

# How to Create a Performance-Driven Workforce

*“I stare at my computer for hours, so it looks like I’m busy”*  
— Peter, in the film, *Office Space*

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Managing Employee Performance is a Process, not an Event! | BY PATRICK IBARRA

**The workplace continues** to grow more complex. Ensuring employees are being led in a way that continues to move your organization forward in an ever changing, noisier ecosystem has never been more challenging. From recruiting, hiring, and developing skill sets of the future to leading multiple generations in the workforce, accommodating changing employees’ expectations, and managing remote talent, work teams are constantly being pressed to be agile, flexible, and on top of their technology game.

In recent years, it has become increasingly apparent that it is critically important for leaders to learn how to build organizations that are simultaneously purpose-driven, performance-focused, and principles-led. At a time when the pace of change is faster than ever, building organizations with these three characteristics is no longer a choice. Being performance-driven is clearly essential to success. You want to succeed by choice, not by chance!

## Performance Mindsets

Organizational cultures vary on many dimensions, one of which is the emphasis on performance. Some cultures are based on entitlement, meaning that adequate performance and stability dominate the organization. Employee rewards vary little from person to person and are not based on individual performance differences. As a result, performance appraisal activities are viewed as being primarily a “bureaucratic exercise.” Many public sector organizations suffer from an entitlement mindset, to their detriment.

In many organizations, the current performance appraisal/evaluation process has mixed credibility, depending mainly on the supervisor who administers it. While the process is not the sole responsibility of the human resources department, supervisors assume they are accountable for its effectiveness. Actually, it is a shared responsibility among all departments.

Today’s conventional wisdom asserts that performance management is no longer a luxury for only the most advanced organizations but is a

necessity for governments to function at an optimal level. Moreover, the dated practice of an annual performance appraisal being the single component of performance management must be replaced with a comprehensive and systematic approach comprised of competency models, leadership development, performance plans, goal setting, coaching, performance appraisals, and recognition.

Successful organizations and their managers approach the idea of providing performance feedback to an employee as a means for that employee to calibrate his or her performance; they use feedback and its regular delivery like a dashboard in an automobile. Each dashboard indicator reflects a vital measurement and together they paint a picture for how a vehicle is performing. Similarly, in order for employees and their managers to recognize and take corrective action about the employee’s performance, performance indicators must also be created and communicated regularly.

## Overreliance on Technology

Frequently, department and line managers presume, often with the endorsement of the HR department, that once a new performance appraisal form is implemented, the issues they have struggled with in improving an employee’s performance will magically be solved. Often, little attention is paid to helping managers improve their skills and their confidence in delivering feedback to employees. In actuality, it is precisely those feedback discussions where performance should be addressed to continually leverage strengths and bolster areas for improvement.

While modifying the appraisal instrument may be necessary, organizations might want to focus more on the forces driving performance: clarity of goals, alignment of goals with the agency’s overall objectives, frequency and effectiveness of feedback being delivered by supervisors and managers, and building managers’ skills in delivering that feedback.

## Steps You Can Take

High-performing organizations have a well-developed performance management process that features several components that function interdependently:



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1. Educate both management and employees on the rationale and value of implementing successful employee performance management as the linchpin to department effectiveness.
2. Focus people on doing the right things that drive value for the organization and deliver results that support key strategic priorities. Identify what employees “must do” exceptionally well to be successful.
3. Consistent with the practice of “what gets talked about gets done strongly encourage supervisors and managers to regularly provide feedback to their employees.
4. Revise the performance appraisal instrument with a focus on values, principles, behaviors, and results instead of tasks.
5. Train both managers and employees to ensure everyone adopts, understands, and embraces the principles and intent behind the performance management system. Reconsider the numbering system as a rating scale – no member of your workforce is striving to be a 3.4 on a 5-point performance scale. Rating scales create unnecessary complexity.
6. Create, fund, and implement a learning/training and development plan; employees and managers work together in co-creating a specific plan designed to accelerate employees’ capabilities.
7. Increase accountability for performance at all levels of the organization. Let me repeat that: Increase accountability for performance at all levels. Those in supervisory, management, and leadership roles should be accountable for how well their direct reports (i.e.



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- subordinates) are performing and how ready they are to assume new responsibilities.
8. “Whatever you tolerate, you advocate.” When performance evaluations are not completed on time, the message to employees is they’re not valued by their manager and thus, by the organization.
  9. Discard the unwritten practice of no employee receiving the top level of performance, over your concerns these employees might stop trying. It’s been my experience, this approach has the opposite effect and drains people who are intrinsically motivated to achieve.

Improving an organization’s performance management approach is about doing 100 things 1% better instead of one thing 100% better. No silver bullet exists to remedy an organization’s performance deficiencies. However, significant progress can be realized by implementing these nine recommendations to move an organization towards a performance management approach that aligns employee behavior and performance with organizational goals and desired outcomes.

Successful organizations hold their leaders accountable for the identification, growth, and retention of key talent. In short, in order to build a 21st century workforce, your organization needs a 21st century approach.

Please email your questions and comments to me at [patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com](mailto:patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com). **PM**