

*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.

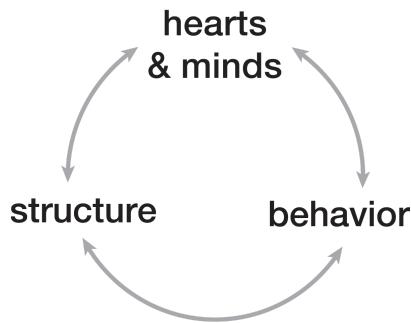
Managing Performance is a system

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.



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

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.

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 identify 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.