

Measuring Performance in the Workplace

BY TANIS FARISH

In this time of labour shortages and high demands, many companies are aiming to perform more efficiently with less or perform at a higher level with the same resources.

To do this, it is first important to get a baseline measure of where job performance currently sits. At a large organization, I recently conducted a research study that explored the relationship between employee health and work performance. The results were interesting and even a little surprising. If one had to guess about the relationship between health and performance, you'd think that the two would follow a parallel path: as health decreases, so would job performance. However, the results revealed something quite different. Each of the 30 study participants perceived themselves to have a high level of job performance. In fact, on a scale of one to five, participants stated their performance level was four or five. While they believed they were hardworking, productive, and effective in achieving their work objectives, a third of all participants perceived a low level of health, particularly feeling "tired for no reason" and "helpless at work."

Puzzled by this pattern, the focus group following the interviews clarified how these workers defined job performance and what it meant to work at a "high level." Interestingly, there were no doubts about how job performance was defined — if they did what they were told, they performed at a high level. These workers defined performance as compliance; therefore, they rated job

performance as "high" yet did not relate to the evidence of addiction, anxiety, and other health issues throughout the organization.

These findings provide insight into the process of self-reporting measurements. Each employee at any level in an organization could define performance differently. As with defining individual success, it depends on where you stand. If you are curious about the culture and meaning of performance, then this type of information can be very useful; however, for a more concrete picture of performance, I recommend digging a little deeper and using a variety of measurements to capture a more objective view of job performance.

Specifically, observe work tasks (speed, accuracy, effectiveness, use of resources), and review financial records and supervisory performance ratings to capture a more accurate picture of job performance. This is valuable information. We begin to understand that a workplace culture with little decision-making ability creates a perception of "just do what you are told" and puts a ceiling on productivity. It also creates a dependency on the organization's leaders to set the bar high.

If superior job performance is doing what you are told, then it becomes the supervisor's responsibility to make reasonable yet challenging requests of their staff. This can lead to another issue of "who is to blame?" That is, if performance is sub-par and work objectives are not met, it is easy to blame senior management for not demanding more.

When employees perceive a lack of control in the workplace and responsibility lies solely on the shoulders of management, employee health and performance are affected. Research tells us that when employees feel they have very little control, they tend to disconnect from their workplace, resulting in poor coping strategies, decreased job satisfaction, stress, and subsequent health concerns.

A more effective way to increase performance is to shift and spread the responsibility from leaders to employees. In



building a workplace where performance is equated with initiative and project completion is critical, the culture will, over time, shift towards a new, more meaningful definition of performance. Start by providing feedback and rewards that marry the definition of performance to employees' actions. This can look different in each company; it depends on the demands and requirements at each. But it is important to note that you can hinder the process by applauding those who work around the clock or accept that part of their job is unpaid overtime and quick email replies. This promotes imbalance, burnout, and resentment. But it is practical and healthy to reward initiative, innovation, teamwork, and project completion.

Popular ideas in some workplaces are personal days accumulated in recognition of low sick leave, where each employee can take flex-time for personal development or family commitments. Another is paying for sports or gym memberships. Not only does this value performance, but there's also an understanding that healthy employees have more energy and achieve higher job performance. Unique ideas to increase workplace performance are abundant. However, it is important to tailor them to your work force to develop a culture of responsible performance, as well as the best way to measure it. ■

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