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# Understanding Performance and Productivity

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## COURSE OVERVIEW

This course will help you understand the “why” behind work performance principles and help you develop the “how” that is best for your situation. There is a significant difference between being busy and being productive and a simple way to make sure your employees are always productive.

Additionally, participants will learn to define productivity and identify the difference between work pressure and work stress. Additionally, they will discover how to reduce a lot of the stress in their daily activities by asking for clarification of expectations.

Finally, it prepares them to design tools to measure performance effectively and objectively, and to show other how easily it can be done.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students taking this course will learn to:

1. Compare and contrast productivity with just being busy.
2. Clarify their expectations with elements of quality, quantity, and time.
3. Explain why much workplace stress stems from poorly defined expectations.
4. Reduce much of their workplace stress by asking leaders for clarification of expectations.
5. Explain what SMART goals are and why they are important
6. Write their own measurable performance goals and help others with theirs.
7. Identify the critical elements necessary for productivity.
8. Define and construct “feedback loops” for their work setting.
9. Contrast the advantage of sharing information with employees instead of hoarding it to make them seem indispensable to the department.

## WHAT IS PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY?

One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. *“Which road do I take?”* she asked. *“Where do you want to go?”* was his response. *“I don't know”,* Alice answered. *“Then”,* said the cat, *“it doesn't matter. When you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there.”* (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass or the Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*)



The Cheshire cat's response is a model for much of the difficulty with defining performance in the workplace today as employees hear phrases like these:

- “Make it look very professional”
- “I know you will do a great job!”
- “Make sure they get their money's worth.”
- “I will need that report in a timely manner.”



Think about this...

What vague directions do you hear daily?

How do you know when you have met their expectations?

How do those vague directions make you feel?

By the time you finish this course, you will be able to define your performance expectations very clearly, have no doubt in your mind (or the other person's either) if they have met your expectations, and feel very confident that you will get exactly what you are expecting.

## THE ELEMENTS OF PERFORMANCE & PRODUCTIVITY

Nearly every article written about performance always includes the concept of SMART goals (From Paul J. Meyer's "*Attitude Is Everything*") According to Meyer's viewpoint, goals should be **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**ealistic, and **T**angible.

While that certainly encompasses the overall concept of performance and gives people another acronym to use even when they are not sure what it all means, it leaves out a critical component: **how do we measure subjective items or activities such as:**

- Team work
- Communications skills
- Customer service
- The best cake in a baking contest
- The best picture in a photography contest

In this course, we will not mention performance without associating it with productivity because productivity is why employers pay people for work. They do not pay for just doing things ("performance") but for doing things *with a destination in mind* – productivity.

This goes back to the Cheshire cat's comment to Alice: *when you do not know where you are going (predefined productive outcomes), any road will take you there.*

We will provide a more practical definition of performance than just telling you to set SMART goals and show you how to create your own measurement systems. After we introduce the elements of performance and productivity, we will give you examples of how to create a measurement system in your workplace.

Will they be foolproof and fit every situation? No, not perfect but if you understand the 'why' of what we present, you will know how to create a useful means to measure performance until someone comes along with a better one.

## THE CRITICAL TRIO



Just as there are three critical elements necessary for fire (fuel, heat, and air), there are three critical elements necessary for **productivity** (which is much different from just “being busy’): **quality, quantity, and time.**

Occasionally in this course we will abbreviate them into QQT.

**Productivity** means people clearly understand how error-free it must be (quality), how many you require (quantity), and by when (time.) An additional benefit for the leader who defines expectations using QQT standards, it is extremely difficult for an employee to explain their failure to perform with say, “I didn’t understand.”



Think about this...

How many of your current performance expectations can you redefine using the quality, quantity, and time components?

Could you comfortably whether you have been busy or productive today?

If you could not, are you putting yourself into some measure of career risk?

Would you want to have your job defined more clearly with elements of QQT?

## IT'S SHOWTIME

Another aspect of performance is **allowing the employee to work alone to master the skill**. You must also be willing to let them fail as part of the learning process. **(NOTE: "Letting them fail," means you still provide a safety net so they do not harm the organization, someone else, or themselves.**



Still, many people learn best from a trial-and-error approach. If you do not believe this, what is the first thing most people do when they see a "Caution: Wet Paint" sign?)



