Performance Improvement Insights:
Relationships as Valuable Accomplishments

Would you say that good relationships are among our most valuable accomplishments, both in our personal and work lives? I certainly would. In this column I would like to explore the idea of identifying relationships as accomplishments (or work outputs) in the analysis of performance.

Tom Gilbert (1978) insisted that we focus performance analysis on the valuable accomplishments that people, teams, and processes produce, rather than on the costly behavior needed to produce them. My colleagues and I have spent decades helping clients and fellow professionals learn to distinguish clearly between behavior and accomplishments and to use an accomplishment-based approach in performance consulting, leadership, and management. In that context, we have identified relationships as an important category of accomplishments to be considered when examining the performance of a job title, a team, or a process. While relationships are not always critical prerequisites for success, they certainly are in many cases.

To some, it might seem cold or inhumane to call a relationship an accomplishment or a work output. But consider the fact that in both our personal and professional lives we spend a lot of time and activity establishing and maintaining relationships that work for us (and, hopefully, for those
with whom we have those relationships). When they are good, things go more smoothly than when they are not good. And in many situations, the difference between a good relationship and a not-so-good one is the difference between long-term success and failure.

I often ask people in our Six Boxes Practitioner program or Coach-Manage-Lead programs to list the names of people or groups with whom they have important relationships, and then to mark the ones that are truly good, helpful, and working well. There are almost always a few that are not so good. Distinguishing between relationships that are working and those that are not can help us to better define what we call “criteria for a good one”—the features of those relationships that make them good. This is an essential element in performance analysis because it sets clear expectations and provides a foundation for precise measurement and feedback.

For example, at Microsoft some years ago, I worked with a team focused on developing successful team managers in software subdisciplines such as coding, testing, user interface design, and so on. When we interviewed successful people in that role, we determined that cross-discipline relationships with managers of other teams could be considered “good” if they met the following criteria:

- Mutual acknowledgement of technical competence
- Free exchange of information
- Timely response to communications (within 24 hours)
- Work toward shared goals

You can see that if a working relationship consistently exhibits these characteristics, one can call it good. And that if it does not, there is an opportunity for improvement.

Following the “logic” of performance improvement, describing an accomplishment (we call it a work output) and the criteria for a good one leads to identifying the behavior needed to produce and maintain the desired work output. We can interview and observe exemplary performers, those who consistently excel at the particular performance, to glean best practices behavior. In this case, they would be those team managers known for consistently productive working relationships with peers. Once we identify specific best practices behavior, we can set expectations for managers, provide feedback, recognize success, model or teach specific best practices behavior, and better select people to fill the role.

Taking such an accomplishment-based approach sets clear expectations for what it means to be successful. It allows us to coach, manage, and teach others with a clearer measure of the outcome. And it focuses on the value delivered to the organization, rather than on activity or behavior for its own sake. In the end, a development plan for establishing this type of relationship is likely to be leaner, more focused, and ultimately more cost-effective than a generic soft skills training program designed to help people get along with others.

I like this example because it demonstrates how an accomplishment-based approach to performance improvement can clarify an otherwise fuzzy definition of desired performance. I also like it because, let’s face it, relationships are often at the heart of a successful personal and professional life. And if we can be clearer about what it means for them to be “good” and what it takes to establish and maintain good ones, we and those whom we serve will benefit.
As you consider efforts to improve business results such as operational efficiency, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction, include relationships in the types of accomplishments you might decide to identify and improve. This otherwise “soft” area of performance might benefit substantially from greater clarity with a focus on desired accomplishments.

Reference


About the Author

Carl Binder, CPT, PhD, is CEO of The Performance Thinking Network, LLC. He received ISPI’s Thomas F. Gilbert Award and Lifetime Member Award. A thought leader, presenter at ISPI conferences since the mid 1980s, and frequent author in ISPI publications, Carl began his career as a doctoral student with B.F. Skinner and entered the field of performance improvement in the early 1980s. Mentored by Gilbert, Harless, and other HPT pioneers, Carl has been communicating the essentials of behavior science and performance engineering in plain English for over 40 years. Contact him at carlbinder@sixboxes.com.