The Conditions of Performance

Factors that Help or Hinder

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Introduction

Managers regularly encounter situations where employees are not performing assigned tasks as expected or desired. Such situations are commonly referred to as "performance problems." Many managers attribute these performance problems to a lack of knowledge, a lack of skill, or a poor attitude.

There are many conditions that must be met before employees can perform assigned tasks as expected. If any of these many conditions are not met, task performance can be hampered or prevented. Only two of these conditions involve employee knowledge, skill, or attitude.

Eight general conditions of task performance are presented on the following pages.

1. Task Clarity
2. Task Competence
3. Task Consequences
4. Task Competition
5. Task Cooperation
6. Task Control
7. Task Commitment
8. Task Character and Context

Each of these eight conditions is briefly explained and then followed by preventive measures that can be taken to ensure it doesn't become the cause of a performance problem.

At the end of this paper you will find a list of questions related to the conditions of performance. Use it to guide your thinking when investigating performance problems.

Condition 1: Task Clarity

Task clarity exists when the person expected to perform the task can correctly define three factors: the task itself, the person accountable for performing it, and the limits of authority and initiative that can be exercised in carrying it out.

One of the more basic reasons people don't do what they are expected to do is that they don't know *they* are accountable for doing it. Confusion about task accountability is reflected in statements like, "Gee, I didn't know you wanted *me* to do that." When accountability for a task has been assigned to two or more people, you might hear something like, "I thought *Lee* was going to do it."

Another reason people don't do what they are supposed to do is that they don't know *what* they are supposed to do. The task is unclear. Confusion about the task itself shows up in statements that, except for emphasis, are identical to the one mentioned above: "Gee, I didn't know you wanted me to do *that*." When both the task and the accountability for accomplishing it are unclear, the statement takes on this tone: "Gee, I didn't know you wanted *me* to do *that*."

A third reason people fail to perform as expected is that they are unsure about the limits of authority and initiative they can exercise in carrying out the task. Uncertainty about the limits of authority in carrying out a task can show up as, "I didn't know I could go *that* far."

Ask people to state the tasks for which they believe they are accountable. See if their views match yours. Be specific in assigning accountability for a task, especially when you are assigning more than one person to the task.

Avoid shared accountability. Dividing accountability divides authority. This reduces the amount of this particular form of power an individual can bring to bear on a task. Shared accountability also increases the requirement for cooperation. Remember, only individuals can be truly held accountable. As evidence in support of these comments about shared accountability, witness the finger pointing that goes on between data processing and operations units when one of their shared business objectives is not met.

Don't assume that "telling" someone something means they understand it – even if they say they do. Ask the person responsible for the task to describe the steps of the task and its product or result. Be as detailed as you think is necessary. Generally speaking, the newer the task or the newer the person, the more detail you will find necessary.

Written tasking statements can be helpful in ensuring satisfactory task performance. Indeed, with a little elaboration, these can become job aids that substitute for lengthy training. For brand new tasks that have never before been performed, don't be surprised if no one knows exactly how to do them. Set your expectations accordingly.

Condition 2: Task Competence

An obvious condition of performance is employee ability or competence to perform the task. Competence entails mastery of the skills and knowledge required by the task, and being able to configure these skills and knowledge into an integrated performance with an acceptable degree of proficiency.

Don't equate possession of the individual or component skills required by a task with being competent at the task itself. Let's suppose, for instance, that I am able to organize my thoughts, formulate sentences that express these thoughts clearly, and even spell correctly. This does not mean I can write a good business letter or construct a winning proposal. Ask yourself if the person assigned to the task has ever performed it or a similar task before. If not, the person might be capable of performing the elements of the desired performance, but not know how to put them together in a finished performance.

When people perform a task for the first time, particularly if they are new or inexperienced, it is a good idea to "walk and talk" them through the steps of the task before releasing them to do it on their own. If you have to use an easel or chalkboard in a formal meeting to do this, so be it. It is better to make sure the task is done right the first time than it is to do it over and over again later.

