

## People and Priorities: Empowering Performance Management

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

Performance management is too often viewed as a laborious burden by supervisors and as a potentially threatening and arbitrary ritual by their subordinates. These unfortunate expectations are also unnecessary, and even tragic. Done right, sound performance management practices can be empowering for both employee and supervisor.



### Focus on the Mission

Individual performance management should be tightly integrated with organizational performance management. After all, the only way an agency accomplishes anything is through the work of its people. Many government employees directly provide services to the public, such as serving as first responders or managing recreation areas. Dozens of other activities that local, state or federal government employees perform, even if several steps removed from interacting directly with the public, nonetheless contribute to mission accomplishment. These connections to mission must be recognized and them made explicit through the performance management system.

### Align Individual to Agency

The crucial first step in any sound individual performance management system is to ensure a clear alignment between the organization's mission and the individual employee's performance elements. This means understanding and unambiguously articulating in writing in the individual's performance plan how what the employee is being asked to do relates to the agency's strategic plan. Employee engagement and morale, and agency effectiveness, are greatest when the employee understands how his or her

job contributes to mission accomplishment. The federal Office of Personnel Management annually conducts a Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey. Agencies whose employees most frequently respond positively to the question asking whether they understand how their work relates to the mission of their agency are much more likely than other agencies to be among the best places to work in the federal government.

No job is too menial to show a connection to mission. I recall an apocryphal story involving a janitor employed by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in the 1960s at what was then known as Cape Canaveral. The agency was working hard to achieve President John F. Kennedy's charge to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. One day, as the story goes, a VIP from Washington, D.C., was strolling through the control room after hours and saw the janitor sweeping the floor. Asked what he was doing there, the janitor is said to have replied, "Why, we're putting a man on the moon, of course." That is alignment to mission.

### Less is Better

One challenge in crafting a performance plan that shows alignment to mission is having too many choices. Unless the employee is very near the bottom of the organization chart, or in a very narrowly defined function, he or she is probably contributing to the achievement of multiple organizational goals. Often, the employee wants to get "credit" through the performance plan for everything they are doing. Alternatively, the supervisor may be tempted to write performance plans that ensure that everyone on the team is working toward achieving all the targets for which the supervisor is herself being held responsible. Either scenario can lead to lengthy and unmanageable performance plans. Instead, the art in writing a meaningful and manageable

performance plan is including only those performance standards that are the most important for the particular employee. Otherwise, the employee will feel overwhelmed and have a hard time focusing efforts on the real priorities.

If everything is a priority, then nothing is a priority. In the long run, taking an exhaustive approach to performance standards actually hinders the performance of the organization. Particularly in a period of budgetary constraint, managers owe it to themselves, their superiors, and their subordinates to ensure that everyone is focusing on the real priorities.

One technique for achieving economy in performance planning is choosing a performance standard whose achievement necessarily means related activities will also have been successfully achieved. In statistics, this relates to the concept of covariance, where the value of one variable tends to move up and down with the values of other variables of interest. For instance, for an ambitious target to be achieved on a customer satisfaction performance standard for a help desk function, the employee almost necessarily needs to have sufficient expertise to answer the questions, be polite to the customer calling in, and not keep the customer waiting for an answer for an extended period of time. All three variables tend to move together with the broader satisfaction measure.

### Balance is Good

A sound performance management system has to do more than achieve alignment to the organization's mission, as important as that is. It needs to be balanced with other considerations vital to the long-term health of the agency. A typical balanced scorecard approach to individual performance management may therefore have three or four performance elements. The element relating to mission alignment often contains the most perfor-

mance standards, and may appropriately be weighted more heavily than other performance elements. However, it should not be the sole basis for evaluating an employee.

### Emphasize the Team

Supervisors should use a second performance element that addresses how the employee is contributing to the success of the broader team of which they are a part. Did the employee do a good job of helping to onboard and mentor a new hire? Did the employee find an opportunity to teach the rest of the team some skills or share some knowledge that the employee has in abundance, but represent a weakness across the team as a whole? Did the employee unselfishly weigh in and help out other members of the team experiencing stress during a period of peak work activity? These and related activities have real value and should be encouraged through a team-oriented performance element.

### Emphasize the Individual

As much as employees want to see that their work contributes meaningfully to something greater than themselves, they also want to know that the agency cares about them as individuals. One way the agency can show this commitment is by promoting opportunities for personal and professional development. Members of the Millennial or Gen Y generation—loosely speaking the “twenty-somethings” in the workforce—particularly crave opportunities for development. An agency can promote or even require individual development plans for its employees. However, it sends a far more powerful signal of the agency’s commitment to its employees if there is a third performance element in the employee’s performance plan that addresses the employee’s professional development. This tactic also has the benefit of making sure the supervisor spends at least some time thinking about how to develop his or her employees. The implicit message to the supervisor then becomes that they have a responsibility for both mission accomplishment and employee development.

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### Reduce External Risks

Every agency must comply with a raft of internal regulations and administrative policies. These requirements often generate a lot of snickering and grumbling about bureaucracy. However, every agency also functions in an environment of legislative, media, and often other external oversight. External critics focus just as much on perceived administrative misfeasance as they do on programmatic failures. It makes for a much more sensational story on the evening news when an agency is found to have lost a laptop carrying thousands of citizen’s social security numbers or made “extravagant” conference expenditures than to explore the nuances of a policy debate.

Employee failure to conform to appropriate administrative policy and procedure can in fact put the agency at real political risk. That quickly translates into budgetary risk. It also sadly too often results in early “retirements” by civil servants who had long distinguished careers in public service. To minimize these personal and organizational risks, it may make sense to adopt a fourth performance element that addresses important agency internal operating procedures. These typically involve expense management, IT security, privacy and ethics.

### It Is Not About the Paper

Much of the energy in performance management is expended on creating performance plans and then conducting

formal annual or, more typically, semianual performance conferences. However, to really create a performance-based culture in an agency—a culture of continuous improvement—requires a different mindset.

Supervisors should not “save up” compliments and critiques for a formal structured conversation every six months. Instead, they should be continuously observing employee performance, and in a constructive way provide regular feedback. That feedback is not always appropriately provided instantaneously, but it should be provided at least weekly. A five- or 10-minute weekly check-in with every employee is a best practice. It can be positioned as an informal counseling session in a relaxed environment. This will do far more to improve the effectiveness of the organization and the employee than adhering to the formal paper driven performance management process. It will also ensure that there are no surprises for the employee when the requirements of the formal process are observed.

Effective performance management is your best tool for steering your employees in the direction you want them to go. Taking the time and exercising the discipline to think that through will make you a better supervisor and a better public servant. By helping employees understand how they contribute to the success of the organization, they will feel empowered and engaged. Showing them that their personal growth as professionals is a big enough priority that you are willing to hold yourself and them accountable for it sends your employees a powerful message, promoting their engagement and productivity.

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