



Managers can counter the causes of poor performance

Enabling and Building High Performance

Performance that fails to meet expectations can be sorted into three classes of cause: (1) “don’t know,” (2) “can’t do,” and (3) “won’t do.” The first is a matter of understanding. If workers are unsure about what is expected of them or do not know enough about the overall operation to do more than the minimum in their own jobs, the manager ought to find ways of delivering the missing information. Opportunities to inform can be found in employee orientation, job descriptions, an employee handbook or written notices, rotation of job assignments, crew or staff meetings, and ongoing, informal communications.

Workers often cite insufficient direction as a major impediment to their performance and insufficient feedback as a block to timely correction of problems. They want to know what is expected, how they are doing, how to monitor their own performance, and how others see them. An ongoing exchange of information, as well as periodic performance evaluations, can enhance both ability and motivation. The purpose of an evaluation is to clarify and agree upon expectations for the next performance period. However, performance evaluation alone is insufficient communication to ensure that an employee understands the job and its requirements.

Managers have to communicate their expectations before the work begins if they are to reasonably expect the results they desire. Ongoing communication between management and employees increase the likelihood of satisfactory performance. Some techniques for better employer-employee communication are discussed in Chapter 6. Where an organization appears to have problems with employees understanding job expectations, a review of communication methods and frequency is in order.

Once employees understand what is expected of them on the job, their performance depends on their ability and motivation—what they can do, as well as what they will do. Neither of the two is sufficient by itself to ensure good work. Despite being extremely dedicated, enthusiastic, and hard working, a person with no mechanical skills will not be able to overhaul the tractor engine. And even a top-notch mechanic will not get the job done right if he or she is not motivated to do so. Managers who want better worker performance may need to consider management practices that affect ability, motivation, or both.

If employees do not have the ability to work effectively and reliably, the manager might consider restructuring recruitment and selection processes or providing better training (after hire) for the marginally qualified and for people whose jobs have changed. Different tools or equipment can help solve ability problems by reducing skill or stamina requirements, and they are sometimes the “reasonable accommodations” that workers with disabilities need to perform.

When workers know what to do and are able to contribute up to par but do not, the issue is rightfully viewed as a lack of effort or motivation. Some folks call

it an “attitude problem.” The effort that people exert depends to a large extent on what they expect to receive in return. Most employees work harder to obtain higher pay, greater job security, coworker esteem, appreciation, or a kind word. They seldom put out additional effort for a blank stare, disrespect from the foreman, resentment from coworkers, and more work without compensation.

Farmers and ranchers can use pay systems, performance appraisals, job allocation policies, and related supervisory practices to persuade workers that it really matters if they perform up to or above expectations. Analyzing what the employee stands to gain from working hard is a step toward uncovering conditions that lead people to work below capacity.

Several factors can be combined to create an atmosphere in which worker productivity is more likely to flourish. These factors are noted in the High performance cycle diagram, Figure 5.1. The influences under managers’ and supervisors’ control are noted on the outside portion of the circle (four groups). Factors internal to the employee are noted within the circle (four groups). This model highlights four powerful ways for managers to foster high performance:

- Set meaningful, challenging, achievable goals
- Provide clear instructions and check that they are well understood
- Provide structured, informative performance reviews
- Recognize personnel through verbal and other meaningful rewards

Figure 5.1. High performance cycle.

