowledge** and **skill** deficiencies (*Knowledge* = information that can be directly applied to the performance of a task; *Skill* = an observable ability to perform a learned psychomotor task).

Some Non-Training Related Causes of Poor Workplace Performance

So, what are some of the "*non-training*" related causes of poor performance that you should consider before deciding on a corrective plan of action? Generally, the *non-training* related causes of workplace performance problems can be broken down into the two broad categories of *individual-based factors* and *organization-based factors*. Let's look at these categories.

Individual Worker Factors That Can Negatively Affect Performance

a. a worker who is physically and/or mentally unable to perform the task (temporarily or permanently)

b. a poor work ethic or attitude on the part of the employee (e.g., laziness, personal beliefs in conflict with organization, personality traits incompatible with expected workplace behavior)

c. an employee's personal situation (e.g., family issues, physical and mental health, finances [important to determine if these issues are long or short term as that adds context for your decision-making])

Organizational Factors That Can Negatively Affect Performance

a. a lack of effective leadership and management (e.g., unqualified or unsuitable leaders/managers [lack of job knowledge, experience, training, leadership traits, emotional intelligence])

b. a poorly designed organizational structure (e.g., no clear chain of command, duplication of effort, stove pipe organization chart)

Generally, the non-training related causes of workplace performance problems can be broken down into the two broad categories of individual-based factors and organization-based factors.

c. staff shortages and budget shortfalls

d. a lack of effective recruiting, selection and hiring procedures (e.g., a haphazard hiring process resulting in employees poorly suited to the organization's needs)

e. a lack of effective written policies and procedures on how to do a job correctly and covering the standards of professional conduct (e.g., non-existent or poorly written policies, conflicting policies, lack of standardization, lack of a change management system for policies that creates confusion)

f. no consistent understanding and/or enforcement of, the performance policies, standards and procedures (e.g., ineffective dissemination of policies, inadequate disciplinary and quality control systems)

g. a hostile work environment (e.g., sexual harassment, discriminatory practices)

h. poorly designed and implemented training programs (in those organizations that have them)

i. a lack of task familiarity and workplace performance support (e.g., lack of task practice, complex task with many steps but inadequate workplace support [e.g., lack of needed job aids, flowcharts, step-by-step guides, operation manuals])

j. a lack of effective and timely performance feedback to the employee (e.g., via a standardized employee performance evaluation process, including vague performance objectives and expectations)

k. a lack of positive incentives (e.g., salary, benefits, recognition, awards)

l. disincentives to good performance (e.g., the better job performance the more work assigned, assignments/promotions based on who you know rather than performance)

m. unethical, illegal, and/or corrupt practices within the organization

"I believe that if you show people the problems and you show them the solutions they will be moved to act." **Bill Gates**

n. a negative or dysfunctional organizational culture (e.g., one that emphasizes individual success over team success or achievement of the broader organizational goals)

o. poor working conditions (e.g., substandard and/or poorly maintained facilities, equipment, tenuous job security)

p. a lack of needed equipment and technology (e.g., including effective IT systems/software and hardware)

q. external hostility directed against the organization and its employees (e.g., from customers, clients, internal and external stakeholders, the public, special interest groups)

A Basic Performance Improvement Model

In the previous sections we examined the training and non-training factors that can affect a worker's performance. We discussed how training, when *properly developed and delivered*, can be the appropriate solution for many performance problems and that it is a very effective method for addressing **knowledge** and **skill** deficiencies.

We also discussed how the *non-training* related causes of workplace performance problems can be broken down into the two broad categories of, *individual-based factors* and *organization-based factors,* and looked at several examples of each category.

Mager & Pipe Performance Improvement Model[1]

Now, let's examine one popular performance improvement model developed by respected training experts, Robert Mager and Peter Pipe. Mager and Pipe, created a checklist of questions, including a simple flow chart (see diagram), that systematically identifies the cause of a performance problem and the solution for it. Although rather basic, it can be a very helpful tool for managers facing an immediate performance issue and the need to resolve it quickly. The steps of the model are as follows:

Step 1. Describe the performance deficiency

Step 2. Decide if it is important? If it isn't, ignore it. If it is important proceed to next step.

