What it is

A series of articles, best practices and suggestions for managing the performance of individuals and teams

What it can do

This tool can help leaders:

- o Understand their role and take greater, more effective responsibility for the performance of their team
- o Improve their process of attracting, hiring and retaining staff
- o Help create a culture of high performance
- o Deal with problem performers

The tool can also help consultants and coaches better support their clients in the above tasks.

How it works

The Managing Performance Toolkit includes the following articles, best practices and tools:

1. *An Overview & Best Practices*
2. *Tips on Hiring*
3. *The Art of Setting Goals*
4. *Ongoing Support – The Key to High Performance*
5. *Performance Evaluation Best Practices*
6. *About Firing*

You can download the articles in this toolkit, and many other tools for transformation, at: atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

This is the 1ˢᵗ article of 6 in the Managing Performance Toolkit.
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools at:
atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

Your most important jobs

As a leader of a non-profit, you have three absolutely critical tasks:

1. To ensure alignment to a compelling vision of the future and a strategy for achieving it
2. To ensure sufficient resources
3. To ensure the creation of a system for supporting the high performance of your team and developing the capacity of your people

In the overloaded schedules of most non-profit leaders, it is the last task – managing and developing people – that most often fails to get the attention it needs.

Whether you are head of an organization, or leading a department or team, your success in bringing out the best in your people will have tremendous impact over time on the success of your mission. Do notice the word *ensure*. You don't have to do all of this yourself, but you are personally responsible for making sure it gets done, and done well.
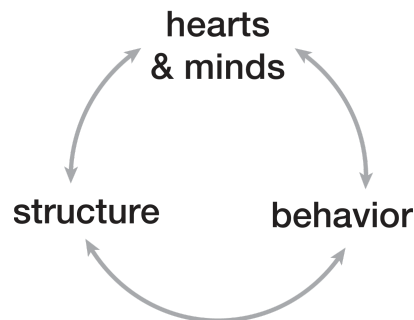
Managing Performance is a system

When leaders think about managing people, the image usually comes to mind of sitting down with staff for a one-on-one meeting or performance review. These meetings are, of course, part of the process. But it's important to look at performance management as a *system*, of which face-to-face meetings are only one element.

An effective performance management system needs to:

- Inspire, guide, support, challenge and educate staff to deliver the best possible results for the organization
- Help inform you about what staff need in order to be more successful
- Build trust and mutual understanding between you and your staff
- Support the ongoing development of your people
- Identify and deal with weaknesses or problems in performance
- Provide you with feedback about how to be a better supervisor
- Provide information to help you better support and coordinate work among your team as a whole
- Identify weaknesses or problems in organizational processes that need to be addressed
- Provide information for decisions about compensation and promotion
- Provide documentation as required by law, HR policies, and possibly union contracts for dealing with performance problems, grievances, and firing
- Provide protection for those with less power from the arbitrary use of power by managers (including yourself)

Let's use the Wheel of Change to look at what goes into an effective system
for managing performance.

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                    hearts
                    & minds
                   ↗        ↘

        structure              behavior
                   ↘        ↗
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Hearts & Minds:
There are certain attitudes and beliefs that are fundamental to
creating an effective system for managing performance.

Structure:
A performance management system comprises a number of processes, including the
formal performance review.

Behavior:
The success of whatever system is set up will be determined largely by the
behavior of the people implementing it.

Hearts & Minds

Most leaders are promoted due to their capacity to do some job well. Perhaps you were
good at campaigning, organizing or policy. Your success was about your performance.
But now, you are a manager. As you begin to oversee more and more people, your job
becomes increasingly less about what you do, and more and more about supporting
others in doing their jobs well. Think of a sports team. As an organization grows, no
matter how much star power you may have, your job is more about being the coach
than being an individual performer. This is a paradigm shift that every leader must
make to be successful.

FYI: In highly quoted research by Google on what makes an effective manager,
the number one directive among all others is:
Be a good coach.
Technical expertise ranked very last.[1]

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[1] Bryant, Adam, "Google's Quest to Build a Better Boss, New York Times, March 12, 2011

Here are some of the key beliefs and attitudes needed to create good performance management:

1. Accepting responsibility

Your staff's performance is your responsibility. Really! If someone is sub-performing, it's your responsibility to help them meet the standard or remove them from that position. Equally important, it's your responsibility to develop and retain your key people. Helping your strongest team members achieve their maximum contribution will make the difference between adequate and great results.

2. Comfort with authority

Many of us engaged in social change carry some ambivalence around power. We have seen and fought against the abuse of it. As leaders, we are charged with exercising power on behalf of our organization's mission. Yet many leaders feel awkward about having more power than others. This tension is often exacerbated by also having staff members who may resist the very notion of organizational hierarchy.