Think about this...

Does your work situation allow you the chance to succeed BIG and fail within certain safety nets so that you can learn from your mistakes?

What kind of "safety nets" do you have in place for your employees so they can learn through small failures?

How does your boss react when you make a mistake? Is their reaction one that allows you to learn from it or are you deathly afraid to make a mistake?

If you are afraid to fail, how does that fear impact your productivity? If you were not so afraid of your boss' wrath (or someone else's in authority), would you be able to work much faster (and probably just as accurately?)

Many times, we learn more from our failures than from our initial successes!

## PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK LOOPS

**People must be to tell how they are doing without having to wait to be told** (especially from the boss.)

There must be a feedback loop in the work process that allows the employee to self-monitor their progress.



Think back to when you were in school. Did you have to wait until the report cards came out before you knew how you did that semester or were there ways for you to keep track?

The grades you got back on tests, reports, and homework plus staying out of trouble and making sure you were not excessively late or absent created a “feedback loop” that let you know how you were doing without having to ask the teacher every day.

In addition, the teacher gave you the system for grading at the beginning of the school year. The system may include how many days you be could absent without hurting your grade; the progressive scoring range such as <65 = F; 65-70 = D; 71-80 = C; 81 – 90 = B; >90 = A; a term paper weighted to count as three grades; the midterm test counts half of the final grade; etc.

With that feedback loop, you could track your own progress and had an answer every time your parents would ask, “How are you doing in school?”



Think about this...

What kind of performance feedback loops do you have in your job?

If there are none, how would you create some if it were your decision to make?

What advantage is there for you to share your ideas about performance feedback loops with your supervisor?



## NEED HELP?



The next component of performance is being available when your employees need help or guidance. Even something as simple as this can go wrong if not handled with some forethought.

The ultimate goal of developing your employees should include that they can work alone without supervision and be productive. That said, the next question is, “How do we get them to that point?”

The first thing would be an effective orientation and training plan for the department that develops new people into productive employees as quickly as possible. (We present that in another course and will not go farther into it here.)

The next thing would be to choose from two basic methods that the leader could use to provide help or guidance when needed.

## HELP HOARDING

With one method, the department leaders are reluctant to share information because to them, knowledge is power, and allowing others to become as smart as they are means they are no longer special.

As juvenile as it sounds, many people still act that way. However, if they are the keepers of the knowledge, it becomes difficult to get away from work without having people keep contacting you for information. Of course, to them, that just reinforces their image of self-importance.



“That place can’t get along without me!” is a favorite saying as they answer another call from work. What they fail to consider is, once others learn the secrets – as they always do – they will remember that lack of cooperation and the self-serving one will gradually become isolated from the work group.

This can be a problem for the knowledge-hoarding leader because the employees are always more intimately involved with the workflow than is the leader. Employees frequently know when things are not running properly or when there are opportunities to improve the workflow and *they alone determine whether to alert the leader.*



If the leader willingly shared information and helped the employee develop skills and knowledge, there is a strong probability they will alert the leader of the pending problem or opportunity for improvement.

If the leader hoarded knowledge and made come to him or her thus stunting the development, there is a high probability the the leader and the disaster, when it source of entertainment for the employees.



the employees always employee's employees will not alert happens, will be a great

**Remember: it's the EMPLOYEE'S CHOICE about how much they will tell you about a situation.**

## SELF-DISCOVERY

The other method is to make available as many learning resources as possible that allow the employees to find their own answers. *This leads to their self-discovery and self-development.*



However simple this may sound, there are three ways to do this.

1. One is to say, “Look it up! I had to when I was in your situation” and offer no real help to the employees.
2. Another is to say, “My door is always open. Just call me when you need help!” While this is a little better than the first approach, it may cause a dependency on the leader for employees too lazy to do a little research.
3. The last method is the best. Here, the leader says, “Call me if you can’t find the solution for yourself.” He or she has clearly defined their expectation that the employee will make an effort on their own first as a means of self-development. And, even when an employee comes to them, their first question is something like, “Before I tell you the answer, where did you look for yourself?”

