

## **Core Practices for Creating a High-Performance Workplace**

### *A Disciplined Approach to Leading and Managing*

*How can I get people to do what I want them to do?* That was the unspoken but underlying refrain in a conversation I was having at a breakfast meeting not long ago. I was sitting across from a CEO of a five-year-old company which was in the process of changing its business model.

The CEO was telling me about a performance problem he was having with his VP of Customer Service. The VP had been with the company for a couple of years and was being asked to shift the focus of his department's activities from working directly with customers to interfacing with new strategic partners; other organizations who would now provide direct client support. The CEO was frustrated that his VP was not implementing the required changes in his department. He didn't know how to move the process forward.

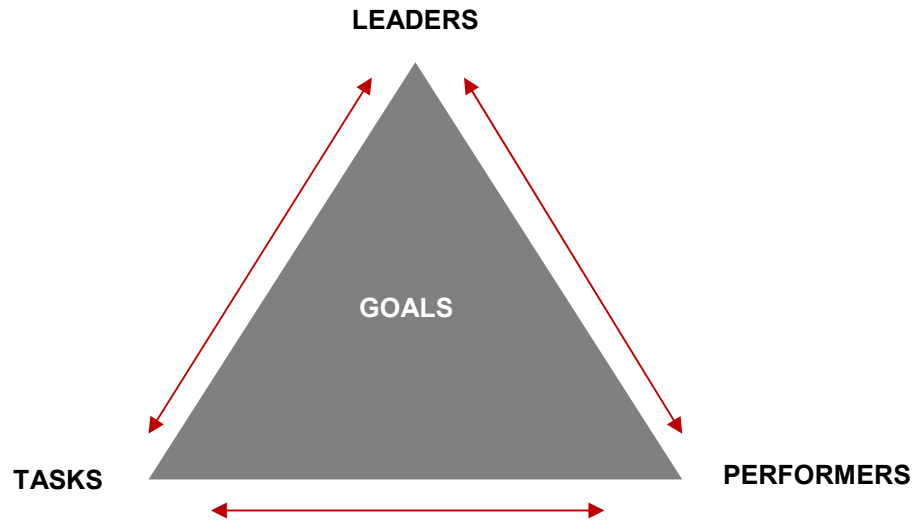
The purpose of this paper is to unveil the mystery behind the performance process – to give managers a discipline for fixing these kinds of performance problems or preventing them from taking hold in the first place. To this end, it will introduce the High-Performance Triangle, a framework that will point the way to specific strategies for elevating and optimizing an organization's performance.

### **The High-Performance Triangle**

Did you ever eat a good meal and wonder how it was prepared? I admire good cooks. They know how to combine ingredients to get the results they want. Some people have an intuitive sense about these things, whereas others need to follow instructions. The same is true about managers in the workplace.

The High-Performance Triangle (HPT) is like a recipe – one for creating a workplace in which people and organizations reach optimum levels of performance. It identifies the four elements that are critical to the effectiveness of any performance process: goals, leaders, performers and tasks (Illustration 1). By understanding these elements, managers will learn how their actions can inspire or inhibit the ability of people to execute and perform effectively.

Illustration 1



**Goals** All effective performance initiatives are directed toward specific goals. In order to be most useful, these should engage people, be worthy of their efforts and have a clear value to the organization, team and individuals.

**Leaders** People in the leader position have the capacity to fashion how goals are achieved. A leader is anyone who assigns work to another with the expectation that the task will be completed.

**Performers** A performer is anyone who has been assigned work and is responsible for achieving a goal. At different times, managers can find themselves in either role; performer or leader.

**Tasks** The nature of assigned tasks can complicate or ease the performance process. Tasks range from work done at executive levels to hands-on tasks performed by frontline employees.

The arrows signify the attention needed to continually align and fine-tune the four elements in order for individuals and organizations to reach their potential.

Goals, leaders, performers and tasks represent the top set of performance elements. In order to complete the High-Performance Triangle, a second level needs to be included (Illustration 2).

**Illustration 2**



The following charts provide a brief description of the second set of elements.

