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Improving Performance Management: Take My Golf Game, Please!

NEIL M. A. HAUENSTEIN
Virginia Tech

Consider the following prescriptions: Improving employee performance requires employees throughout the organization accepting responsibility for achieving organizational objectives, managers having complete confidence in their subordinates, information flowing effectively throughout the organization, and employees receiving honest task and performance feedback in short cycles. This prescription is strikingly similar to Pulakos and O'Leary's (2011) explication of the rationales that guide the development and implementation of formal performance management systems today. However, this prescription was formulated 50 years ago by Renesis Likert; the prescription is Likert's System 4 organization (Likert, 1961). The reasons performance–feedback-based organizational interventions fail have not changed over the years, only the interventions have changed. Although Pulakos and O'Leary target specific mechanisms that contribute to the failures of formal performance management systems, the broader underlying causes lie just below the surface.

For example, the guiding rationales for formal performance feedback systems today share core assumptions with the human relations movement of the 1950s and 1960s; that is, individuals are fundamentally good and intrinsically motivated to learn and grow. These optimistic assumptions about human nature are appealing but oversimplify the variability in motives that underlie behaviors (cf., Baumeister & Campbell, 1999). Ultimately, organizational intervention-based human relation theories failed because these assumptions about human nature do not consistently apply to enough individuals across enough different contexts. Another systemic cause of the failure of performance–feedback-based interventions is the folly of rewarding B while hoping for A (Kerr, 1975). As Pulakos and O'Leary make clear, organizations talk a great deal about developing employees, but organizational reward systems do not provide incentives that create environments where managers meaningfully engage in employee development.

The authors provide recommendations to better achieve effective performance management based on the systematic implementation of informal feedback systems. The fundamentals of these recommendations are not new, for example, the importance of clear performance standards (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995), finding meaningful ways to hold raters accountable (Mero & Motowidlo, 1995), and training employees to both deliver and receive feedback (Hauenstein, 1998). Although the above examples are sound recommendations for building a performance management system based on informal feedback, other recommendations remain based on simplistic assumptions that have led to the long history of disappointing results.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Neil M. A. Hauenstein.
E-mail: nhauen@vt.edu
Address: Department of Psychology, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061

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Pulakos and O'Leary argue that training managers to improve subordinate relationships will lead to both direct and indirect improvements in job performance. This argument was foundational to human relation theorists and practitioners, for example, McGregor's (1960) Theory X-Theory Y and Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid intervention. Furthermore, relationship building is viewed as integral to the more fundamental issue of building trust between the manager and the employee. Of course the performance management process works better when there is a high degree of trust, but trust is difficult to build and maintain when power in the dyad is asymmetrical, and subordinates process feedback both intrapersonally in regards to self-esteem threats and interpersonally in regards to fairness (both equity perceptions and procedural justice perceptions). More to the point, improving performance by building trust relies on the assumption that each employee is somewhat equally motivated to look out for the needs and welfare of other employees. Any consultant having experienced the wide swath of organizational ''dysfunctionality'' caused by a psychopathic (Hare & Neuman, 2008) executive (manipulative charm and total lack of empathy) knows the falsity of this assumption all too well!

The recommendation for increased use of positive feedback is another example of a simplistic assumption to improve performance management. Regulatory focus research has shown that individuals operating in a promotion-motivational orientation (seeking pleasurable outcomes) prefer positive feedback, but individuals operating in a prevention-motivational orientation (avoiding painful outcomes) prefer negative feedback (e.g., Van-Dijk & Kluger, 2004). The complexity of the effects of positive and negative feedbacks is complicated by the fact that the motivational orientation construct is not a trait. Although individuals have chronic preferences regarding regulatory focus, an individual's regulatory focus is also affected by the situation (Higgins, 1999). The point is not to argue that regulatory focus provides the most valid understanding of the effects of feedback valence. Rather, the point is that the effects of valence on feedback utilization are complex. Given the general failure of performance management systems, it is unlikely that the recommendation to increase the frequency of positive feedback across the board will meaningfully affect the efficacy of any performance management system, formal or informal.

Finally, the use of the athletic coach analogy (Pulakos and O'Leary use golf for their coaching analogy) to explain performance management is another problematic oversimplification. In the athletic domain, individuals practice extensively in an environment where mistakes do not affect the ''final score''; there is no score while the coach helps hone the golfer's swing on the practice range. Furthermore, the motivational context in the golf example is completely different; the golfer pays the swing coach to instruct, the swing coach does not pay the golfer to play. To make the swing coach analogy fit the performance management context, the golfer must play a round of golf in a tournament 5 days a week and the golfer's self-esteem and perceptions of personal security must be inexorably intertwined with the number of strokes it takes to complete each round. Intermittently during each round, the swing coach provides feedback designed to correct swing flaws, reinforce correct aspects of the swing, or to motivate the golfer to do better. Finally, at some level, the golfer is always aware that the coach may terminate the relationship because he or she takes too many strokes in too many of these daily tournaments. The coaching analogy, regardless of which sport is chosen, fails to adequately convey the complexities a manager faces providing performance feedback. The overuse of the coaching analogy fosters erroneous perceptions that adopting a ''manager as coach'' frame of reference makes providing effective employee feedback a simple and straightforward task.

Changing the focus of performance management from a formal review system to a

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daily managerial activity is an excellent first step for improving performance management. However, the challenge for the next generation of performance-feedback-based organizational interventions is to avoid simplistic assumptions that have contributed to the 50 years of failure. Employees make sense of feedback in the context in which the feedback is embedded. In one context an employee may focus on avoiding mistakes to preempt criticism from the supervisor, yet in another context the same employee may take risks in the hope of gaining praise from the same supervisor. An employee's behavioral choices reflect a goal pursuit strategy that fits his or her current motivational orientation (cf., Higgins, 2000). In a ''teachable moment,'' the extent to which feedback disrupts the fit between motivational orientation and the adopted goal pursuit strategy reduces the likelihood that the feedback will be utilized. For example, an employee attempting to gain attention by maximizing productivity is likely to utilize feedback regarding behaviors that improve productivity. However, without changing motivational orientation, the same employee is likely to have difficulty implementing feedback to increase vigilant behaviors intended to improve the quality of the product.

From the above regulatory-fit perspective, it quickly becomes evident that there are many more variables that disrupt fit than variables that sustain fit—potential nonfit between a chronically preferred motivational orientation and a situationally induced motivational orientation, both from the perspective of the supervisor providing feedback and the recipient processing feedback; potential nonfit between motivational orientation and goal pursuit strategy as a function of task constraints (e.g., a task that requires strict compliance with rules and regulations vs. a task that requires creativity); and so forth. It is also evident that the tradition of interindividual (nomothetic) research of feedback recipient characteristics (e.g., personality) and situational variables (e.g., feedback sign) has failed to provide an adequate understanding of the dynamic interplay between the feedback recipient and the feedback context. The key to improving performance management interventions is better understanding of processing and utilizing feedback based on intraindividual (idiographic) research designs.

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