



Performance Management Ten top tips for 2021

Much of a manager's time and energy is devoted to ensuring her or his team delivers organisation-goal aligned results every day. The activities encompassed within this role are referred to as performance management. The ten tips in this note provide a framework for achieving consistently effective and efficient work performance by employees.

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Performance Management

Ten top tips for 2021

1. Embrace the value of performance management

Performance management is a structured system to align employees' day-to-day activities with an organisation's goals. At the level of each employee, performance management must operate to • increase time spent by the employee performing efficiently and effectively • achieve employee productivity improvements, • raise the employee's maximum performance capacity.

2. Make work meaningful

Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction. (Bailey and Madden, 2016). The key concept is that motivation is less about employees *doing great work* and more about employees *feeling great about their work*. The better employees feel about their work, the more motivated they remain over time. There is no stronger motivation for employees than an understanding that their work matters and is relevant to someone or something other than a financial statement. (Lai, 2017)

3. Train managers in conflict resolution skills

Inevitably performance management will necessitate some tough conversations between a manager and subordinates. Ignoring or avoiding these tough conversations, or leaving a party feeling unjustly dealt with, will ignite conflict, which if not resolved, will exacerbate poor work performance. It is not good for business. Training managers in conflict resolution skills will

give managers the know-how and confidence to tackle tough work performance challenges.

4. Invest in employee training

Enhanced skills and knowledge, which are the ROI of an organisation's investment in learning and development strategies and programmes, increase the capacity of employees to boost the performance of organisations. Training does not automatically translate into improved organisation performance. Managers must ensure that employees' higher performance capacity is converted into enhanced work performance, which in turn must flow through to better business results. That is the performance management link.

5. Avoid creating a cumbersome bureaucracy

When organisations turn performance management into a cumbersome paperwork or electronic information capturing process managers and their subordinates will not buy-in. The focus must always be on examination and analysis of the work being done by employees and not on the conversion of that work into a numerical score abstracted by ratings, weightings, bell curves, forced rankings and other number crunching exercises.

6. Goal Setting

"All good performance starts with clear goals."

Gary Ridge

In setting goals specified as clear performance standards, managers lay the foundation for a valuable performance management contract with employees. Goals describe, in outcomes-based statements, how an employee's work would look or be experienced by the customer of that work, if it were excellent.

A useful framework to define performance goals is the SMART method which defines performance outcomes in terms of criteria which are • specific, • measurable, • achievable, • relevant, and • time bound. (Doran, 1981)



7. Do not ignore the “how” of work performance

Goals are an event. The end point of where you want to be. A system is what gets you to the destination. A system is the processes you follow to get you to your destination. Sometimes organisations become too focussed on results attainment at the expense of the systems necessary for the efficient attainment of the results. Consider a rugby coach meeting his team at half time. His team is trailing on the scoreboard by five points. The coach will be of little help if the only input he gives is that his team must score a converted try or two penalties to get ahead. The team needs system feedback which will touch on things like defensive and offensive game plans, player discipline, strengths and weaknesses of the other team, and referee decision making. Such analysis and feedback will guide the team to better performance.

“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.”

James Clear (Atomic Habits)

The Japanese philosophy of continuous improvement ‘Kaizen’ is an example of a business system for better performance. Kaizen is a system of deliberate, and constant improvement. Through continual, aligned small improvements and standardization large performance improvement results are achieved.

8. Understand root causes of under performance

When a performance standard is not met, a manager must work with the employee to uncover the obstacles preventing the employee from achieving agreed goals. A simple way to get to the root cause of a work performance problem is known as ‘5 Whys’. You take the problem indicator and ask ‘WHY?’ several times. For example, “A credit controller missed his collection target.” Ask WHY? To the first answer, ask WHY? And, to each successive answer ask WHY? By repeating this cycle of questioning the response, it is likely that you will need no more than five WHYS to get to the root cause of the

problem. This ensures that you do not focus on symptoms but create the opportunity to get to long term sustainable performance solutions.

9. Manage performance everyday

Blanchard and Johnson (2015) say that managers should make it their mission to catch people doing things well and immediately recognise them for it. They advocate informal ‘one-minute praising’. In applying this, managers should not overdo it. Managers must look for and praise examples of people doing more than expected. Acknowledging work well done must be aimed at all team members. Any favouritism will kill the motivational benefits. Words of praise must be genuine. And for performance lapses, managers should use ‘one-minute corrections’ to give feedback and to redirect the employee’s performance. It must be immediate and informal feedback. This helps an employee get back on track and achieve his or her goals. It helps the employee and the business succeed.