Elements Level 1	Elements Level 2	Why These Elements Are Important
<b>Leaders</b>	<i>Clear Expectations</i>	Clear expectations set direction for performers and provide a foundation for monitoring, reinforcing and/or adjusting work as it goes forward.
	<i>Sufficient Support</i>	Performers may need management support to get through obstacles or rough patches that can interfere with a task.
	<i>Performance Feedback</i>	Feedback lets people know how they are being perceived – both positive and corrective feedback helps them adjust their performance accordingly.
<b>Performers</b>	<i>Right Fit</i>	When assigning tasks, leaders need to consider a performer’s skills, knowledge, and experience, as well as their physical, intellectual, and emotional ability to carry it out.
	<i>Interest &amp; Commitment</i>	Performers are more likely to take ownership of a task and put in the needed effort if they are interested in the assignment and committed to it.
	<i>Self-Management</i>	Performers are responsible for using time wisely and focusing on activities that will move them toward performance goals.
<b>Tasks</b>	<i>Workflow Design</i>	Workflow is the sequence of steps and activities required to get a task done. A well-thought-out workflow process is critical to improving productivity.
	<i>Task Interference</i>	No matter how good and dedicated people are, obstacles that interfere with performance gradually take a toll on morale and results.
	<i>Personal Consequences</i>	People often receive consequences from doing tasks. If you provide good service to a customer and receive a smile and a ‘thank you’ – that is a positive consequence. The objective is to build positive consequences into work and drive out negative ones wherever possible.

The elements of the HPT are based on the work of academics and practitioners who study workplace performance, as well as my own experience. Gary Rummier's work has shown that the majority of performance problems (80-85%) exist because of deficiencies in the *leader* and *task* categories.<sup>1</sup> Within these two elements, the focus quickly shifts toward *leaders* for improving performance.

It is worthy to note that the two elements controlled by *leaders* – setting expectations and providing clear feedback – are the most effective, fastest, and least expensive remedies for raising performance levels. *Task* issues are usually more difficult to change. They require management decisions and capital expenditures that are often outside the purview of any single manager.

According to the research, a lot rides on how disciplined *leaders* are in setting expectations, providing support and giving feedback.

### **How to Use the HPT: A Case Study**

My wife and I were on a business trip to Australia and Hong Kong a few years ago. We decided to add vacation time in Vietnam to visit Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) and the Mekong Delta. Because we were to be there for only a week, we hired a guide to plan an itinerary and help us understand the cultural and historical context of the sites we were seeing. It was an effective use of our time and energy and a richer experience than if we tried to figure it out ourselves.

Think of the HPT as a guide – one that can save you time by drawing your attention to the elements that can have the greatest affect on your organization's performance. Through understanding this terrain, you can begin to frame performance conversations. Whether you're preparing to kick off a new project or need to improve an underperforming situation, the High Performance Triangle can provide the framework for these discussions.

As an example, let's revisit the situation when the CEO needed to figure out why his VP of Customer Service was not making the changes that were expected. In this instance, he needed to create a guide that would help both him and the VP get to the bottom of the problem. Using the HPT, he could create a series of questions such as the following:

- Leader      Are the *goals* and *expectations* that we discussed clear? Have I given him *feedback* about my observations and concerns? Does he need additional *support* that I'm not aware of?
- Performer    Is he still the *right fit* for the position – able to make the necessary changes? Is he *interested* in operating in this new way? Can he *commit* to executing the changes? Is there anything preventing him from following the planned timeline (*self-management*)?
- Task        Does the new process (*workflow*) for interfacing with strategic partners make sense to him? Is anything *interfering* with making the shift to the new system? Are there any negative *consequences* from using this new approach that I'm not aware of?

The objective is to use these questions to engage the VP in discussing the problem and creating a strategy for getting back on track. The HPT framework has guided the CEO toward the key areas for inquiry. In order to develop workable solutions, the conversation needs to get beneath the surface to hear the VP's concerns and feelings about the situation. The HPT provides a foundation for these discussions, but it is the manner in which they're conducted that will determine their effectiveness.