While managing performance is about supporting our people to bring out their best, it also involves holding staff accountable to meet the performance criteria needed for success. Many of our social change organizations have too many people not pulling their weight. This does not help bring about the world we want to see. Effective performance management requires that leaders establish and hold a high standard for those they supervise.

3. Caring and compassion

The positional power you have over people can gain compliance, but will never inspire them to give their all in the way people do when they feel seen, valued and cared for. In our busy lives, there is a danger of seeing the people that work for us as a means to an end. This is not about management techniques – caring and compassion are qualities of the heart. If you want your people to flourish and give their best, open your heart to them. Know their dreams and their struggles. See and cherish who they are. Your caring helps to generate loyalty and commitment that helps build great teams and organizations.

Behavior

The best of intentions and the best-designed structures and processes will be undermined if we fail to develop good habits – the things we do and don't do every day. Some of the key behaviors needed for successful project management include:

1. Prioritizing

Accepting responsibility for the success of your people means you have to actually prioritize check-ins, make yourself available, and bring regular, good-quality attention to supporting and coaching those you supervise.

2. Appreciation
A survey of 20,000 employees in 29 countries showed:

- Reviews and informal feedback emphasizing performance strengths was linked to a 36% *increase* in performance.
- Reviews and informal feedback emphasizing performance weaknesses was linked to a 27% *decrease* in performance.[2]

Another study found the single most important reason employees quit is limited recognition & praise (34%). Compensation was second at 29%.

There is considerable research showing that in order to elicit best performance over time, managers should maintain a *minimum* proportion of 4-1 positive or affirming feedback to corrective feedback.[3]

The acknowledgement, however, must be authentic – not a management technique. What we appreciate… appreciates.

3. Invest more in what's working
Here are two of the most common mistakes in managing performance:

- Putting more energy into problem performers
  There is a natural tendency to focus primarily on dealing with performance problems. If someone's doing well, we tend to leave them alone. But the real excellence and power of our teams and organizations come from our top performers. We actually want to invest more time in helping our good performers become great.

- Putting too much energy into fixing weaknesses
  In managing individuals, we should put far more energy into maximizing use of their strengths and much less into trying to fix weaknesses. We do want to learn about and compensate for our weaknesses, but this is damage control. It never leads to excellence. Put more focus on identifying and developing your peoples' unique strengths.

4. Deal directly with what's not working
Appreciation is not an excuse for failing to proactively and forthrightly deal with performance problems. It's natural to put off doing things that feel uncomfortable. But when left unattended, performance issues always become worse. We sometimes use the excuse that we're concerned about hurting the feelings of sub-performers. Well… by not dealing with performance issues in a timely way, we're actually failing to help the person we supervise even as we fail to fulfill our responsibilities to the organization.

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[2] http://www.shrm.org/hrnews_published/articles/CMS_02316.asp

[3] For example: Kantambu Latting, Jean, "*Giving Corrective Feedback: a decisional analysis.*" Social Work 37, Sept.5, 1992, p.424-427.

Structure

A performance management system can be seen as having four key processes:

1. Hiring

Most performance problems start here. All too often we are not completely clear what we're looking for, there's inadequate creative and sustained energy put into the search, we feel rushed to make a decision, or we override a nagging feeling that something isn't quite right about the final candidate.

See our article: *Managing Performance 2: Tips on Hiring*

2. Planning and goal-setting processes

There is no effective way to manage performance without setting clear goals for each individual. Yet, in a recent survey of 1000 managers, when asked to write down their three most important goals, over 70% failed to identity goals that would meet common acceptable standards for performance goals.

See our article: *Managing Performance 3: Setting Goals*

3. Ongoing support, communication and feedback

In the rush of everyday events, we often turn to other priorities, leaving our people to sink or swim until the next scheduled check-in or even until their yearly performance appraisal. The skillful manager maintains the continuity of contact needed to support high performance and deal proactively with deficiencies.

See our article: *Managing Performance 4: Ongoing Support*

4. Performance reviews

The final element of the Performance Management system is the performance review itself. If the first three elements have been done well, there are no surprises. Although dealing with poor performance can be challenging both for managers and staff, most reviews can be highly engaging, productive, even enjoyable exchanges between you and your people.

See our article: *Managing Performance 5: Performance Evaluations*

In conclusion

Those of us dedicated to social change naturally gravitate towards the issues that concern us – social and economic justice, human rights, the environment. It can sometimes feel like all the energy we have to put into managing and developing our people is a distraction from the real work.

But for leaders, the care and feeding of our people *is* the real work – the critical path to the success of our mission.

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Decisions about who to hire are some of the most important decisions you will ever make. Each time there is an open slot, you have the opportunity to significantly advance the work. But many, if not most, performance issues begin with bad hires. Failed hires are a huge waste of organizational energy and morale.

