

ENCOURAGING PERFORMANCE

- A new set of disciplines for practical leadership -

WHAT THEY SAY

"This approach to leadership and team working is an outstanding example of an approach that can make a difference. During difficult times, this is what is needed."

Professor Cary Cooper, Distinguished Professor of Organizational Psychology & Health, Lancaster University Management School



"The writing is crisp, clear and thoughtful... works for managers from large as well as smaller organisations... And, it asks managers to think in new ways – and that's a good thing. A very good thing"

Laura Dolby, Editor, GLR News for The Chartered Institute of Marketing

ENCOURAGING PERFORMANCE: a new set of disciplines for Practical Leadership

A paper for current and future managers by David Finney

Dan was brilliant technically but kept missing deadlines. His manager tried everything; gave him ideas, suggestions, techniques, reminders and orders; sent him emails, called him, thrashed it out in 1:1 meetings; nothing worked. Occasionally Dan would hit a deadline and then miss it again the following week. The important thing to know here is that Dan very much wanted to please both his manager and his internal clients. There was no lack of desire, but he'd get so engrossed in another task that the existing deadline would get overlooked.

Then the manager attended a leadership course which included a coaching model. He applied the model and a change took place which was dynamic and instantaneous. Dan became animated in a way his manager had not previously seen and was proudly displaying a weekly planner he had designed to manage his schedule.

In my twenty plus years of people management and staff development, there are three precepts I have come to observe:

1. Everything starts with a conversation and so the quality of that conversation determines everything.
2. People – given the right circumstances and the right stimuli – will be prepared to make a change in their working practices.
3. Work is an emotional business – understanding and appreciating how people want to *feel* when they are at work will help to make you a successful manager.

And so what are 'the right circumstances and the right stimuli'? Firstly, a **reason to change**; secondly, a **sense of ownership** and thirdly, **words of encouragement**. Read on and I will let you into the secret of effective performance management.

Practical Leadership

Managers sometimes have a tendency to use catch-up meetings and staff appraisals as a chance to air views, give directions and point out what their direct reports are doing wrong. But what is it that individuals really need from their manager? What stops them from being fantastic at their jobs? If “people leave managers and not companies”, as Marcus Buckingham concluded after 25 years of research at Gallup, this should serve as a huge reminder as to the importance of the ‘manager’ function.



Visitors to social media business forums often discuss the differences between ‘leadership’ and ‘management’ and go to great lengths to emphasise the virtues that distinguish the ‘leader’ from the ‘manager’; but I think that we are often afraid to acknowledge the important disciplines that underline the art of great management and so I have grown to love the term ‘Practical Leadership’. For me this term covers the inspirational and visionary sides of leadership as well as the routines and disciplines of performance management.

Without effective means of managing performance, even the most inspirational words from the most charismatic of leaders may not yield results. And so, building on the work of Buckingham and more recently the Appreciative Inquiry movement, managers need to pause, take stock and work from a new position of strength, which leads us to the first of the 6 keys to effective performance management.

1. Strengths



“The right people in the right jobs” is possibly the oldest and most hackneyed HR policy; you can even find it in US TV series *The Waltons*, which made in the seventies. Yet amazingly this is often overlooked and it too easy for a manager desperate to for help to recruit someone who is *almost* right for the advertised role. Assuming then that this discipline is followed – and on every occasion - the first job of every manager is to conduct some appreciative enquiry and locate the strengths of the team. Should those strengths not be sufficient to achieve the goals of the department, then careful recruitment must take place where again the focus should be to recruit natural talent and elicit the strengths of the applicants and how they might be used in the organisation to maximum benefit.

When a child first learns to walk, adults rally round with shouts of joy and encouragement and the child beams with pride and determination, taking another step and then another. This basic human need for support and encouragement should never be forgotten for not

only is it extremely motivating but it is an approach that allows people to make mistakes without their confidence getting crushed. Falling over is simply a part of the journey.

Managers need to make strengths a focus in the department so that when their reports forget how good they are, they won't. To remind individuals of their talents enables them to tackle their daily challenges with greater motivation so that they will be always working from a position of strength. Then teams are empowered to park 'issues' for 10 minutes and get to start meetings with what is working and stop seeing companies as continual problems that need fixing. This approach is a core feature in the Appreciative Inquiry movement triggered by David Cooperrider in the nineties.

Once all strengths are on the table and the manager has explored with the team how they can be put to the greatest use, this is a good time to give get renewed clarity about roles, responsibilities and expectations. Employees need to be clear on what 'must' be done in a specific way and what is left to their initiative.