Don't be surprised when you offer to help out but people don't come to you for the help you've offered. Many people try to figure things out for themselves. Self-sufficiency can be an admirable personal quality but, on occasion, it makes for inefficient task accomplishment. You're better off telling people you expect them to get stuck and to come get you when they do.

An Example

Let us see how these first two conditions of performance can affect task performance. The case that follows, by the way, although it appears absurdly simple, actually happened.

Two supervisors have been assigned to prepare a unit cost report for their manager. This task requires the collection of production and cost data. The manager wants the report in a three-column format. The production data are to be arrayed in column A, the cost data in column B, and the unit cost figures in column C. If the supervisors lack basic arithmetic skills, the task won't get done. Even if the supervisors are mas-

ters of arithmetic, the task still won't be done properly if they do not understand that the unit costs to be shown in column C result from dividing the numbers in column B by those in column A. Nor will the task be accomplished if each supervisor assumes the other will do it.

If you think this is an absurdly simple task, you might be correct; however, consider the other conditions affecting this task.

- If the report is due on Monday, should it be typed on Friday?
- What does this imply about deadlines for the other portions of the task?
- Who will actually type the report?
- What are the typist's workload and priorities?
- Who can assign work to the typist?
- Who says it is due on Monday?
- Why is it due on Monday?
- What are the other tasks on which the supervisors are working?
- From what sources are the necessary data to be obtained?
- How are these data to be verified?
- Who will see the final report?
- What decisions or actions will be based on it?
- What happens if the numbers are wrong?
- How can the final product be checked for quality?
- What happens to the supervisors if they screw it up?
- What happens if they do a good job?
- How is the work of this task to be divided?
- How is it to be coordinated?
- Who will be accountable for what?

As you can see, the successful performance of even the simplest of tasks is affected by many, many considerations. Some of these additional conditions of performance are discussed next.

Condition 3: Task Consequences

The consequences of task activity may be thought of as natural or contrived, and direct or indirect. Moreover, they might be seen as positive or negative by the performer.

If I am nailing two boards together and, while hammering, strike my thumb instead of the nail, the consequences are natural, direct, and negative. If you later praise the quality of the bookshelf I built, your comment can be classified as a contrived, indirect, and, assuming I value your opinion, positive consequence of my activity.

Carrying out any task in an organizational setting generally results in some mix of natural and contrived, direct and indirect, and positive and negative consequences. The same is true of not doing it. This mix of consequences, usually predicted on the basis of past experience, acts to encourage or discourage task accomplishment.

For people to approach instead of avoid a given task, they must see its overall mix of consequences in a favorable light. Keep in mind that it is the mix of consequences that affects behavior. A single consequence – good or bad – is just part of the mix and rarely the chief determinant of behavior.

Don't confuse what you see as positive or negative with what the person performing the task sees as positive or negative. Remember, positive and negative, and rewards and punishment, like beauty and incentives, are in the eye of the beholder. Get to know what your people see as positive and negative. Ask your people what they like and don't like about certain tasks. Find out what they believe are the consequences of the task – natural and contrived, direct and indirect, and positive and negative.

Beware reliance on contrived consequences. Employees observe, study, and draw conclusions about your behavior just as you do about theirs. Some employees will see your efforts to reward or punish as manipulative, no matter how well intentioned you might be.

Condition 4: Task Competition

Sometimes, people aren't doing what you expect them to do because they are doing something else instead. Rarely is an employee assigned only one task.

Tasks compete for the time it takes to do them and for the order in which they are to be done. At the loftier levels of an organization, this is generally referred to as "resource contention."

Remember also that employees, especially at higher levels, are working their own agendas and issues. Sometimes, people see doing what the boss wants as interfering with their goals and objectives. Check to see what else the person you are tasking is currently working on and how the new task relates to what has already been assigned. It helps to set and enforce deadlines. It also helps if you have the person being tasked set the deadline and you enforce it. If you set a deadline, enforce it or the deadlines you set will be meaningless. Help your people learn how to manage and schedule their time in terms of due dates, task time requirements, and various schemes of priorities (e.g., when it's due, who wants it, how important it is, and so forth).