For over a decade in our Rockwood National Yearlong Leadership Trainings, our senior progressive leaders have been sharing best tips and practices about hiring. Here is some of their collective wisdom.

Tips on Job Descriptions

- Take job descriptions seriously, for they are the foundation for good hiring.
- The process of creating the job description should include those in the organization who best understand this role and its impact from their varying perspectives. The previous holder of this position will often be a valuable source of information.
- Understand that job descriptions actually serve numbers of purposes. They:
    - provide an opportunity to clearly communicate the mission and where the employee fits inside of the big picture
    - set clear expectations for what you really want and expect from this person
    - are a tool for you to help make good hires
    - are a tool for aligning the organization's expectations of new hires
    - address issues and questions of those people who were not selected
    - help others in the organization understand the person's responsibilities
    - help cover your legal bases (e.g. compliance with the Americans With Disabilities Act)
    - serve as the basis for goal-setting and ongoing management of performance
- Focus on what the person will actually do – the activities that make up the roles and responsibilities.
- Separate out "must haves" from "nice to haves"
- Include the intangibles – spirit, energy, values, impact on others – as well as the tasks. Don't get so lost in making the job description sound "professional" that you lose communicating what you are really looking for. Let the job description reflect your organizational culture.
- Job descriptions should be updated whenever there is a new hire. It is also a best practice to review it annually as part of performance reviews, as the reality of roles often evolve.

Tips on Searches

- Proactively set up a pipeline in anticipation of future hires, rather than waiting until you're in immediate need. Developing your pool should be an ongoing organizational initiative.

- Go outside the box. We too often get stuck with a pool of the usual suspects, recycling around through the same network of organizations.

- Look at the edges of your social networks.

- The for-profit world can be a good source of people who have highly developed skills and may be wanting more meaningful work, even at less pay.

- Three options for searches:

    1. Manage the search internally
    The challenge: everyone in the organization is typically already overloaded. When managing a search is placed on top of existing commitments, it is rarely done well. An excellent search requires someone waking up each morning with their first thought being, *"How do I insure a really great hire?"* If you do assign a staff to run the search, make sure to reduce their other responsibilities.

    2. Use a search firm
    Search firms should be considered for larger organizations regularly doing senior level hires. This works best when you develop a relationship over time with a recruiter, so they really begin to understand the nature, values and spirit of your organization, as well as its functional needs. There are several firms that specialize in the social change sector. Headhunters typically charge 1/3 of annual salary, though there's always the chance of pro bono or negotiating reduced rates.

    3. Hire an independent consultant
    This is a cheaper and often very good alternative. The ideal is to find someone who knows your organization and its culture well – a former staff, board member or ally who's now a consultant or in between jobs. This gives them a jumpstart on the search. Not only will they understand your needs, but they will be far cheaper than a search firm.

Tips on Interviewing

- Get multiple perspectives in interviewing.

- Make sure the hiring committee is aligned *before* beginning interviews.

- Engaging others from all levels in your organization in the hiring process serves two purposes: one, getting better quality hiring decisions and, two, creating inclusion and buy-in for key hires that help position people for acceptance by the organization.

- Always ask people about a significant failure and what they've changed as a result.

- Make sure you know regulations about what you can and can't ask.

- See them in action. Role-plays and hypothetical situations are fine but insufficient. Some tips:

    o Actually have people do a piece of work similar to what they would do in their position.

    o When appropriate, bring people to a meeting or event with the constituents/allies with whom they will be working. See how they interact.

    o For important hires, consider paying them for a day or a week of consulting.

Tips on references

- Don't stop at the references candidates suggest. All candidates can come up with a few people that will say good things about them. If you're not sure about a candidate, ask to speak to key people in past positions *not* on their reference list.

- Try to get below the surface in reference checks. Establish rapport as a fellow leader.

- References are often hesitant to talk about a person's weaknesses. Ask questions which make it easy for them. For example:

  - *"What is the most important way they could improve their performance?"*

  - *"What two positions would this person ideally be suited for?" And then, "What two positions would they be less well-suited for?"*

- Make sure you understand regulations on what you can and cannot ask.

- If anyone in a reference check raises any concerns or red flags, magnify it by a factor of 5!

- Use social media as part of your background checks.

Tips on making final decisions

- *"No hire is so much better than a bad hire."*

- Always keep in focus the absolute "must haves" for this position.

- Be clear what skills are trainable and which are difficult to develop. Technical skills can be developed with training and mentoring. Personal habits and talents are far more difficult. Be careful if you see shortcomings with things like personal discipline, focus, motivation, critical thinking, or communication skills showing up in the hiring process.