2. Enforcement

Have you seen Charles Handy's doughnut principle? It's a model which is very useful in determining the 'non-negotiables' of performance management. In the centre of the doughnut – the inner ring - are those elements of the working week that need full compliance without question. The manager decides which parts of someone's role need to be enforced and which are open to initiative and creative input.



Defining and declaring the areas of enforcement is crucial in achieving transparency about ownership boundaries. All the 'non-negotiables' are placed in the centre of the doughnut. This process enables managers to establish their tell:ask ratio. Before starting a conversation at work with a report, it is essential to be clear: "in this situation, am I asking or telling, is this discussion to be directive or collaborative?" If the subject is in the centre, there is no negotiation: this part may contain the core of company policy: quality standards, contractual obligations, company administration and any other company legislation. It is the manager's duty to ensure that this company policy is enforced. (Of course if someone constructively challenges the 'why' of company policy this should be taken on board and placed in an appropriate review meeting; compliance until the review is still non-negotiable and managers should commit to the review in the spirit of continuous improvement).

The doughnut principle also teaches us that if the inner ring is too large – i.e. if too much is placed in the centre thus reducing the space in the outer ring - individuals can feel suffocated, and their creativity will be stifled. When the contents of the inner ring have been declared then a greater freedom of expression can be given to individuals in the outer

ring. Once there is clarity in the rings, teams will know exactly what is required of them and where within their roles they can apply their unique talents.

The outer ring is one of enterprise and excitement. It is the place where individuals can really stake their claim in the organisation and find an authentic way of making a special contribution that adds value to the company and provides meaning to their role. In this larger zone of ownership and individual responsibility the direct report needs an approach that is both facilitative and empowering.

3. Coaching



“The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage” – Arie de Geus

Everything starts with a conversation and therefore the quality of that conversation determines everything. “The best leaders talk with people not at them” as Susan Scott expressed poignantly in her “Fierce Conversations”. When ‘The Answer’ is provided by the leader, minds in the immediate vicinity tend to close and thinking capabilities are paused. When we think a solution to a problem is found and a decision is made to run with an action plan based on that solution, we must be sure that there really are no alternatives otherwise greater solutions may be overlooked. Only thing lost by facilitating further exploration might be another 10 or 15 minutes and yet this could be the most creative quarter of an hour of an entire career. This fascinating line of enquiry is discussed by Peter Senge in the “Fifth Discipline” and it is one of the pillars of great coaching.

A big decision for managers is when to mentor and when to coach and this is an on-going and complex discussion between directive and non-directive coaches. In a nutshell, coaching sceptics will ask: if you know the answer why on earth would you not want to share it? Coaches will respond: how do I know that I *know* the answer? What has previously worked for me may not necessarily work for others.

Let’s run with the idea that a manager does know the answer but chooses to hold it back – at least for a while; by asking the right questions the manager gives the direct report a chance to reach the answer and maybe produce a few more options, some of which may be even better. In pure coaching, final choice always lies with the report – even if the coach has offered a ‘suggestion’ that can sit on the table with all the other ideas. Empowerment is heightened and ownership of the process that led to the answer and hence the action plan that follows is that much greater. ‘Players’ are both surprised and inspired by their own creativity. Why would a manager not want to give their report the chance to feel that good about themselves at work?

Of course there are times when Mentoring does have a specific role to play: when speed is of the essence or in a consultancy capacity when lesser experienced staff members are honing their written skills or are involved in intricate communication strategies. Written work comes with practice and experience; important meetings can sometimes have links to other key discussions going on in the business and there may be some subtle political undertones. In these situations players would be wise to consult those who already have the t-shirt. Other instances might include the passing on of technical knowledge – e.g. software, hardware, legislative, regulatory etc.

When discussing the rationale for coaching, for me there are three broad reasons to coach: Communication; Change; Concern; and they all fall under the popular coaching umbrella of ‘improving performance’. Let’s look at each in turn:

a) Communication

One of the most disempowering and de-motivating experiences for team players is when they experience communication difficulties and the manager steps in to take care of it – either by assuming control or responding to the report request to do so. Unless players conquer fear, apprehension, uncertainty and a lack of focus and assertiveness in their verbal skills, they may never develop one of the most important strengths in corporate life. This is where Coaching comes in as the great confidence-builder – a natural facilitation process while players find their corporate ‘voice’.



b) Change

Coaching a team player through a change initiative provides the report with a periodic soundboard and base to work from. The coach can support the report throughout the process, help them to build an overall strategy, explore benefits, identify possible risks, include contingency plans, gain peer support, maintain motivation and recall past successes and prime strengths at appropriate stages. This is the heart of encouraging performance.

c) Concern

The need for creativity at work is strong when there is an issue to resolve: a procedural block, an inter-departmental barrier, or maybe stress from a high workload. When a report comes to a manager with a concern, it’s all too easy to launch into advice and direction. Coaching for clarity is a great starting point. Placing (leaving) ownership and responsibility in the hands of the report is a good antidote to ‘monkey management’.