10. When poor work performance persists, go formal

In the case of serious and persistent under performance, it is necessary to ramp up to a formal poor work performance management process. There are four primary steps • a work performance counselling meeting • follow-up • a final warning, and • a poor work performance hearing. A manager must convey clearly to an employee that there is a process transition and dismissal is a possible outcome. An employee should never be surprised if dismissal is the ultimate outcome of a formal performance improvement process.

Sources

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Serious misconduct

Zero tolerance ≠ automatic dismissal

Many employers implement a *zero-tolerance policy* in respect of certain categories of misconduct at work such as intoxication, racism, and sexual harassment. And rightly so. However, some employers make the mistake of interpreting a zero-tolerance policy as justifying the dismissal of employees for every instance of such misconduct.

The Labour Appeal Court applied its mind to a company's application of zero tolerance in an unfair dismissal case in the retail trade¹.

Staff theft of stock is a universal problem in the retail trade. As a counter measure, Checkers, a major South African retail company, required staff, on arrival at work, to get security to record any personal items that the store stocks. In a case which progressed from CCMA to Labour Court to the Labour Appeal Court the issue to be decided was whether the company was substantively fair when it dismissed an employee for breaking this rule. At the end of shift, a supervisor was found by a security official to have a *Shield for Men*, roll-on deodorant, in her handbag. The company dismissed the employee for "being in possession of uncanceled/unpaid goods when leaving work." The supervisor said she forgot to declare it before coming into the store.

At arbitration, the first level of the subsequent unfair dismissal dispute, the commissioner was satisfied that as a supervisor, the employee was aware of the rule that she was required to declare goods in her possession. The commissioner did not accept her version that she had forgotten to declare the deodorant when she arrived at work. The commissioner was satisfied that the company acted consistently and that employees who were found guilty of this offence were dismissed. The commissioner found that the sanction of dismissal was appropriate and therefore the dismissal was substantively fair.

The Labour Court first, and then the Labour Appeal Court (LAC) decided that the arbitration

commissioner was wrong. In dismissing the company's appeal against the Labour Court judgement, the LAC included the following in its reasoning:

The law does not allow an employer to adopt a zero-tolerance approach for all infractions, regardless of its appropriateness or proportionality to the offence, and then expect a commissioner to fall in line with such an approach. The touchstone of the law of dismissal is fairness and an employer cannot contract out of it or fashion, as if it were, a "no go area" for commissioners. A zero-tolerance policy would be appropriate where, for example, the stock is gold, but it would not necessarily be appropriate where an employee of the same employer removes a crust of bread otherwise designed for the refuse bin. Commissioners should be vigilant and examine the circumstances of each case to ensure that the constitutional right to fair labour practices, more particularly to a dismissal that is fair, is afforded to employees.

It is difficult to appreciate how a single transgression of this rule, (to declare goods on arrival at work) except as regards high value goods, is sufficient to warrant dismissal and all the unfortunate consequences that it embraces. [In this case] a final written warning is called for as opposed to dismissal. the dismissal for a single transgression was, in these circumstances, unfair.

In other cases, involving different categories of misconduct, the courts have also ruled against automatic dismissal for misconduct which the employer adopted a zero-tolerance policy.

- **Intoxication**

The Labour Court² found that an employee who was intoxicated at work after a previous night's festivities should not have been dismissed despite the employer's zero-tolerance policy. The employee was a general worker responsible for loading trucks. The Labour Court considered that the employee was not performing 'skilled, technically complex and highly responsible tasks'.

- **Racism**

The Constitutional Court³ noted that the notion that the use of the most offensive racial slur in



the workplace will be visited with a dismissal regardless of the circumstances of a particular case, is irreconcilable with fairness. It is conceivable that exceptional circumstances might well demonstrate that the [employment] relationship is tolerable.

- **Sexual Harassment**

The Labour Appeal Court⁴ found that by and large employers are entitled (indeed obliged) to regard sexual harassment by an older superior on a younger subordinate as serious misconduct, normally justifying dismissal. The LAC stated that it is appropriate then for this court and employers to send out an unequivocal message: senior managers who perpetrate sexual harassment do so at their peril and should more often than not expect to face the harshest penalty. Much will depend on the circumstances, with the court or commissioner being obliged to have regard to the nature and gravity of the infringement; the impact on the victim; the relationship between the perpetrator and victim; the position and responsibilities of the perpetrator; and whether there is a pattern of behaviour evidenced by prior misconduct. [My underlining]

The message for employers is that a zero-tolerance policy should not be used as a justification for imposing dismissal. Even the most reprehensible forms of misconduct manifest in different degrees of seriousness. Employers must carefully assess each case on its merits and impose a disciplinary measure proportionate to the circumstances.