- Consult your gut.
  We all-too-often have a nagging feeling and then override our gut sense. Consult and trust your inner wisdom. Especially be wary when you see yourself rationalizing:

  - *There's a shortage of good people right now…*

  - *What can you expect at this salary level…*

  - *Well, they were probably just a bit nervous in the interview…*

  - *Yeah, but we really need someone right away…
    I don't have the time to keep looking.*

  - *But they're a great person…*

- Consult your gut, but watch for implicit bias.
  - We can confuse intuition with personal comfort.
  - We're usually more comfortable with people like ourselves.
  - This can lead to exclusionary hiring and lack of diversity.

- Remember you're hiring for a position and certain skills. Be careful not to give inappropriate weight to personal preferences of who you might enjoy hanging out with.

- Don't make the mistake of hiring a good person who really doesn't want this position and sees it as a stepping-stone to something else, e.g. hiring someone

for an admin position who really wants to be an organizer. This situation presents itself even more often when job markets are tight.

- Make sure you know the competitive salary range for the position in your market. Pay what is really needed to get the right person. "Saving" money by hiring a less-qualified person may cost a lot more in the long run.

- Continue accepting resumes even after you've narrowed the field to your best candidates. Sometimes when we don't get our first choice, we end up settling for someone we don't really want. Having an additional pool of possibilities may help encourage you to stay the course and get someone you're really happy with.

- Even after you do all of the above, remember the words of a very experienced ED. *"It's still a crap shoot."*

- One last technique: consider a trial period, and actually manage the trial or probationary period in a real way so that you do not get stuck with a poor hire.

"If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else."
– Yogi Berra

In a recent study of thousands of senior managers, when asked to write down their three most important goals, over 70% failed to identify goals that would meet common acceptable standards for performance goals.

If you look at typical goals in our social change groups, you too often will see phrases that are not effective targets for driving high performance.
For example:

1. **Develop plans for our organizers to reach more people.**
   What's missing from this goal? Creating plans for organizers to reach more people is an activity that may or may not lead to the real goal of effectively engaging more people in support of campaigns. Also, how would we know if we achieved it?

2. **Research our donors past patterns of giving.**
   What's missing? It doesn't directly connect to the real goal of generating more income, and it's missing any clear criteria for success. There is also no set time frame.

3. **Improve communication between the campaign & development departments.**
   What's missing? It doesn't make clear what exactly needs to change and what's the actual result that will further the mission. What would success look like?

4. **Reorganize our management structure.**
   What's missing? There is no clear intended improvement in performance. Why reorganize the management structure? How would we know if it was achieved? And by when is this to be accomplished??

The most commonly used model for goals in our sector in **SMART Goals**:[1]

   Strategic: it focuses time and resources wisely regarding the mission

   Measurable: there are clear criteria for determining success

   Ambitious: it challenges and stretches towards high performance and impact

   Realistic: it's potentially do-able

   Time-bound: time parameters and deadlines are clear

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[1] There are over 2000 variations of what the acronym SMART stands for. For instance, in addition to Ambitious, the A sometimes stands for Attainable, Agreed upon, Achievable, Acceptable, Action-oriented, etc. We recommend this version used by the http://www.managementcenter.org/goals-faq

How might the above goals be recreated as SMART goals?

SMART Goals:

1. Create a plan to recruit 1200 qualified new members by December 31 with at least 300 coming from each of the 3 communities we serve.

2. Analyze existing donors' past 5 years of giving, focusing on key criteria to optimize future campaigns. Deliver report by April 1 to Development Director with recommendations on how to increase donations from existing donors while using current donors to help generate contacts for expanding the pool.

3. Campaign and development departments will co-create a new fund-raising program, jointly committing to a revenue increase of 20% by year-end. A plan will be submitted to the management team within 60 days.

4. By year-end, increase programmatic coordination and accountability by:
    *   merging our 3 program initiatives into one unified department
    *   ensuring that no manager has more than 4 direct reports.
    *   creating an effective mechanism for ensuring more accurate budgeting for programs and greater financial oversight, leading to cost overruns of no more than a total of 10% across all programs

Some tips in goal-setting:

*   **Goals should be strategic**
    Individual goals should follow directly out of departmental or team goals.

*   **Balance ambitious and realistic goals**
    Good goals should help push towards greater results by stretching our sense of what's possible. But if they are too much of a stretch, they can discourage rather than incent extra effort and inventiveness. Unrealistic goals can also lead people to not take them seriously.

*   **Goals sometimes need to change**
    Goals will evolve in today's rapidly changing world. Certain kinds of work, such as advocacy, require rapid responses to opportunities and threats. This is fine, but changing goals should be a conscious act—not an excuse for failing to achieve them—and must be proactively renegotiated.

*   **Number of goals**
    As the number of goals starts to exceed 7-10, they become less useful as a serious guide to action.