So let’s assume a manager decides to coach; should they get trained to do their own coaching, hire an internal coach from across the organisation, an external coach from outside the organisation or employ a mix of all three? A risk analysis may be helpful.

Table 1 - Risk Analysis

Manager as mentor	Manager as coach	Internal / External Coach
Disempowering for mentee	Insufficient time to coach report effectively	May take longer to understand complex departmental issues
Encourages mental laziness in the team	Lack of trust from report in opening up and addressing the tough issues	Initial cost might be greater
Options do not get fully explored	Inadequate detachment and objectivity may dilute approach	
Slower long-term development of team		

The risks of mentoring slightly outweigh the others although in terms of exploring options; coaches - or managers who employ coaching techniques - must also take care so as not to pull the blinds down too quickly when all the creative light *appears* to have shone through. Replacing advice with 'The Right Question' is the main tool of the Coach and if backed up with thorough and patient probing can lead to startling results.

4. Reward & Recognition



There are many different ways to reward a member of the team and many different ways to recognise their performance. I still remember a previous boss of mine from many years ago, sending my wife a bunch of flowers when I was detained very late one night - appropriate and memorable – the core elements of R'n'R.

Here's an exercise: imagine you could never again give someone a salary increase or a cash bonus (maybe not so difficult in times of financial restraint). What ways can you think of to reward a member of your team and similarly what different ways are there to recognise the value and achievements of an individual?

Managers should take care not to embarrass anyone with a form of recognition that makes them want the ground to open up beneath them. Not sure? Ask them. Declare your wish to (publicly) recognise their performance and check it is something they would appreciate. Otherwise a good intention will fall flat and would be like buying a birthday gift for someone based on what you like. (Yes I've been there too).

5. Evaluation

To get a sense of where someone has been, how far they've come and where they are going, measurement is absolutely essential.

Regular 1:1 sessions and structured two-way appraisals with 'smart' objectives, there's really no substitute. Keith Bishop is the product of 10 years of managerial negligence and you will not want to inherit or develop a Keith in your team under any

circumstances. To avoid, give individuals attention and feedback; prevent disconnection and disengagement at all costs. Staff sleeping at work because they had a late night is one thing, but 'sleeping at work' whilst appearing to do the job is simply going through the motions, devoid of meaning and degrading to both manager and team. Take care your office doesn't quietly become "The Office".



In terms of the 1:1 session, the term 'regular' is of course subjective - frequency needs to match the structure of the department, the experience of the team and the nature of the work. Once-a-year appraisals without interim catch-ups are a no-no. To fully evaluate performance and maintain strong rapport, regular feedback from the manager is crucial and appraisal must never be a shock to the system. Reports should get used to a healthy mix of encouraging feedback and constructive criticism.

Managers would do well to avoid using the appraisal as a chance to air all their grievances over the past year. They also need to avoid using the 1:1 forum as a golden opportunity to point the finger. No report wants to hear their manager constantly criticise them as 1:1 meetings soon become something to dread and the person stops being receptive to the wishes of the manager. It is no coincidence that the word 'praise' is in the verb to 'appraise'. Achieving a healthy balance of positive and negative is important to the self-esteem of the report and the credibility of the manager. The only viable feedback from a manager is one that contains evidence, preferably written.

6. Three-Sixty



Evidence that an appraisee will be most convinced by is the output of thorough research conducted across the company and three-sixty degree feedback is a highly effective process. 'Stop- Start-Continue' contains three simple questions that gather a broad set of feedback from a wide audience – e.g.

- *What is Dan not doing which if he started doing, would really add value to the service he provides?*
- *What is Dan doing which if he stopped doing, would improve his performance?*
- *What is Dan doing well that he should continue to do?*

Keys on the Table

So there you have it, the secret to effective performance management revealed – in summary:

- o locating and maximising **Strengths**;
- o defining and stating areas of **Enforcement**;
- o encouraging performance through **Coaching**;
- o establishing a **Reward and Recognition** framework;
- o ensuring that an **Evaluation and Three sixty** feedback mechanism is in place.



I've handed you the keys – don't lose them!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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To access The Energy of Conversation website, click on the Energy blue logo shown left.



To watch a 90-second film about practical leadership including a job satisfaction / employee engagement model, click on the YouTube icon.



For sound bites on performance management, quality management and other general business conversation, follow David Finney on Twitter.