



# Excellence: Keys to top work performance

Superior employee performance can translate into superior organisation performance. For the latter to constitute a source of sustainable competitive advantage, an organisation must aim to have every employee consistently performing at the upper levels of their performance capacity referred to as the 'Target Zone' in Figure 1 below.

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## Keys to top work performance

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For each individual employee there are three ways, represented by the red arrows in the diagram, to improve an employee's work performance:

- Increase time spent by an employee at or above the level of effective performance,
- Raise, and ensure that the employee achieves the level at which the company accepts an employee's performance as effective,
- Raise the employee's maximum performance capacity with a commensurate increase in the required effective performance level.

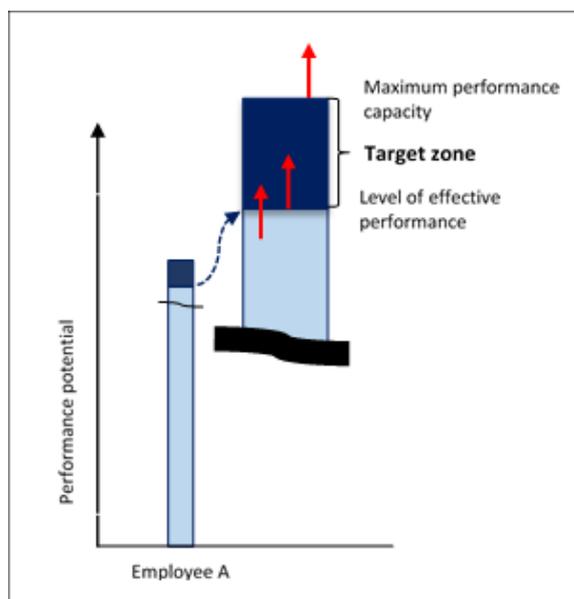


FIGURE 1: THE TARGET ZONE OF EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

In this note, we describe four HR practices which can contribute to the

goal of consistently high performance by employees:

### 1. Effective recruitment

Jim Collins (2001), best-selling business success researcher, pointed out that a company's journey from good to great begins with hiring the "right people". He said that if you employ the right people, the challenges of motivating and managing employees largely goes away.

Here are four key elements of a recruitment and selection process to ensure an organisation employs the best people:

- Begin recruitment from within, thereby providing the opportunity for internal promotions before considering external job applicants. An organisation will have detailed internal candidate information available on which to base sound selection decision making.
- Don't rely solely on selection interviews to assess job candidates. Psychometric tests; practical work tests in the form of 'in basket' exercises, pen and paper (or electronic) tests, case studies, role plays, and presentations based on what the applicants can expect to deal with in the position will provide valuable information about a candidate.
- Use competency-based selection interviews to get detailed information about the knowledge, skills and attributes of job applicants relevant for success in the vacant position. When interviewing, probe beyond the superficial to build an in-depth evidence-based understanding of a job applicant's credentials. A simple technique is to follow an applicant's answer with "And what else...?". Rather focus on a few issues and get detailed information than ask loads of questions which elicit little more than "yes" or "no" answers.



- Conduct reference and if applicable background checks on the applicant such as verifying the qualifications of an applicant, credit checks and criminal record checks. (The integrity checks must not infringe unfair discrimination legislation.)

## 2. Performance management

Performance management is a system to align employees' day-to-day activities with an organisation's goals. When performance management is working well, employees consistently work in the Target Zone (Figure 1).

It is important that any performance management initiative incorporates 'new generation' methods. Much of how performance management was set up in the 1990s and earlier part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has proved unsatisfactory. Incorporate these four elements into your performance management system to better guide employees to excellent work results:

- Frequent performance communication: If an aim of performance management is to get day-to-day goal directed actions by employees, then frequent two-way performance communication is required. Managers should sit at least once a month face to face with each of their team members to acknowledge good performance; gain understanding of performance barriers and agree short term action plans with support to be given by managers where necessary.
- Employee led performance assessment: Let employees lead performance discussions by asking rather than telling them how they are doing with their performance and goal setting. This is not an abdication of management responsibility. Managers still have the prerogative to make the call whether employees are performing acceptably. (Jacobs, 2010).