If the employee made no effort on their own, the leader tells them to do a little investigation first. However, if the employee made a bona fide attempt and failed, the leader may point them to a better information source or tell them the answer. Either way, it will not take long for employees to realize the leader will be available for them but expects them to attempt to find their own solutions first.

**Please burn the Socratic Method into your memory chip!**



If time allows, use the Socratic Method of learning with your employees.

In ancient Athens, the philosopher Socrates taught students by asking question after question, seeking to expose contradictions in their thoughts and ideas to then guide them to arrive at a solid, tenable conclusion.

The principle underlying the Socratic Method is that students learn through the use of critical thinking, reasoning, and logic, finding holes in their own theories and then patching them up. Try playing the Devil's Advocate and take an opposing viewpoint and encourage them to defend theirs as you help them understand the "why" behind many policies that define "what" in every organization.

**IF YOU WILL HELP THEM UNDERSTAND THE "WHY" OF SOMETHING, THEY CAN USUALLY FIGURE OUT THE "HOW" FOR THEMSELVES!**

## ESTABLISHING SMART GOALS

Now we will start using some of the performance and productivity concepts we mentioned earlier in the establishment of meaningful Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Tangible goals.

*Specific* means using as many of these six “W’s” as you can. Who (is involved?). What (do I want to accomplish?) Where (Identify a location); When (Establish a time limit); Which (Identify requirements and constraints); Why (Specific reasons, purpose or benefits.)

*Measurable* can take many forms but the essential information you must know is, “How will I know I am making progress?” and “How will I know when I have finished?” The essential elements for this are quality, quantity, and time (QQT).

This is why announcing a goal such as, “*My goal is to improve the relationship between our departments*” is a waste of time unless you have measurables that will tell you:

- The extent of the current relationship
- The minimum acceptable level for the ‘improved’ relationship
- How we will know if it is getting better, worse, or not changing
- The actual goal to achieve or do we just keep working at it? (This is Alice’s problem when she talks to the Cheshire cat. When you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there.)



*Attainable* – The goals must be realistic enough that you can actually attain them. Setting a goal to lose 50 pounds before your high school reunion next month is not attainable *because it is not realistic* outside of possible extreme surgery.

“Attainable” means there are no laws of science (such as losing 50 pounds in 30 days) or society (we can drive across the city in 20 minutes if we take a shortcut down the airport’s main runway) preventing it from happening. The fact that it has never happened to you but has happened to other people means it can be done but only you can determine if it can be done BY YOU! (For example, not everyone has won a marathon race but some people have. If you are physically able to compete in a marathon, it may take a lot of practice and will power but it is attainable by you.)

*Realistic (in the mind of the person doing the work)* – The person must feel they have some chance of success or they will not bother trying. (This is very much like attainable.)

*Tangible* - They must involve his/her *doing something* that they can observe and measure. A goal that calls for “Understanding how a travel expense voucher flows through the Accounting Department” is useless because you cannot measure **UNDERSTANDING** in a meaningful way.

It only becomes useful if he/she must **do something** that demonstrates his/her understanding such as, “explain in writing the complete workflow of a request for travel reimbursement from the time Accounting receives it until they deposit the money into your account.”



We will use the three elements of **quality, quantity,** and **time** as the essentials for a measurable goal and to define productivity.

The other parts of the SMART goal are important, too, but **QQT** are the most critical.

## PRACTICE ACTIVITY

Describe an activity associated with your job that has all of the elements of a SMART goal and then break down each element afterwards.

The *specific* components are

The *measurable* (QQT) components are

The *attainable* components are

The *realistic* components are

The *tangible* components are

We asked you to describe some vaguely defined activities at your work back on page 3. What parts of SMART goals are missing?

How does **this clear definition** (above) of what your leader expects affect your personal satisfaction and your work performance?

How does your work performance and personal satisfaction regarding this clearly defined task on page 15 compare with the task you identified earlier on page 3 that is vague?

How can you use this comparison *between vague and more specific tasks* to talk with your supervisor? (Help him or her see the difference between them, how it affects your performance, and ask if they can be more specific about the vague goals.)