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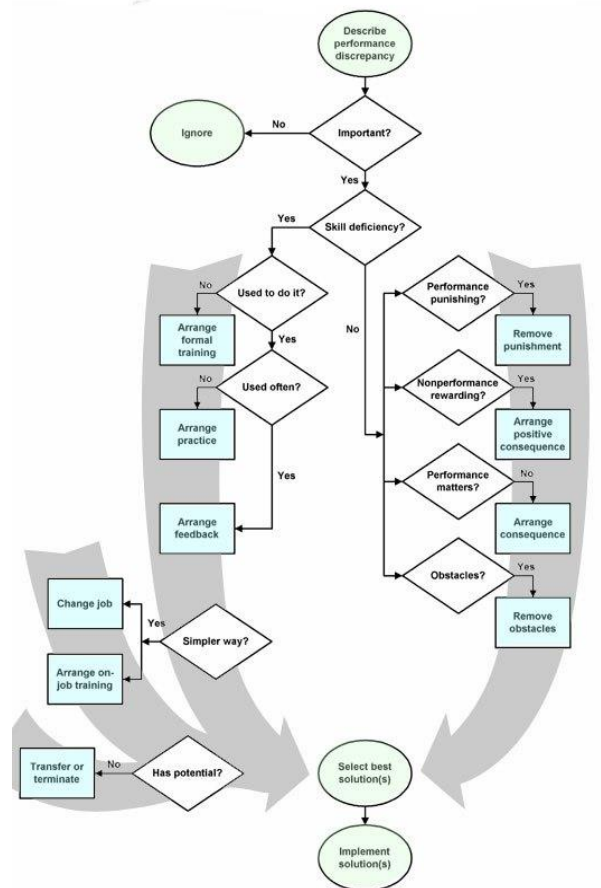
[1] Robert Mager & Peter Pipe, *Analyzing Performance Problems*, (3 ed., 1997).

Knowledge and/or Skill Deficiencies

Step 3. Decide if it is a knowledge and/or skill deficiency? If it is, does the worker need formal training (either knowledge and/or skills), additional practice on the task, or additional, specific feedback on what they are doing incorrectly?   If it is not one of above, go to next step.

Step 4. Decide if there is a simpler way to perform the task? If there is, does the task need to be changed to the simpler process or does the worker need some form of training at the workplace on the new simpler process? If not, proceed to the next step.

Individual Worker Causes of a Performance Issue

Step 5. Decide if the worker can perform the task(s)? Consider, mental ability, physical ability and work attitude.   If not, consider counseling, a transfer to different job, or possible termination.

Possible Organizational Causes of a Performance Issue

Step 6. Decide if good performance is punishing? If it is, remove the punishment.

Trying to determine which factors are causing substandard performance can be both confusing and time consuming, as few workplace performance situations involve just one or two influencing causes.

Step 7. Decide if non-performance is rewarding? If so, remove the negative incentives and add positive incentives.

Step 8. Decide if performance matters to employee? If not, arrange a consequence that motivates a change to good performance.

Step 9. Determine if there are any other organizational obstacles to good performance (see the list in section above)? If so, attempt to remove the obstacles or minimize their impact on performance.

Step 10. Select the best solution(s) for the performance problem and plan their implementation.

Step 11. Implement the solution(s) and monitor for change of performance. Revaluate and repeat the process if necessary.

In Conclusion

As we can observe from the long list of *non-training related* causes of poor worker performance, there are many factors that can influence individual and/or group performance. Consideration of these factors should aid you to identify the correct causes of the worker performance gap and to select the appropriate solutions. Managers who can do this in an effective and timely manner will have an advantage in today's constantly changing and complex workplace. Hopefully, this report will help you with that difficult task.