Condition 5: Task Cooperation

Frequently, the person assigned to a task is doing his or her part, but task accomplishment is being hindered or hurried by others.

Working was once largely a matter of individuals interacting with things – the farmer with the land, the factory worker with the machine. Today, most work in most organizations involves some degree of cooperation or collaboration with other people. What one person does or doesn't do often depends on the schedules, preferences, and priorities of others. Identify from whom, where, when, and how cooperation is required.

Learn to negotiate and to manage conflict. Both skills are essential to successful cooperative endeavor.

And, once you've learned how, teach your people. After all, they're the ones who actually do the work.

Use your position, power, and influence to help your people obtain the cooperation and collaboration they need.

Condition 6: Task Control

A task is a discrete piece of work. It is a process with a well-defined beginning and end, producing some result of value. This process must be initiated, executed, and terminated, which is to say it must be controlled. Control is achieved by comparing actual conditions against a set of required or reference conditions and adjusting current actions to eliminate any future differences between required and actual conditions.

Adequate task control entails establishing reference conditions, measuring actual conditions and comparing them with reference conditions, communicating this information to the person performing the task, and taking corrective action. Inadequate task control leads inevitably to inadequate task performance.

Ask yourself and the people who are to do a given task how to tell if progress is satisfactory and how to tell if the task has been properly completed. Check to see what standards apply to the task. Check to see if they're valid. If quickness is what counts, say so. If quality is all-important, make that clear. And, if all that really counts is quantity, don't hesitate to hammer this point home. Check to see how the result or product can be measured and where and how this measurement information can be captured, recorded, reported, and distributed. Check to see how information about progress and the quickness, quantity, and quality of results actually gets back to the person or people doing the task.

Condition 7: Task Commitment

Managers are often correct when they say that the reason this or that task isn't getting done is because employees don't want to do it – but managers are usually wide of the mark when they attribute this to a "bad attitude."

Employee commitment to a task is essential to its accomplishment; however, commitment to a task frequently hinges on the other conditions of performance. For example, an employee might avoid doing a task because he or she does not know how to do it (competence) and does not look forward to the prospect of being made to look incompetent (consequence).

Never assume a performance problem is attributable to an "attitude" problem on the part of your people. *The last place to look for the cause of a problem is where the symptoms present themselves*. When you think you've got a performance problem attributable to employee attitudes, check out the other conditions of performance in order to find out what's behind this seeming lack of commitment. Odds are you'll find something a lot easier to change than attitudes.

Meet with your people and use the checklist at the end of this paper to review the conditions of performance to determine where things are going wrong. You can also use the checklist as a way of reviewing a task with the people to whom it is being assigned as a way of preventing problems with performance.

Ask for volunteers instead of relying totally on task assignment mechanisms. People who volunteer generally have a much higher degree of commitment.

As a last step, check your own expectations; maybe they're out of line. If so, lower, raise, or otherwise change them, as the case may be.

No one likes doing dumb work and most people avoid "busy work" like the plague. The implication here is that the task itself should be viewed as worth doing by the person assigned to do it. If not, the person will probably try to avoid doing it or do it just well enough to get by. "Getting by" isn't good enough. Explain why the task has to be done, or why it has to be done so soon, or why it has to be done a certain way. Explain the contribution the task makes to the overall mission of the unit and any unusual requirements relating to urgency or procedural constraints.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that explaining a task is unnecessary or a challenge to your authority. Tasks should be explained so the people doing them can exercise judgment in adjusting to unforeseen circumstances. This enables them to continue working toward the desired result without having to come back to the boss for decisions about how to handle minor deviations from standard task conditions.

