

A PERFORMANCE DIALOGUE

What's more important, a person's performance or the result? Which comes first? Does one lead to another? Obviously, the performance leads to the result, right? If a person performs poorly, the odds of the results being achieved are less than if the person performed well. But what do most managers focus their employees on? The results, right? After all, we've been told over and over again that we need to set goals for our employees and for ourselves. Goals are great, but without a focus on performance, they begin to feel more like just a result that needs chasing. And rarely do people perform at their best when they are simply focused on the result. They perform at their best when they focus on the act of performing in a way that will end up achieving the goal. In other words, the goal or results are in view, but the day-to-day focus is on the performance that is going to lead to achieving them.

I'm not saying goals and results are not important. It's why we do what we do – a business that didn't achieve its goals will not be around long. Not achieving goals and results is not something that anyone wants. But goals and results need to be used appropriately to get the best performance out of a person. And, appropriate for one person is not necessarily appropriate for another.

Imagine I tell my employee, Frank, "We need to create a training program from scratch, about a subject we have no experience in, and we need it completed by year-end. The company is depending on it – we need to prove we can do this, both to the client and to our own investors. You're the curriculum development person, so you own this project." We then spend more time talking through the project, and especially developing a clear mental image of what the result is going to look like.

Frank goes away thinking, "Big important project. I want to deliver – that's just me. A bit of pressure is good. This project has got to be good, though. It's okay – I know what the end result is supposed to look like. I want to show people what I can do with this project..."

So far, so good. Frank knows the rules of the game, and most importantly, he's taken ownership of the project. A month goes by and Frank is performing well. But, it's taking longer than he or I predicted to learn what's needed – the project is a little behind schedule. And this is where I make a mistake...

"Frank, remember how important this project is. Around here, we meet or exceed our goals. It's got to be done on time, and it's got to be right – just like we envisioned. You're behind schedule, and that's not good"

What goes through Frank's mind? Here's a few things that could – are likely to – go through his mind:

- "That's unfair. When we started this we didn't even know what we were really doing. I'm having to learn this as we go along. Now that I've learned some things, I don't know if that end result was accurate. If he's so sure of himself, why doesn't **he** do the project?!"
- "Hmm... Pressure. I've got to make this happen. I don't have time to learn more about this – I need to start generating. No more mistakes – no more time for that. I've got to get this done. Darn – this used to be fun, but not now..."
- "I don't seem to be very good at staying on schedule with this project. Come to think of it, there was that project last year that I didn't complete on time either – maybe I'm just not very good at delivering on time. Wow, I'm screwing things up here..."

None of these scenarios are good. In the first, Frank is likely to perform worse, and for sure he won't feel like he can come to me for help – he's beginning to get annoyed with me. In the second scenario, Frank is putting more pressure on himself (likely decreasing his ability to perform), he's become

focused on the result instead of his performance (the learning that the project requires), and he's becoming afraid to make a mistake. In the third scenario, by me focusing on Frank as a person rather than his action or performance ("You're behind schedule" rather than "The project is behind schedule"), he's losing confidence in himself to deliver – he's building a mental model of himself as someone who can't deliver on time.

So, what's the alternative? What could I have done? What if...

Ross: "Frank, how's the project going?"

Frank: "I'm behind schedule."

Ross: "Okay. Is there a reason?"

Frank: "It's taking longer to learn what I need to really do what the project needs. And every day that goes by, I get a little further behind. On top of that, I'm beginning to think that what the end result should look like is not what we initially agreed to."

Ross: "Do you think that if you put more into learning what the project needs, you'll be able to make up the time?"

Frank: "I don't know – that scares me a little. If I get too far behind, I'll never be able to make up the time."

Ross: "Are you better off ignoring what you think you need to learn and just jump into developing the curriculum? Is that a better way?"

Frank: "When I really think about that approach, I realize that's not it. If I do that, I'm sure the project will not end up being what we want – it won't be at the standards you and I want. I really want to make this right. Actually, I've got to admit that I got side-tracked for a week as well – I thought I was doing so well that I took my eye off the ball and started 'playing' around with another project – sorry."

Ross: "Okay, so what's the solution?"

Frank: "Well, I think I need to stay focused on continuing to learn what the project needs. I'm going to keep pushing myself – I will make the deadline, no matter what it takes. I'm also getting a picture of what the end product is going to look like – what we really need. Can I tell you my thoughts?"

Ross: "Absolutely. I really appreciate your personal commitment to making this project happen on time, and on making sure it's done right. Remember what I said about making mistakes – it's okay as long as you learn, we talk about them, and then we make them right. And by right, I mean in the end. I don't really care – within reason! – how you get the project done, as long as it's done. And I hear your commitment to doing that, so we don't need to talk about that anymore. As for what the end result looks like, let's talk about it. As long as it achieves the goals we talked about – making sure we deliver the project on time and we achieve the client's goals, then I'm okay. What are you thinking?"

In this dialogue, I make it okay for Frank to make mistakes, and to admit to them. I make it so he can take some pressure off himself. I encourage him to come up with the solution, so he owns it again (rather than me telling him he needs to meet the deadline in a way that's going to make him want to throw the whole project back at me). I recognize his commitment to the project. I focus on the project, not on Frank. I make it safe for him to talk to me about changes. And I make it so he can be heard.

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