How can you use this same concept of comparing specific and vague goals with your employees? (It may give you some insight why they are not working to your expectations.)

Why would you want to do this? (You are ultimately responsible for their productivity. Anything you can do to clarify expectations for them can only improve their productivity and make you look very good to your boss.)



## WORK STRESS OR WORK TENSION?

Think about how frustrating it is when someone expects you to do something for him or her but have difficulty defining exactly what they want. The examples we used on page 4 are heard from too many workplace supervisors and managers:

- “Make it look very professional”
- “I know you will do a great job!”
- “Make sure they get their money’s worth.”
- “I will need that report in a timely manner.”

We believe that people inherently want to do the right thing. However, because of their supervisor’s inability to articulate specific expectations in terms of QQT or some other objective manner, they endure unnecessary stress trying to guess what is expected.

Additionally, they stress after they turn it in because they still are not sure that is what the boss wanted and they continue to fret about it.

On the other hand, we can deal with work tension more easily because, even though we may have a large workload, *we know the expectations and are confident we can do the job!* When it is over, we put it out of our mind and relax in the knowledge we did it right.

Although this is a simplification, it describes the basic model.

**Work stress** occurs when you are not sure of the expectations and your anxiety grows as you try to guess right and never know if you are doing the right things. A way to reduce some work stress is to get as much clarification as possible about your boss’ expectations.

**Work tension** means you are sure of the expectations, may have a lot to do and will have to move fast. However, when it is over, you can forget it because you always knew that you were doing the right things.

## SYSTEMATIC PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

Before getting into this analysis tool, we must first have a universal understanding of what we mean by “problem behavior” and how we determine whether we should do anything about it.

The easiest, most universally relevant question to ask when trying to determine if we have problem behavior in the work place is, **“DOES THAT BEHAVIOR IMPACT THEIR WORK OR SOMEONE ELSE’S?”**

If the answer is “yes,” then go after it. If the answer is, “No” or “Not sure,” then take some time to think about it some more. *If the behavior just irritates you but does not affect your work, it may cause more trouble dealing with it than any gains from ignoring it.*



For example, suppose you are a manager with an employee who you think could be a lot more productive but, for some reason you cannot identify, just isn’t reaching his potential.

This flowchart will prove to you that 90% of the reasons for employee performance problems have their roots in systems controlled by management. Work your way through these ten steps and you will see what we mean.

Once again, you cannot begin to coach for a **change in behavior** without first addressing the **CAUSE OF THE PROBLEM**. Otherwise, the problem will never be resolved!

**REMEMBER, YOU MUST DO SOMETHING DIFFERENTLY IF YOU WANT A DIFFERENT OUTCOME!**

## PERFORMANCE PROBLEM FLOWCHART

This flowchart will prove to you that 90% of the reasons for employee performance problems have their roots in systems controlled by management. Work your way through these ten steps and you will see what we mean.

### Before you begin

Ask yourself, "Is this issue worth pursuing?"



**Question:** How do you know if it is worth pursuing?"

(If it interferes with work, it is worth pursuing! If it is only a nuisance or aggravation, but does not interfere with work, it may be best to leave it alone.)

If so, go to STEP #1. If not, you are done! Remember, you can stop anytime the problem is **"sufficiently solved."**

(This means it is not worth the time, effort, or expense to "fix it better".)

### STEP #1

Ask yourself, "Are my expectations clear?"



**#1 Question:** What do you ask your employee here?

(I want to make sure I did a good job of explaining. Please tell me what you think I expect you to do.)

If your expectations are clear, go on to the next step. If not, what should you do?

### STEP #2

Ask yourself, "Are the resources adequate?"



**#2 Question:** What do you ask your employee here?

(Do you have everything you need to do what I expect?)

If they have everything, go on to the next step. If not, what should you do?

**STEP #3**

Ask yourself, "Do they get fast and frequent feedback on their performance?"



**#3 Question:** What do you ask your employee here?

(How do you know how you are doing?)



If they can monitor their progress, go on to the next step. If not, what should you do?

**STEP #4**

Ask yourself, "Does the desired performance seem punishing?" (Hint: What do you usually do if they finish early and others have not finished yet?)