- **Regarding Measurements**
  - o Some mission-critical goals in social change work are, in fact, hard to measure.
  - o What's important is for supervisors and staff to share, as clear as possible, an understanding of what success looks like.
  - o Break big goals into interim goals and smaller, measurable milestones

- **Incent collective success**
  In most organizations, success comes from teamwork. In goal setting, find ways to support collective effort. Goals that solely focus on individual tasks may hinder the teamwork needed for high performance.

- **Create agreement and alignment on goals**
  The goal setting process is as important as the goals. Make sure there is true ownership of goals by your people. Forcing staff to agree to goals does not lead to high performance. By watching and listening carefully, we can usually tell when someone is not really committed. We sometimes avoid noticing this lack of alignment, as it may feel awkward or inconvenient. Better to surface and deal with disagreements in the setting of goals, than be unpleasantly "surprised" when goals are not met.

  But, do make sure as the manager that you also are fully satisfied with the goals. Take the time to engage in whatever process is needed to come to true agreement.

"Goals are dreams with deadlines."
– Diana Scharf Hunt, author, time management expert

The Key to High Performance

To do a good job of managing your people requires a commitment to regular conversations and coaching. Supporting staff is vitally important but not urgent work and tends to be neglected in the overloaded schedules of many nonprofit managers. The period between setting yearly goals and the formal performance review is actually one of the most important times to support your team in creating superior results.

Two needs must be addressed in the period between goal-setting and performance reviews:

● Gathering information that you need from your staff to do your job well
● Offering the information and support needed for your staff to be successful

These needs can be filled in a variety of ways:
● Written reports
● Scheduled meetings
● Informal check-ins
● Group meetings

Here are some tips for making the most of these processes and generating the best possible performance.

Written reports

Written status reports can be very useful when a lot of information needs to be transmitted and/or where it's helpful to have a record. But, written reports are often a source of frustration, both for those tasked with creating the updates and for managers dependent on the information, if faced with chronic missed deadlines or poor quality. Some tips for avoiding these issues:

● Be really clear on the Purpose and Outcomes for the written reports.
  (See our tool: *The Fabulous POP Model*)
● Only then should managers and staff *collaborate* in creating report templates and reporting processes that:
  o meet the requirements of managers
  o provide value to the staff that have to prepare them
  o are easy to read and digest for those who receive them
  o are streamlined to produce the needed information with the least possible effort and stress to staff
● Revisit the written report process from time to time; be proactive in improving formats and/or eliminating reports that don't meet the above criteria.

Scheduled meetings with individual staff

- Make sure to calendar these well in advance.
- Take them seriously. These meetings are important to the people that work for you. While it's true that meetings with staff may appear to be more flexible than other contingencies that arise, repeated rescheduling by managers of check-ins will likely communicate the message that you don't care about your staff and their needs.
- Make sure to include time in everyone's work plans for check-ins, coaching and evaluations.
- Make REALLY good use of the time. Be clear what you want to accomplish. Either you or your staff should create a POP-directed agenda for each and every meeting.
- Schedule your one-on-ones for 5 minutes past the hour. Use those 5 minutes to mentally prepare for the meeting.
- Summarize takeaways and next steps at the end of each meeting
- Work plans are an invaluable tool for directing energy and measuring progress. Refer to them regularly throughout the year.
- When agreements have been made, and especially when any kind of difficult news has been communicated, it's useful to write these in a follow-up e-mail, as people all too often walk away from agreements and difficult conversations with differing memories of what was said.

Informal check-ins

- In between scheduled check-ins, you want to be available for support as needed.
- Make sure you're accessible. If you look too busy (and you may be), it will be difficult for those who count on your support and feedback to approach you.
    - If someone else manages your calendar, make sure they understand that your direct reports are a priority.
    - You may want to block out certain hours that you're known to be available.
- But, balance availability with your need for appropriate boundaries. Be clear when you are and are not available. (See our article: *Managing Interruptions*)
- As manager, make sure to initiate check-ins and not leave them totally for your staff to initiate.
- There is a concept in the business world called "management by walking around." This might look like stopping by peoples' desks for a quick check-in, or a quick Skype visit for reports in remote locations. It adds a personal touch absent in emails, memos and formal meetings.

Group meetings

- Depending on how your direct reports are structured, group check-ins can be a useful supplement to one-on-one meetings.
- Aside from the obvious advantage of saving time, they foster group learning and help build teamwork.
- The tips in the section on individual meetings around making efficient use of time apply even more strongly to group meetings.
- Group check-ins can be very brief. In the tech industry, stand-up meetings are very common. (See our tool: *Stand-Up Meetings*) Typically lasting a maximum of 15 minutes and often held every day, the meetings focus on 3 questions:
  - What have we done since yesterday's meeting?
  - What are we doing today?
  - Any obstacles that stand in the way of getting work done?
- It is also possible to work with models of peer accountability. In other words, rather than supervision being strictly a model of manager to direct report, it is possible for groups of colleagues to provide for themselves some of this support and accountability.