"First things first," or so the saying goes. Sometimes tasks don't get done properly or at all because the priority or importance of the task was not made clear. The task assignment was not taken seriously. Explain the importance of the task. Have the people who are to do the task ask questions about its importance and to explain what they see as the basis of its importance. Pose hypothetical constraints to people and see what they say they would do. For example, tell a person that there is only time to work on one task and see which one would be worked on. If it's not the one you want, priorities need to be clarified.

Condition 8: Task Character and Context

The nature of the task to be performed suggests the kind of environment or context in which it is best performed.

By context is meant both the surroundings and the support for the task. If either of these is inconsistent with the character of the task, it won't be done properly.

If concentration is essential to a task, don't expect people to do it well in a crowded, noisy room, or otherwise subject to distractions and interruptions. Don't expect someone to produce a professional looking letter using a dot-matrix printer with an old ribbon. Don't expect someone to return immediately with 20 copies of a memo when there's a long line at the copy machine. And, don't expect someone to drive nails into two-by-fours using a steel wool pad in place of a hammer.

Ask the people who perform the task what it requires in the way of equipment and working conditions. Think about the kinds of conditions under which you would want to or could best perform the task. Provide these conditions for the people to whom you've assigned the task. Circulate among employees in the work setting looking for potential trouble spots (e.g., four people wasting time haggling over one stapler, tape dispenser, or reference book). Make certain that any special tools, equipment, or reference materials essential to task performance are readily available.

A Few Words about Task Types

Applying what you have learned from the ideas presented in this paper is helped by recognizing that there are two basic types of tasks: "R Type," and "S Type."

R Type or repetitive tasks occur at regular intervals and show little variation from occasion to occasion. An example of an R-Type task is keying information via data entry terminals.

S Type or situational tasks occur at irregular intervals and vary greatly from occasion to occasion. An example of an S-Type task is designing an employee incentive system.

Because R Type tasks are repetitive and unvarying, you are afforded the luxury of troubleshooting them over time. In other words, if something goes wrong, you can clean it up later. For R-Type tasks, the most important thing to do is set up a task performance measurement and diagnostic mechanism.

Because S Type tasks vary from situation to situation, you have to make sure the conditions of performance are as right as you can make them at the time of task assignment. There are no second chances. For S-Type tasks, the most important factor in ensuring acceptable task performance is the initial design and communication of the task.

Assemble a list of the major tasks for each job in your organizational unit. Classify the major tasks making up each job in your organizational unit as R Type or S Type. Based on the distribution of task types in each job, classify the job as a primarily R Type or S Type job. Review how you currently deal with performance problems in each job and, given the type of tasks making up the job, decide if your approach is appropriate.

For R Type tasks, you can use the conditions of performance as an after-the-fact diagnostic framework for determining what might be causing problems with performance. For S Type tasks, you can use the conditions of performance as a before-the-fact design framework to ensure that all task conditions are met in the course of assigning the task.

A Checklist for Troubleshooting Performance Problems

- ❑ Can the person assigned the task describe the process and the result to be produced?
- ❑ Does the person assigned the task acknowledge being accountable for its completion?
- ❑ Does the person assigned the task have the knowledge and skill to carry it out?
- ❑ Has the person assigned the task ever performed it before?
- ❑ Is the mix of consequences likely to encourage or discourage task performance?
- ❑ Are there other tasks the person must accomplish in about the same time frame?
- ❑ Is the task itself seen as worthwhile by the person or people doing it?
- ❑ Can the person performing the task explain why it needs to be done?
- ❑ Has the person performing the task given it the proper priority?
- ❑ Is the working environment conducive to getting the job done?
- ❑ If special tools or equipment are required, are they available?
- ❑ If cooperation or collaboration on the part of others is required, is it forthcoming?
- ❑ Are standards and tolerances in place and understood?
- ❑ Are measures and means of measurement in place and operational?
- ❑ Is information about progress and results fed back to the person doing the task?
- ❑ If the task is situational (S-Type), has the task been adequately designed?
- ❑ If the task is repetitive (R-Type), has a diagnostic mechanism been established?
- ❑ All things considered, are expectations for task performance appropriate?

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