- Move from performance ratings to performance categories: focus the discussion on performance rather than rating scores by assigning employees into one of three categories: [1] not yet full performance, [2] effective performance, and [3] exceptional performance.
- Involve peers in assessing performance: Make peers more powerful in the performance management process because people are more inclined to take input from peers seriously. In one reported case study, a company found that even though peer reviewers were not obliged to share their input with the person they were evaluating, more than two-thirds chose to do so. (Mohan, 2017).

## 3. Training

Investment in training grows the capacity of employees to boost the performance of organisations. Training is a mutually beneficial intervention which provides employees with a strategic asset of new competence and helps a company move forward in a rapidly changing business environment.

Through training, employees can lift their performance to the level of effective job performance; lift their performance into the target zone (figure 1) where an organisations' expectations are exceeded; deepen competence in a work aspect; and, keep pace with technology advancements.

However, it must be borne in mind that training does not automatically translate into improved organisation performance. Training raises the capacity of employees to perform at higher levels. Management has a role to play in ensuring that the employees' higher performance capacity is converted into enhanced work performance, which in turn must flow through to better business results.



The prospect of achieving better business performance through training will be improved by applying the following steps (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009):

- Conduct a thorough needs assessment to ensure trainees are ready and motivated for training.
- Apply appropriate training design and delivery methods.
- Evaluate training for effectiveness.
- Ensure that knowledge, attitudes and skills acquired in training are fully transferred to job related activities.

#### 4. Make work meaningful

Researchers have shown meaningfulness of employees' work to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions. Meaningful work can be highly motivational, leading to improved performance, commitment, and satisfaction. (Bailey and Madden, 2016)

The starting point for motivated employee performance is to create understanding among employees about the context of their work. Every employee should be able to answer the following questions:

- What is my team required to accomplish and what is the organisation's purpose?
- Why are we doing it?
- Who benefits from my work and how?
- What does success look like for me and for my team?
- What role do I and each of my team members play in delivering on the organisation's promise?

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. This approach is a step away from the traditional carrot or stick to motivate employees. 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)

## Employee Wellness

### Mitigating the stress of daily commuting

An American study by the Ford Motor Company (Gino et al., 2017) found that many people ranked commuting as more stressful than their jobs, moving into a new house, or going to the dentist, and another study of 900 Texas working women found that the morning journey between home and the office was, on average, the least enjoyable activity of their day; the evening trip home was the third worst. (Working itself took second place.)

Every day millions of South Africans take on an arduous commute to and from work. The country's major cities, notably Johannesburg and Cape Town, rank highly amongst the world's most congested. A mini survey of Johannesburg based commuters that we conducted, suggests that South Africans also experience their work commute in a negative way.

Reasons why Johannesburg residents dislike the journey to work include:

- Time wasted
- Bad driving habits and general disregard for traffic laws



- Queuing for taxis
- Unreliable public transport
- Poor infrastructure (roads in disrepair and faulty traffic lights)
- High fuel costs and vehicle wear and tear
- Risk of crime (people in gridlocked traffic are sitting ducks for criminals)

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*“When you get to work, you are tired and irritated.”*

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3-hour per day commuter

These commuting experiences must negatively affect employee productivity. Rather than arriving at work energised and ready for the challenges of work, many employees get to work irritated and stressed.

Gino et al (2017) recommend some strategies to handle the transition from home to work to mitigate the stress of commuting. The following are based on their recommendations:

Engage in daily rituals or routines during the commute or on arrival at work. For example, drink a cup of coffee on reaching your destination before you push the power button on your computer. Your daily ritual need not involve an additional cash outlay. It can be as simple as breathing slowly and deeply while walking calmly from your transport to your desk. It's a technique that paramedics use on arrival at the scene of an accident. They don't run to emergency patients. Being slow and deliberate in approaching the victims, helps paramedics keep their cool and operate at peak effectiveness, typically making them the calmest people on the scene. It is a strategy to lower rather than add to stress. (Cohen, 2017)

Plan your day. Knowing what you are going to do when you sit at your workstation to start your workday facilitates a smooth transition from road to desk.