Tips on communication

Whatever the form of the check-ins, what's most important is how you show up.
A full study of the art of communication between managers and their direct reports
is beyond the scope of this paper, but here are a few tips and best practices:

- **Be present**
  Your people are your most valuable resource. Bring your best quality of attention to these meetings. Your inattention, being distracted or impatient, sends the wrong message.

- **Make it safe**
  In order for check-ins to fulfill the function of generating superior performance, staff needs to feel safe to be vulnerable and transparent about what's not working or where they may be falling short. You, as manager, have the power to deny promotion or fire your direct reports. This is a structural barrier that needs to be overcome in creating a collaborative spirit in performance check-ins.
  Managers can help by:
  - Behaving in ways that communicate trust in and respect for the person
  - Being consistently honest and transparent, so reports trust that they know what's going on and where they stand
  - Show interest and curiosity in both what's working well and where they are experiencing challenges or difficulties
  - Take a collaborative, problem-solving approach to challenges – e.g. *"What are we (vs. you) going to do about this?"* and, *"How can I help?"*

○ Creating a learning environment where "mistakes" are met with,
"What can we learn?" rather than blame and shame

○ Being very clear about when you are offering suggestions vs.
telling staff what they need to do

- **Be a coach**
Use these times together as opportunities to help develop your people.
When your people bring you a challenge, it's tempting to quickly offer them
advice or simply tell them what to do. It takes a bit more time on any given day,
but your job is to help grow your people by developing their capacities to solve
their own problems – to help them learn to fish rather than always provide them
with fish dinners.

- **Slow it down**
We are moving at high speed during much of our workday, juggling multiple
priorities, jumping from task to task. To create an environment suitable for
coaching and learning, we need to create a different pace. Even if the meeting
is going to be brief, we want to slow things down, to create a bubble in which
deeper conversation can occur. The reason for suggesting you schedule
5-minute prep time for formal one-on-ones is partly to help you slow down
and be present.

- **Adapt your style**
It is likely that the people who report to you will have different personality styles
and backgrounds. People's needs for supervision vary dramatically. For example,
some of your staff might thrive in a relatively hands-off style. They'll come to you
when they need something and may feel crowded or disempowered by your
checking in too often. Others of your staff may best engage their own power and
creativity in interaction and do well with more frequent, more engaged check-ins.
The golden rule needs to be adapted for supervision. Don't treat others as *you*
would like to be treated. Do unto others as *they* would like to be treated. You
must learn to adapt your own natural style of managing to meet the varying
needs of your reports.

- **Remember the person**
Check-ins are time to step back and see our people as full human beings, not
just a cog in a mission delivery system. In Google's extensive research about
what makes an effective manager, one of the highest-ranked behaviors was:
"Expresses interest in team members' success and personal well-being."
In our article, *Managing Performance 1: Overview,* we talk about "caring"
and "compassion" as key attributes for bringing out the best in our people.

- **Model accountability**
If you want your staff to be accountable, model it. Be impeccable in
keeping your end of agreements made with staff (including timeliness).

The magic formula:

Maintain a <u>minimum</u> proportion of 4:1 positive to corrective feedback

- Considerable research shows this ratio elicits best performance from people over time.

- The acknowledgement *must* be authentic – not a management technique, but coming from your actual experience of appreciation for their efforts.

- Timing of positive reinforcement should be as close as possible to the behavior.

- Frequency? More appreciation is better, even for the same action or behavior. It feels really good to receive positive energy.

- Celebrate victories. Public acknowledgment is often a wonderful boost to folks and a great complement to one-on-one acknowledgment.

- However, other research shows that if the feedback ratio becomes more than 13 affirming to 1 developmental feedback performance goes down. Don't let the appreciative approach get in the way of courageous and direct feedback regarding improving performance. (See our tool: *How to Give Feedback*)

Offering appreciation comes more or less naturally to us due to upbringing and habit. Our inclination to offer it generously also tends to rise and fall with our stress levels. Up until now, you could claim ignorance, but you now have the information:

> *Acknowledgement is one of the most powerful ways you can support high performance*.

When leaders get busy, it can sometimes feel like managing people is a distraction from getting the work done. Don't be deceived. There is no more important job than supporting and cultivating the performance of your people.