**#4 Question:** What do you ask your employee (or yourself about the situation) here?

(If their "reward" for finishing early is you give them the work the slower people have not finished, you will soon have no one finishing early.

You must praise the ones who finish early, let them know you documented their file that they finished ahead of the others, and ask if they will help the slower ones.

This way they do not feel that the slackers are getting away with anything)



If you are inadvertently punishing their behavior, what should you do? If not, go on to the next step.

**STEP #5**

Ask yourself, "Is poor performance rewarded somehow?" (Hint: What do you usually do if they have not finished yet but others have?)



**#5 Question:**

What do you ask your employee (or yourself about the situation) here?

(This is the opposite of above. If they are behind, let them know you documented their file that they were behind and you asked a faster worker to help pick up their slack.

This way, they realize they are not getting away with anything.)



If you are inadvertently rewarding poor performance, what should you do? If not, go on to the next step.

**STEP #6**

Ask yourself, "Is there any penalty for not doing it right?"



**#6 Question:** What do you ask your employee (or yourself about the situation) here?

**("Is there any penalty for not doing it right?" If there were no penalty, why would they stop doing it?)**

If there is a penalty, go on to the next step.  
If not, what should you do?



**STEP #7**

Ask yourself, "Is their non-performance a genuine skill deficiency?"



**#7 Question:**

What do you ask your employee (or yourself about the situation) here?

*(Can they not do it or can they do it but just do not want to?)*

If it is a genuine skills deficiency, go on to the next step. If not sure, what should you do?

**#7A Question:**

Have they ever done this in the past?

**(If so, give them practice to refresh their skills)  
If not, continue to the next step.**



**STEP #8**

Ask yourself, "Can the task be made easier?"



**#8 Question:**

What do you ask your employee here?

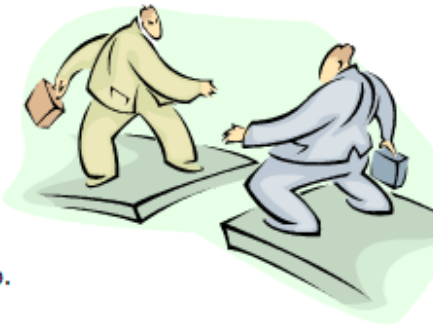
**(Can you think of any easier way you can do this?)**

If it can, do it. If not, go to the next step.



**STEP #9**  
Ask yourself, "Are there any other obstacles?"

If there are, what can you do?  
If there are not, go to the next step.



**#9 Question:**  
What do you ask your employee here?  
*("Can you think of anything keeping you from doing this?")*



**STEP #10**  
Ask yourself, "Does the person have the potential to change?"

**Question:** What do you ask your employee here?  
*(Do you have any plans to change your behavior?)*

If they have the potential and desire to change, go to the next step.

If they do not, **REPLACE THEM!**



**Train them to the desired skill level!**



Have you noticed that every step, except #10, is a factor controlled by management?

This means there is a 90% probability that an employee's performance problem is caused by something controlled by management!

## IN SUMMARY

The student should understand these concepts of performance and productivity at this point.

1. Productivity only occurs when the elements of quality, quantity, and time are present. If any of these are missing, the person has simply been 'busy' and not really accomplished anything.
2. SMART goals are better than no goals but not as good as goals including quality, quantity, and time.
3. Staring a project or a journey as Alice in Wonderland without a clear destination (outcome) in mind will result in a lot of wasted effort, possible stress, and may be career damaging if you do it too often.
4. You must allow people to fail (gently) if they are going to learn. The trail-and-error process is a primary learning method for many people. **Experience only comes from making mistakes while making mistakes only comes from lack of experience.**
5. Feedback loops are essential in a work process if we want people to become accountable for their performance. If there is no way for someone to track their work progress, they will not be able to self-correct when going wrong or continue as they are when going right without having the boss tell them.
6. **Work stress** comes when people's anxiety builds as they try to meet vague expectations and there is no outlet after they finish because they are still worrying whether it was the right thing. This is very draining emotionally and can become unhealthy.
7. **Work tension** means we have a heavy workload but know how the expectations and can relax afterward. This is very draining physically but is a healthy way to exercise our abilities.