Plan activities that you enjoy for the trip. If you are a passenger, you can knit, crochet, read a book or do a crossword puzzle or sudoku. Drivers can listen to music or audio books to productively pass the time. Exercise caution in opting to listen to news, current affairs or talk shows on the radio. These programmes aim to create controversy which can add to rather than lower your stress level..

Reach out to your fellow commuters. A study in America showed that commuters who engage in conversation with fellow commuters had a more positive commuting experience and another study, found that even using social sharing apps, such as Waze, can trigger this effect and reduce drivers' transport-related stress.

Move closer to work. Studies have shown that people, when choosing where to live in relation to their workplace, consistently underestimate the psychological, emotional, and physical costs of longer travel times.

Generally, the stress of the homeward bound commute is easier to manage. Nonetheless, planning the transition from work, to commute, to home will significantly improve the experience of the trip. The following ideas come from an article by Terri Cettina (2005):

Set a specific end of the workday time. If it is 17:00, then each day at the exact time, shut down your computer, pack up and leave work. Don't work again until you get to office the following day. (If you don't have the luxury of such a definite downtime cycle, maintain your strict shutdown rule and allocate some time to work once you are home and have fulfilled your commitments at home.)

Start your end of workday activities some fifteen minutes before your designated end of workday time. You may tidy your workstation, write a to-do list for the following day, or file



documents in your electronic out tray, for example.

Mentally disengage from your job by making a coffee stop or perhaps a gym stop on your way home. A strenuous workout will help you physically and mentally get out of work mode. Augment these activities with breathing exercises – slow and deep.

All the above techniques for managing the daily commute only reduce the negative effects of commuting daily. Currently, the only way to eliminate the negative effects is to eliminate the commute altogether. Of the people we spoke to, only those living seven or fewer kilometres from work did not find the commute stressful. An implication is that those employers who can, and are considering implementing a work from home environment, should add the elimination the daily commute to the arguments in favour of the change.

## Employment Relations

### Shop stewards are not above the law

Employees of an automotive accessories producer were disgruntled with the way that the company calculated their holiday pay and together with a shop steward went to the payroll department to complain. The shop steward confronted a payroll administrator and an altercation ensued in which the shop steward was the aggressor. He shouted at the administrator and prodded her with his finger. The payroll administrator was reduced to tears and was diagnosed after the incident as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The employer dismissed the shop steward.

The shop steward challenged the fairness of his dismissal in an arbitration before an industry bargaining council arbitrator. The arbitrator decided that the shop steward's actions were not assault, nor intimidation because no threat was made. The shop steward won his case and was awarded compensation of twelve months' pay. Believing that he should rather have been reinstated, the shop steward took his case on review to the Labour Court. The employer brought a cross-review arguing that the dismissal was fair. The Court found against the shop steward and the original dismissal was found to be fair.

The shop steward then appealed to the Labour Appeal Court claiming that the incident was a "storm in a teacup". The Labour Appeal Court did not buy this and concluded instead that the shop steward was extremely aggressive. Furthermore, it was probable that he had made physical contact with the payroll administrator. This finding was based on the evidence of independent witnesses.

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*"Assaults and threats thereof are not conducive to harmony or to productive negotiation. ... [there is no principle that] when one acts in a representative capacity 'anything goes'."*

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- Labour Appeal Court

The Labour Appeal Court concluded that the shop steward's conduct was not that of a responsible shop steward; it demonstrated the kind of belligerence and militancy which had no place in industrial relations. The payroll administrator could not be blamed for "provoking" the shop steward. Previous cases which held that when a shop steward negotiates with management the ordinary rules of the workplace should be relaxed did not apply. While shop stewards should not be victimised



for fulfilling their role with zeal, this was not a licence for resort to defiance and needless confrontation. Assaults and threats are not conducive to productive negotiation. Furthermore, the incident in this case was not part of a negotiation. It could not be said that the employer's response to the incident was disproportionate and unfair. The shop steward had shown no remorse. Dismissal was appropriate. The shop steward's appeal was dismissed with costs.

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**the most  
valuable of all  
capital is that  
which is  
invested in  
human beings**

- Alfred Marshall