

Managing (Beyond) Performance

Managing performance is a necessary function of supervisors, managers and leaders. Do traditional performance management practices potentially impose an unintended set of limitations on performance? While we all want those we're responsible for to achieve defined goals, "performance management" practices encourage us to manage to those goals, not necessarily beyond. Set goals, provide feedback, harness negative behaviors, encourage, reward for goal achievement, etc. all important competencies but could we be limiting our teams by investing ourselves in "performance management" rather than performance optimization?

One may raise the likelihood that the defined goals are met, the other should not only achieve that, but perhaps elevate team performance to a level well beyond our initial expectations. Our focus should be on optimizing performance, enabling the individual and team to reach their full potential, not simply managing their performance to a set of agreed upon goals.

The foundation of performance lies in the beliefs. Individual and team actions will be shaped by what they believe. If they believe that management says one thing and does another, their actions will reflect that. If they believe that targets are unattainable, their actions will reflect that. If they don't believe processes support their success, their actions will reflect that. All of the actions that are a reflection of their beliefs will, in turn, lead to the results you see. The struggle we often find ourselves in is trying to manage the actions (behaviors) without understanding the underlying belief structure. In a study by The Conference Board, 22% of respondents indicated that deficient performance resulted from either fear of failure or an inability to envision a successful outcome – the belief structure.

Can individuals and teams achieve more if we understand and help shape their beliefs rather than, or in addition to, just focusing on behavior? Consider the following:

- Self limiting beliefs affect behavior by preventing people from taking certain actions that they would have otherwise taken if the belief was not there. An intelligent child might never study and so fails the exams if he/she believes that they are not intelligent. Reference "Pygmalion Effect".
- Our beliefs shape the way we view others and subsequently our filters associated with new information. We filter information based on our beliefs and only absorb the information that matches our belief system. This impacts our behavior by making us biased towards what we believe in no matter how many proofs are provided. Reference Meta Filters/NLP
- Our beliefs shape our reality. If you believe that you will not be successful in reaching your target (belief) then you won't be motivated to prepare for the prospecting, process improvement, etc. (the change in behavior) and subsequently will fail. Reference "Self Fulfilling Prophecy"

On the other end, we see sports teams, individuals and organizations that achieve great success that is difficult to explain on merit alone.

- The 1980 USA vs USSR game, called the "Miracle on Ice" in the United States, is the best-remembered game of the tournament and the best-remembered international hockey game in the United States.

- DaVita dialysis treatment centers back in 1999 was on the verge of bankruptcy. It had revenues of \$1.4 billion, losses of \$56 million, and a share price of about \$2. Less than ten years later, it had revenues of \$5.7 billion, net income of \$374 million, and a share price approaching \$60. It is one of the great business turnarounds seen in a long time — from a market capitalization of \$200 million in 1999 to more than \$6 billion today. Reference “How One Company's Turnaround Came From the Heart”, by Bill Taylor.

If we accept that our opportunity, if not responsibility, is to encourage the realization and fulfillment of potential in our teams and that their beliefs, positive or negative, shape their actions and behaviors, how then do we achieve this within the context of management competencies?

In my next article we'll explore approaches that enable management to better understand existing belief structures and how to shape them in a manner that enlists ownership and accountability to actions that support and lead to peak performance and, quite possibly, better than expected results.