

Knowledge Worker

Worthy Performance and the Actions-Outcomes Matrix

(August 2015)

This month's column focuses on the Actions-Outcomes Matrix. It is a tool for thinking about and examining what Tom Gilbert called "worthy performance." The matrix suggests four basic kinds of performance issues. Let's begin by reviewing "worthy performance."

Gilbert, who many will agree is one of the chief architects of human performance technology, first set forth his "worthy performance" formula slightly more than 40 years ago. He postulated the following (Gilbert, 1974, p. 14):

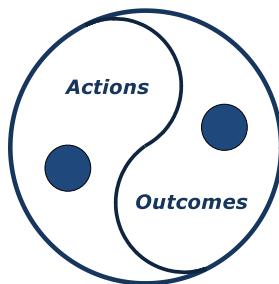
$$Worth = \frac{\text{Value of an Accomplishment}}{\text{Cost of Behavior}}$$

In this column I use "Outcomes" in lieu of Accomplishments and "Actions" in place of Behaviors but they are essentially the same elements of performance used by Gilbert.

Gilbert also asserted "If you think about it, then, it is *only* the accomplishments of performance that we value – *never* the behaviors that produce them" (Gilbert, 1974, p.13, italics added). "Never" is a strong word and we will come back to this notion of not valuing actions later on.

Actions & Outcomes:

The Yin & Yang of Performance



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Actions and Outcomes are the Yin and Yang of performance (see the figure on the left). Said a little differently, your performance is a function not just of the outcomes you achieve but also of the actions that produce them: $P = f(A + O)$. As Gilbert put it in *Human Competence*, "Performance (P), then, is a transaction involving both behavior (B) and its consequence (C). Or, in shorthand $P = B \rightarrow C$ " (Gilbert, 1978, p.16).

Presumably, you hold yourself to some set of standards regarding your actions and the outcomes you achieve. Other people in your organization also have expectations of and impose requirements and standards on your

actions and on the outcomes you achieve. When your performance is assessed, whether by you or by others, your actions and their outcomes can both be looked at and judged as acceptable or unacceptable.

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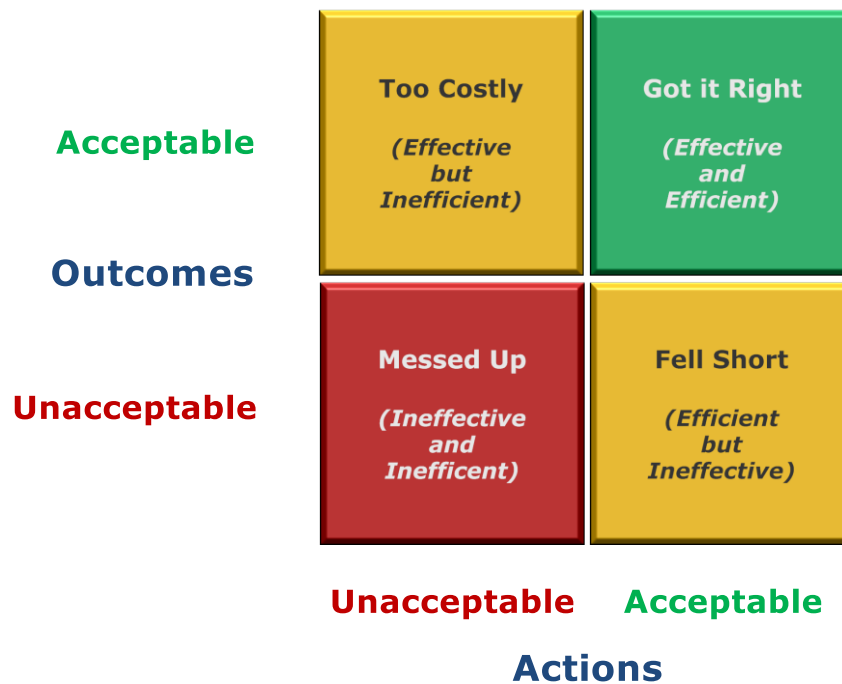
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When you achieve a set of intended outcomes your actions are deemed to be effective. If you don't achieve the intended outcomes your actions are viewed as ineffective. Whether or not you achieve the outcomes in question your actions can be separately judged as efficient or inefficient; that is, they can be seen as sound, as making good use of resources, or they can be regarded as questionable, wasteful or even damaging.

The interplay of acceptable and unacceptable actions and outcomes yields a 2x2 matrix (see the figure below). These are the four basic judgments that can be made about performance.

As the Actions-Outcomes matrix indicates, only when your actions and their outcomes are both acceptable is your performance acceptable. Then and only then can be said that you "Got it right." To turn in a worthy performance your actions have to be effective and efficient.

The Actions-Outcomes Matrix



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If the outcomes you achieve are acceptable but the way in which you achieved them isn't (e.g., you alienated your co-workers, or burned through precious resources, or took far too long to achieve them), then it will likely be acknowledged that, yes, you achieved the required outcomes but you did so in a manner that was "Too costly." In other words, you were effective but inefficient.

On the other hand, if your actions were perfectly acceptable but the required outcomes were not achieved, whether not at all or only in part, it can be said that you "Fell short." You were efficient but ineffective.

Lastly, if you muffed it regarding the outcomes and your actions then even if no one actually says it they might be thinking that you "Messed up." You were ineffective and inefficient.

At this point you might be wondering why I am bothering with all this. Isn't all this rather obvious? Yes and no. Bear with me as I explain.

Actions or behaviors are more or less costly in relation to the resources they use and consume, which ties to their efficiency. Our actions can also be more or less effective, that is, they can produce or not produce the intended outcomes or accomplishments, and they can do so to varying degrees. We are concerned with actions not just because they drive the cost part of Gilbert's formula but also because their effectiveness or lack of it determines the extent to which we do or don't realize the outcomes we're after. Our actions, then, drive the cost and the value components of Gilbert's formulation.

I believe we have to value and be concerned with effective actions as much as we are with the outcomes they produce because without effective actions there are no outcomes to value. The Actions-Outcomes Matrix reminds us of this.

In conclusion, when examining performance, whether your own or that of someone else, look at actions *and* outcomes and, when looking at actions, pay attention to their effectiveness *and* their efficiency. Then and only then do you get a true and full picture of the worth of that performance.

References

1. Gilbert, T.F. (1974). *Levels and Structure of Performance Analysis*. The Praxis Corporation Technical Series. Praxis Corporation: Morristown, NJ.
2. _____ (1978). *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance*. McGraw-Hill: New York

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About the Author

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