

# performance architect

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## Let's talk ... about managing performance

*Terry Fewtrell and Kerry Martin*

Performance counts. How many times do we hear that statement? People (we) expect performance in line with or better than (our) expectations – whether on the sporting field, in artistic arenas or the workplace.

In today's information rich world there is often great transparency around performance. The performance of professional sports people is measured by endless statistics and metrics, published in the media for all to see and dissect. As our culture becomes more enterprise oriented and consumer driven, the workplace challenge is increasingly about lifting and sustaining performance – at the individual, team and organisational levels.

Organisations need a systematic approach to performance. While consistency and fairness require this, it does not mean that performance is simply a product of, or measured by, formulae and rules.

Performance is far more creative. Culture is perhaps one of the greatest factors in developing performance. Organisations that build and sustain a culture of openness with shared objectives and supportive networks are well down the track to optimising performance at the individual and corporate levels.

As human beings we respond to encouragement, shared endeavours and recognition of efforts made. These ingredients are often easier to produce in smaller more focused organisations, but are achievable in any work environment. As Sydney Smith suggests we all have aspirations to discover just how good we can be – to be challenged to achieve at levels that we may at one time have thought beyond us, or perhaps never contemplated. In fact Smith emphasises the positive and aspirational elements that are so often overlooked in the application of many workplace performance systems.

*'The thing about performance ... is that it is a celebration of the fact that we do contain within ourselves infinite possibilities.'*

SYDNEY SMITH  
18<sup>th</sup> Century English Essayist

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PERFORMANCE ARCHITECTS

For many large and public sector organisations performance systems have overlays of accountability and public scrutiny of outcomes. The design of performance management frameworks often gets bogged down and gazumped by bureaucracy and over engineering that seeks to address everything, but in the end achieves little other than compliance with the requirement to have a framework in place. So often employees complain that the performance management approaches are too stilted or formal, are time wasting, don't relate to individual jobs, or have become discredited processes that just have to be endured.

So what are the ingredients for a successful and effective performance management framework? Yellow Edge has worked with a number of organisations to develop fresh and meaningful approaches to the process of managing and lifting performance. Some key factors are:

- performance management is about an **on-going conversation** between the employee and their manager — take every opportunity within the formal process to encourage that conversation in the more informal context of day-to-day work
- pitch the framework and its **language so that it is conversational, simple and natural** — wherever possible use everyday words that flow naturally and help both employee and manager feel comfortable about the process — mirror verbal conversations
- provide **help and tools for managers and staff** so the framework is easy to use and people feel positive about it — acknowledge cynicism and circumvent it by avoiding generalised statements and bureaucratic 'speak'
- ensure that work objectives and performance **goals clearly align with the organisation's corporate aims** — and frame them so that they have meaning for individuals and teams
- **frame work objectives around key capabilities** for the organisation or work area — rather than list a whole lot of things to be done, focus on the most important and describe the characteristics of how they are to be achieved
- using capabilities enables a focus on the **how** of doing the job and not just on the **what** and provides a **natural link between organisational culture and business objectives**
- recognise the shared elements of **team performance and interdependencies** that exist across organisations
- **encourage employees to seek clarity around expectations and performance** from managers and help managers articulate the organisational view of what good performance looks like — employees need to be informed and engaged before they can perform
- be open about identifying what **assistance or support the organisation needs to provide to help the employee** achieve their goals
- structure and describe **ratings categories so that they are meaningful, clear and connect with employees**
- promote the framework as **empowering for both managers and employees** in terms of being open about what needs to be done, what support is needed and how progress is to be reviewed
- recognise that **underperformance is a legitimate category that must be dealt with honestly, quickly and realistically**
- accept that **priorities change** and use the on-going conversation approach to adjust formal agreements
- see performance management as an **on-going journey shared by manager and employee** — encourage an attitude of shared open discovery.

In designing and introducing performance management frameworks it is critical that they 'fit' the organisation, in terms of culture and business needs. To be effective they should be customised to the organisational circumstances. They should also address a common management failing that overlooks the need for managers to engage and interact naturally with their employees. So often the performance management process is undermined by the poor quality of people skills displayed by line and branch managers.

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To invoke Sydney Smith once more, the individual comes to the performance management process with a positive disposition. It is a responsibility of managers to articulate and describe what is to be achieved by the employee and the key characteristics of how it is to be done.

Effective performance management starts with the manager sharing their views on what is required and engaging with the employee in order to enlist their input and insight. Too often the focus is on the latter stages of the process — the reckoning where the entrails of what has been achieved are counted. Instead the focus should be on the early stages of agreeing what needs to be done and the approach to be adopted. This requires a real conversation, a meeting of hearts and minds about what is to be achieved.

Yes, performance counts but conversation is a necessary step at the start and along the way. Conversation leads to clarity, openness and trust. Performance will surely follow.

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*Terry Fewtrell is Principal Consultant with Yellow Edge, and Kerry Martin is an Executive Director of the company and practice leader in the areas of performance management and organisational capabilities.*

*Yellow Edge is a strategic people consulting company that provides creative solutions for building and sustaining performance at the individual, team and organisational levels.*