Performing Well At Giving Performance Evaluations

The formal performance evaluation is the final stage in the Performance Management system. Most organizations have one annual formal review; some have two. If the stages of Goal Setting and Ongoing Support have been done well, the review follows naturally and there should rarely be major surprises. Here are some best practices:

Preparing for the review

The performance meeting is a big deal for the person being evaluated. As a manager, you want to bring your best to the meeting, to really show up for this person

- Diligently prepare yourself with good data-collecting.
- Be clear on the most important things to be discussed.
- Be ready with specific examples to underline main points.
- Handle any ambivalence or emotions you may have about the meeting before you get in the room.
- Be focused and free from distraction. The time you are going to spend with this person is one of your most important leadership moments.
- Don't bump annual performance meetings. It sends a really bad message to your people.
- For performance meetings that have the potential to lead towards firing, make sure you understand the relevant HR policies and legal requirements.

About rating charts

Many organizations use rating charts to evaluate individual performance. These are of limited value and, if not used well, can be more of a barrier than an aid to high-quality performance management. The numbers, while providing the illusion of objectivity, are in reality somewhat arbitrary. Their use can encourage superficiality and can lead to pointless arguments about whether someone should be getting a 3 or a 4. When using rating charts, make sure they don't become the focus of the meeting. Don't hide behind the evaluation form. Keep putting down the forms, get present, and have the real conversations.

The tone of the meeting

Performance meetings should strive to be positive, collaborative experiences of working together to support your employee's best performance. You both share a commitment to the success of the organization and its mission. The meeting should feel more like a shared exploration rather than you, as the judge, delivering a verdict on their

performance. It's also about hearing the employees concerns and needs, and learning how to help them find greater satisfaction in their job.

You can help provide this atmosphere by always remembering that you are dealing with a human being with aspirations and sensitivities. Even when dealing with serious problems with performance, you want to motivate your people by calling out their commitment and their gifts. Be generous with your positive reflections. Your appreciation for all they give feels really good.

Structure of the meeting

There are three primary areas to be covered in performance meetings.

1. **The results they created**
   Together, review the employee's goals then evaluate the degree to which these were or were not achieved. It is usually best for the employee to share their perspective first. If the original goals were clear, you and your staffer should be able to reach agreement on how well they were met. However, someone's ability to create results is often impacted by factors beyond their individual control. Without diminishing that person's responsibility for meeting their goals, it is appropriate and important to consider the context in which results were or were not created. Results are impacted, for example, by changes in the larger social, economic or political landscape. Also, most people work as part of a team, and their individual results may depend on the performance of others over which they have no control.

2. **How they got the results**
   The performance review is the time to look at the various skills that contribute to outstanding performance in this role. What are the strengths that have been demonstrated, and where are there gaps or needs for development? Equally important is to assess the ways in which the employee did or did not model the organizational values in their everyday behavior.

3. **Going forward**
   Looking in the rear-view mirror of past performance is important, but the greater value of the meeting is in facing forward. Where is there room for even greater contribution? Remember to avoid the tendency to become exclusively focused on weaknesses. Pay as much or more attention to how to further develop and utilize strengths. It may be useful to look at needs for change in the three domains of the Wheel of Change:

   - Hearts & Minds: What changes might you hope to see in attitude and energy?
   - Behavior: What changes in actual behavior might contribute to greater performance and contribution to a positive work culture?
   - Structure: What changes might be useful in the processes and systems with which the person is working? In addition to how the employee might show up differently, what can the organization do to support their further success?

Dealing with gaps in performance:

   - Be clear, direct, and uncharged emotionally – e.g. this is not a time for you to vent your frustrations. Describe the gap in terms of work goals and/or organizational values that are the agreed-upon standard.

- Be respectful of the person. Focus on their behavior – do not offer your interpretations of their motives or feelings.
- Practice deep listening. Provide your staff with the experience of being heard. This doesn't mean that you necessarily agree with their assessment of the situation, but you want them to feel understood. (You also might learn something!)
- Be clear about the seriousness of the problem. Is this a small yet meaningful gap in overall good performance? Or, on the other extreme, is this gap putting their job at risk?
- Be clear on the consequences of failing to close the gap.
- Establish complete clarity about expectations going forward:
  o What will minimum acceptable performance look like? Be clear that this is not the ultimate goal, which is high performance and high values, but meeting this minimum standard is the first step.
  o To the degree possible, find relatively objective measurements for success. The key question: will the other person be able to know, on their own, whether or not they have met the requirements?
  o Establish date(s) on which performance will be re-evaluated, and the milestones for each date. Depending on the severity of the problem, the process should be managed more or less closely.
- What support can the person expect from you and/or the organization? Actively elicit what they might find helpful.
- Have the person restate their understanding of all expectations.
- If there are serious considerations about firing this person, make sure to follow HR/legal/union requirements impeccably.
- In difficult performance situations, sometimes a break of a few days (or more) may be advisable for both parties to sit and reflect before returning to complete the evaluation.
- Make sure there is a clear, written summary of expectations going forward.[1]

Look at the big picture
In addition to looking at yearly goals, the performance review can be a time to help the employee look at larger questions about their career. What are their aspirations? What opportunities for advancement might exist within the organization? What possibilities are there for learning new skills and developing new capacities? What might the organization be able to offer for support in their development (e.g. training, coaching, mentoring, new assignments, etc.)?

