

Knowledge Worker

A Baker's Dozen of Factors Affecting Human Performance

(February 2014)

In last month's column I indicated that in this month's column we'd look at some factors affecting human performance. Failures in performance can occur when these factors are missing or not supportive of the performance in question.

A human performance problem exists when one or more people or teams aren't performing in accordance with expectations or requirements *and* the reasons for this failure in performance are unclear. Consequently, some kind of investigative effort is called for.

Performance has two components: (1) the results or outcomes sought and (2) the behaviors or actions that are required to achieve them. In shorthand form this can be expressed as $P = A + O$. When it comes to performance we are interested in both the "doing" and the "achieving."

A Baker's Dozen of "doing" and "achieving" factors that can affect human performance are briefly described below, along with ways of checking on the adequacy of that factor.

1. **Clarity.** In order to perform as expected the performer must be clear about what to do and about the result that is to be achieved. Telling doesn't guarantee clarity. To check on clarity ask the performer to describe what he or she is to do and the result to be achieved.
2. **Contribution.** Meaningless tasks and results aren't likely to generate much enthusiasm or effort. Make sure the connections between the performer's tasks and results and larger initiatives and outcomes are known. Ask the performer to describe these links and connections. To the extent necessary, help the performer identify them.
3. **Competence.** Obviously, if the performer isn't up to the task it won't happen. Make certain the performer has the necessary knowledge and skills. Has the performer done similar tasks before? Are any special skills required and does the performer possess them? The two big factors here are selection and assignment. Was the right person selected and assigned?
4. **Confidence.** Performer confidence is an important consideration. Is the performer confident that he or she can carry out the task and produce the required result? Can the performer explain just how the desired result will be achieved? Work to instill confidence.
5. **Consequences.** The consequences of our actions are typically a mixed bag of positives and negatives. To be supportive of performance, the balance must be tipped toward the positive. What does the performer see as the positive consequences? What does he or she see as the negative consequences? Are the incentives appropriate? Are there any disincentives?
6. **Commitment.** Commitment refers to a determination to carry out the task and achieve the result. Overall, is the performer determined to carry out the task and produce the desired result? Are the task and the result seen as worthwhile? Is their value clear? To the performer and to others?
7. **Conditions.** Are the surrounding environmental conditions such as tools, resources, working conditions, etc., supportive of task accomplishment? Are there any other actors or factors that affect the same result the performer is trying to achieve? How are those factors compensated

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for? Are there any restraints or constraints affecting the performer's ability to produce the desired outcome? Are there any barriers, obstacles or other hindrances that need to be dealt with? Are these circumstances relatively stable or are they constantly changing?

8. **Control.** Is the performer able to exercise adequate control over the task? Are goals, standards, measures, measurement and feedback all in place and available to the performer? Does the performer have access to timely, accurate and ongoing information about progress and results? Is the performer able to accurately determine if progress is being made and if the final result has been achieved? Does the performer have adequate access to and control over the required resources? Is the performer free to act as necessary to keep things on track?
9. **Character.** Is the character or nature of the task (i.e., prefigured or configured) matched by the approach taken to it? Are configured tasks well thought out and defined and are the necessary supporting conditions well-managed? Is adaptation built-in? Are prefigured tasks well-designed, proven to work and are the conditions under which they are to be carried out standardized and carefully controlled?
10. **Cooperation.** Much of the work we do in organizations hinges in part on the cooperation of others. Has any necessary cooperation on the part of others been arranged for and it is forthcoming?
11. **Coordination.** When accomplishments involve the integrated actions of several people, those actions must be coordinated. Have any task dependencies and interdependencies been identified and are they being carefully coordinated?
12. **Competition.** Often we don't do *this* because we opt to do *that* instead. Not everything is a top priority, including the tasks that come our way. Are there any competing tasks or priorities, especially disruptive ones stemming from changed circumstances that might interfere with or prevent the performer from performing as required?
13. **Communication.** Is information about the task, its outcome, relevant conditions, unforeseen circumstances, barriers, etc., being freely and openly communicated by all involved parties to all relevant parties?

A Few Words to the Wise

It is often the case that we, as performance improvement professionals, are asked to get involved in performance problems that have been identified and diagnosed by others. The classic situation is one in which a manager requests training. In such cases, the manager is often correct as far as the failure in performance is concerned but is often incorrect when it comes to the solution. However, the manager is often certain that training is indeed the solution. In many cases, it would be impolitic to argue with the manager or to bluntly assert that training is not the solution. Instead, indicate a willingness to lend a hand. Take the position that training is often part of the solution but only part of it. Use the items and questions above as a checklist, as a way of helping the manager ensure that all the bases have been covered. Make it clear to the manager that your goal is to help him or her successfully solve the performance problem at hand.

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Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of [Distance Consulting LLC](#). His website is home to the award-winning [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#) and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available [here](#).