## HPT Conversations: Guiding Principles

The High-Performance Triangle is most useful in conjunction with a set of guiding principles for conducting the conversations that need to take place between leaders and performers. They provide guidelines for engaging others in performance improvement discussions and having them play a role in creating the context of success. Following are three guiding principles that will help to make these conversations productive.

***Aim for Two-Way Conversations:*** In two-way conversations, each party is open to hearing the other's point of view. A participative discussion is one in which both parties feel that they have had an opportunity to express themselves and be heard. The objective is to bring out the best ideas and get ownership for final decisions. In his work with GE, Noel Tichy observed that by listening to people you encourage them to think and by encouraging them to think, you can win their involvement and commitment.<sup>2</sup>

**Consider Individual as well as Organizational Needs:** Unless balance is deliberately sought, organizational goals can become the exclusive focus at the expense of individual needs. High-performance organizations understand the importance of supporting people in achieving their personal goals. By keeping this in mind, we have a good chance of satisfying the needs of both the organization and the performer.

**Remain Goal-Focused:** As the center element in the HPT, goals should be the mantra of all meetings. A focus on goals brings purpose to conversations. It provides the parameters that help to shape and direct discussions. The purpose of work-related conversations should be on moving us closer to our objectives.

## Summary

The High-Performance Triangle offers a discipline for creating a workplace in which there is a high degree of operational execution. By using it effectively, managers can raise the level of both individual and organizational achievement.

It can be used to: 1) plan for and start new projects off on the right foot, 2) raise performance levels of people who are underperforming, 3) provide a foundation for a management development program, 4) prepare teams to work as a cohesive unit, and 5) help managers craft a personal leadership and management strategy.

The elements of the High-Performance Triangle help to frame performance conversations. The three guiding principles for conducting these discussions provide a foundation for having them be productive – keeping everyone focused on the important goals.

A survey for using the HPT is provided below. The purpose for including the questionnaire is to give you a tool for analyzing and improving performance in your workplace.<sup>3</sup>

**The High-Performance Triangle Survey: A Worksheet**

This survey provides a mechanism to troubleshoot an underperforming situation and assess what needs to be done.

Complete the survey for a person or group whose performance concerns you. Focus on a specific task. Answer the following questions to the best of your ability by selecting yes (Y), no (N) or don't know (DK); and add a short comment if it helps to clarify your thinking. The objective is to give you a framework for assessing why someone or a group may be underperforming and help launch a dialogue to turn the situation around.

	Y	N	DK
<p><b>Leaders</b></p> <p>Clear Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are expectations clear to the performer?</li> <li>• Have the expectations been discussed and accepted?</li> <li>• Are the expected results measurable?</li> </ul> <p>Sufficient Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do people feel that if needed, management or others are available for support?</li> <li>• Are scheduled review meetings held for complex or long-term assignments?</li> </ul> <p>Performance Feedback</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is there a mechanism for letting people know how they are performing?</li> <li>• Do people receive positive or corrective feedback when appropriate?</li> <li>• Do people receive feedback relatively soon after performance?</li> </ul>			
<p><b>Performers</b></p> <p>Right Fit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the performer have the skills and knowledge to do the assigned tasks?</li> <li>• Does the performer have the experience to function with confidence?</li> <li>• Is the performer physically, intellectually, and emotionally able to do the task?</li> </ul> <p>Interest &amp; Commitment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the performer interested and committed to the task?</li> </ul> <p>Self-Management</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the performer managing herself/himself effectively?</li> </ul>			
<p><b>Tasks</b></p> <p>Workflow Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is the task workflow an effective and efficient process?</li> </ul> <p>Task Interference</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there barriers in the organization preventing optimal performance?</li> </ul> <p>Personal Consequences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are positive or negative consequences received from doing the task?</li> </ul>			



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gary Rummler, *Improving Performance*, 1990, includes a W. E. Deming reference (1982), page 73

<sup>2</sup> Noel Tichy, *Control Your Destiny or Someone Else Will*, 1993, page 172

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Keptner-Tregoe program, *Analyzing the Performance System*

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