Feedback to you
Performance evaluations are an excellent opportunity for you to receive feedback as well as give it. How can you better support this person's success? What can you learn about the team and organizational processes and systems for which you are responsible? How can you help remove obstacles and create more winning pathways for your team? What does this person see from their perspective that might help you be a better manager?

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[1] For an excellent guide to handling serious performance issues, including firing, see Green, Alison and Hauser, Jerry, *Managing to Change the World*, 2009.

Performance reviews are some of the most important meetings you will have in a given year. Treat them as such!

This is the 6th article of 6 in the Managing Performance Toolkit.
You can download the articles in this series, and other tools, at:
atctools.org/resources/tools-for-transformation

Most leaders find firing staff to be one of the greatest challenges of leadership. We don't want to hurt people. There are understandable concerns about taking away someone's livelihood. We worry about the impact on other staff and morale. Many leaders are uncomfortable with conflict and tend to put off or avoid dealing with problem performers. We may try to convince ourselves that they're really not *so* bad or hope that the person will choose to leave on their own and save us from having to fire them.

Firing is one of our most important leadership acts. Many social change organizations are far too tolerant of poor performance. We have precious few resources to meet the scope and scale of the challenges we face in achieving our missions. We sometimes fall into thinking of our staff as family. This is a mistake. We can and should care about each other as people and be good to each other, but our purpose in coming together in an organization is to serve a higher mission. As social change leaders, we need to be willing to hold standards of performance commensurate with the importance of our task. Sometimes that requires us to step up and remove people that fail to make sufficient contributions to the team's functioning and well-being.

It's not personal

You are acting as a servant of the mission, of the people that look to you for leadership. Firing is a positive act. Think of your organization as a symphony orchestra. There's someone in the ensemble who's playing out of tune, off the beat, or on the wrong page. A person may not be pulling their weight, or even worse, pulling in a different direction. They drain rather than give energy. If this continues – after reasonable efforts to support, to coach and to train – then it becomes a real gift to the organization and its mission to remove the player from the orchestra. The move creates an important opportunity for a new hire that can help raise the performance of the whole team.

The quality of your people is one the greatest assets you have to help fulfill your mission. Our colleagues at the Management Center suggest the following: Don't focus on whether or not a person is so bad that you should fire them. Rather, ask yourself, *"Are they sufficiently contributing to furthering the mission of our organization that I want to keep them?"*

Depending on the circumstances and the people involved, firing may or may not prove to be a painful or traumatic event. When a person is aware that they are failing to perform, it's usually not a very positive situation for them either. But people may disagree with our assessment and be very resistant to termination. We may have to deal with someone being upset or angry. You want to prepare yourself well for the meeting. You may have your own emotional reactions to the situation – regret, frustration, sadness, anxiety. Deal with these beforehand so that you show up with clarity, professionalism and compassion.

Be tough on performance but kind to people

Let people know why you're firing them. But, we also want to care for people and do what we can to protect their self-esteem.

Termination may sometimes be a result of low motivation and effort or bad behavior. However, when someone fails at a job, some of the responsibility may also lie with you and the organization. You may not have put the right person in the right role or failed to provide sufficient training or support. Every person is capable of a wide range of possible contribution. A lot has to do with circumstances, the match between a person's abilities and the requirements of the role. Things like values, styles, energy levels, and interpersonal chemistry all impact a person's ability to jell with a team. Also, some firings are due to organizational changes that lessen the need for an individual's particular skills.

It is your responsibility to make a judgment on the person's suitability for a given role. But, you can communicate this in ways that do not judge their worth as a person. It's always best to describe the situation in terms of the person's skills not fitting the requirements of the role rather than focusing on some general shortcoming of the person being fired. Without shying away from the reasons for the firing, we can also usually find ways to appreciate the person's positive contributions.

The termination interview is a time to listen deeply to whatever the person may need to communicate. Don't debate with the person. You have the power in the situation. They have their point of view, which may well differ from yours. Allow them the right to their perspective.

Remember that you are dealing with a human being, worthy of respect and compassion, whatever the reasons for their termination. When we're dealing with an uncomfortable situation, we may tend to close out hearts, to become awkward or more formal. It is possible to communicate your caring for another human being even as your role requires that you fire them.

There are numbers of other considerations around firing, such as HR and legal needs, documentation, timing, communications and handling the termination with the rest of the staff. For additional help with the practicalities of the firing process, see the excellent chapter on "Performance Problems and Letting People Go" in *Managing to Change the World,* published by The Management Center.