Cases

1. Shoprite Checkers (Pty) Ltd v Tokiso Dispute Settlement and Others (JA49/14) [2015] ZALAC 23; [2015] 9 BLLR 887 (LAC) ; (2015) 36 ILJ 2273 (LAC) (24 June 2015)
2. Taxi-Trucks Parcel Express (Pty) Ltd v National Bargaining Council for the Road Freight Industry and 2 Others (C24/2011) LC [2012]
3. South African Revenue Service v Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration and Others [2016] ZACC 38
4. Gaga v Anglo Platinum Ltd and Others (JA 44/10) [2011] ZALAC 29; [2012] 3 BLLR 285 (LAC) (20 October 2011)

How to?

5 personal productivity hacks

You have reflected on the challenges of 2020 and set your goals for 2021. Here are five easy to apply personal productivity hacks.

1. Annual, monthly, weekly, daily planning

Develop and implement plans which cascade in ever more specific detail from annual, to monthly, to weekly, to daily plans. To do so ensures a constant link between tasks you undertake every day and accomplishing your goals in life. Enrich this system by ruthlessly eliminating activities which are not important for goal attainment and spend at least 15 minutes planning each day.

2. Apply the 80/20 principle

The 80/20 principle is the observation that the great majority of outputs come from a small minority of inputs. In 80/20 terms, 80% of the outputs come from 20% of the inputs. At work, the 80/20 principle helps us to identify those few activities that we should pursue because they will lead to great results. (Koch, 2013)

Koch advises, root out the trivial work clutter that keeps you continually busy but threatens to overwhelm you. Keep your work simple. Work primarily on what can be done quickly yet will make a big difference. And, as far as possible, delegate and overlook everything else.

3. Use checklists

Unlike performing delicate surgery or landing a passenger jet, not all jobs have life ending consequences if there is human failure. But, even in less life impacting fields, missed process steps can have costly consequences such as higher product waste, inefficiency, rework, unhappy, and lost clients. Thorough training and years of experience is not enough to ensure flawless execution of processes every time. Medical specialist, Atul Gawande (2010) offers an antidote to avoidable human failures which ensures the correct, safe, and reliable application of complex processes. It is the checklist.



Checklists set out the minimum necessary steps in a process. The person or team responsible for carrying out the process tick off each step to confirm adherence. A good checklist is simple, brief, to the point and has four features, (1) there is a pause point, which is a clear trigger to initiate the checklist, (2) it is short; if it takes longer than 60 seconds to complete there is a risk of short cuts being taken, (3) items are short and concise – it is not a “how to” guide, and (4) it is field tested and revised – it must be based on a best practice proven methodology.

4. Take frequent breaks during work

An uninterrupted intense pace of work throughout the day is unsustainable. Improve the quality of your work outputs by taking regular short breaks from work throughout the day. The benefits of making regular breaks are most likely to be felt during the ‘afternoon slump’. Pick one / some of the following things to do every 25 minutes to 45 minutes during the working day:

- Hydrate your body by drinking a glass of water.
- Find a quiet spot to sit and think about issues not work-related. (Alternatively, if you feel withdrawn after a period of focussed work, then find someone to have a chat with.)
- Tidy your desk. Physical uncluttering of a space is usually accompanied by mental “uncluttering”.
- Move your body. Simple arms stretched towards the ceiling and then lowering while exhaling is a safe option.
- Get outside. A walk gives you fresh air, different scenery, and a changed focal point.
- Serve your senses. Inhale some eucalyptus oil, listen to the sounds around you, suck a peppermint and touch something with a texture different to your keyboard. These acts are a welcome ‘gear change’ for the brain.
- Eat something naturally sweet. A chocolate bar may sound like a good idea, but you are probably better off eating a small handful of a snack like Cranberries

These actions will impact on your wellness at work and lay a foundation for you to consistently perform superior work.

5. Sleep more

A lack of sleep affects your capacity to function effectively at work and at home. Your health is also significantly impacted. For example, a study showed that one week of mild sleep restriction (six hours per night—a typical schedule for many people) causes increased secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines, which can contribute to cardiovascular and neurocognitive dysfunction (Lewis, 2016). Lewis argues that a good sleeping habit is the single best thing a person can do to perform and feel his or her best every day.

Achieving better life and work outcomes is not only achieved by working smarter, but also by pursuing a healthy lifestyle.

Best wishes for 2021 and success, health, and happiness in the pursuit of your goals.

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