The reasons that employees do not perform

When working to improve our service processes, it is important to take a holistic approach and examine all aspects of the service for opportunities. This means that we do not want to focus solely on the process steps; but also want to look at how well the people who provide the services are performing. At times, we will find that the employees are not doing as well as they should be. When this happens, we have to search out what is driving their lack of performance, and work on fixing the problem at its root.

In 1984, Robert Mager and Peter Pipe published a book titled “Analyzing Performance Problems”. In it, they provided a model for analyzing performance issues, identified reasons that cause people to function poorly, and provided simple solutions that can be implemented to make improvements. What I would like to focus on in this article are four reasons that cause employees to perform poorly. They are:

1. People are punished for performing well
2. People get rewarded for not performing
3. It does not matter if people perform
4. Obstacles prevent people from performing

When employees are not functioning at the level expected of them or are not producing any results at all, one or more of these reasons may be the driving cause. The nice thing is, there are simple solutions to fixing these issues.

People are punished for performing well

This may seem like a contradiction, but staff can feel like they are being punished for doing good work. This is usually seen when a top-performing employee is given more and more work or responsibility, to the point they become overwhelmed and burned out. The unfortunate part of this is that it isn’t leadership’s intention to punish the person, it just happens. When staff members are strong performers, their leadership can develop a reliance on them. They know that when they give their top-performers an assignment, that it will get done, usually on time and with good quality results. Because of this, leaders are more likely to (unintentionally) pile work on to their best performing employees or ask them to handle less pleasant tasks. This workload eventually wears people out.

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As the top-performing employees become overloaded, two things can happen. First, they can be so overwhelmed by the demands on their time, and be given so much to accomplish, that they simply cannot maintain their previous level of performance. They will begin missing deadlines because they are trying to juggle too many priorities, and their overall quality of work will decrease because they are rushing to get all of their assignments done. When top-performers begin to fall behind and fail at assignments, it can be concerning for their leaders, but more importantly, it can also create a great deal of stress, anxiety and frustration for the employee.

As stress and frustration increase, the second issue can pop up, which is that the top-performer simply stops trying to do good work. They look around as see others, who are not functioning as well, with lighter workloads or not being asked to complete unpleasant tasks. They reason that if they do not perform as well, they will not be given as much work and their stress will decrease. Here is an example that a friend of mine, Al Filardo, once related to me. When he was in boot camp in the Army, he and another soldier were given the very unpleasant task of cleaning out latrines (toilets), burning the waste, and then scrubbing the burn barrels. Al said that when they had completed this unpleasant task, one of the officers inspected their work and declared that they had done an exceptionally good job. Because of that, he wanted them to do it again. Needless to say, the next day, they did not perform the task well at all.

To counter this, leaders need to keep a close eye on the amount of work and types of tasks being given to their top-performing staff, check with them frequently to see how they are doing, and make sure they are not feeling overwhelmed or unappreciated. Efforts should be made to balance workloads across the entire team. Additionally, the top-performers need to be appropriately rewarded and recognized for the work they do and results that are achieved.

**People get rewarded for not performing**

Here is a pretty common scenario that takes place in classrooms. Students are assigned a group project and told that they will all be receiving the same grade based on the results. What often ends up happening is that a small fraction of the students do the majority or all of the work, but everyone gets a good grade in the end, even those who did not help out at all.

This is what is meant by people being rewarded for not performing, and it happens in the workplace as often as it does in the classroom. Some employees look around and realized that they are getting the same pay, same benefits and same recognition as their coworkers, even if they are not functioning at the same level. Since there is no incentive to perform well, they simply don’t.

To counter this, leaders need to keep a close eye on the amount of work and types of tasks that are being completed by the employees. They need to ask questions and look
at what each employee is contributing to the team. Tying compensation and rewards to the actual results each person achieves will quickly change performance behaviors.

**It does not matter if people perform**

Another factor driving employee non-performance is that it does not matter if they do anything, and there are no positive or negative results tied to their activities.

Here is a personal example from one of my past roles. I used to work for a large retail organization, and every Monday I produced a critical operations report that went directly to the CEO. When I was given the task, I was told how important the report was, and that it had to be done and delivered on time every week. It took me roughly eight hours to collect the information and produce this report each week, so my Monday's were focused solely on this work. After producing the report for well over a year, I started to question its value and whether anyone was reading it. My manager listened to what I was thinking and told me to skip a week. He said if there were any fallout, he would take responsibility for the decision. Monday came and went, but my phone didn't ring. My manager told me to skip the following week, and again nothing happened. After a few weeks of this, we decided to officially stop doing the report. Nobody ever said a word about it, and there were never any consequences for me not providing the information.

To address this, leaders need to examine the work that is being done and monitor results. If a task that an employee is asked to do is so unimportant that nobody notices if it gets done, or there are no consequences tied to not completing it, then we need to ask why it is even being done in the first place. If the work is truly important, then employees should be rewarded for achieving results, and there should be consequences for not getting it done.

**Obstacles prevent people from performing**

W. Edwards Deming asserted that when an organization does not get the results they desire, it is the process, not the people, which is to blame. This is very true in situations where the process places obstacles in the path of employees and prevents them from doing their jobs well. For example, there are cases where policies and official procedures intervene and tie employees' hands, making it impossible for them to provide the services the way customers want, when they need them, and in the form needed. Staff may also not have the systems and tools they need, or what is available is not capable of providing staff with the information or capability to satisfy customers. In these instances, the factors that prevent the staff from performing are outside of the employees' control, and leadership must step in and take action to remove the obstacles. It may also be necessary to bring in sound process improvement methodologies like Lean and Six Sigma to fix the process issues.
I agree with Dr. Deming. It has been my experience that when people come to work, they want to perform well and be successful. In my career, I have only met one person who came to work with the intention of performing poorly, and he was a true outlier. Otherwise, it has been inefficient and ineffective processes that have been responsible for preventing excellent performance.

There are many reasons that people do not perform at work. Hopefully, this discussion of the reasons that Robert Mager and Peter Pipe have outlined will help you view performance in a different way, and assist you in discovering the root causes of poor performance. If you would like to learn more, I would recommend reading their book, “Analyzing Performance Problems.” As always, I welcome your questions or comments. You can email me at clayton.taylor@asu.edu.

About the author:

Clayton Taylor, MBA, is the Director, Organizational Performance and a Certified Six Sigma Master Black Belt working in the Office of the Executive Vice President, Treasurer and Chief Financial Officer at Arizona State University. He leads the Organizational Performance Office. He and his team currently consult with diverse Business and Finance and university-wide operational areas to lower costs, improve operational efficiency and provide the highest quality customer experience to internal and external customers. Mr. Taylor can be reached at clayton.taylor@asu.edu