

Analyzing Performance Problems

A Step-by-Step Procedure To Avoid Time-Wasting Effort

John Anderson

This short article describes a simple, three-step approach to analyzing performance problems. It should be used when you are dissatisfied with what some other person or group is doing, and you would like to change it. The steps described should help you understand a situation better before deciding what to do about it. A great deal of time and effort is very often wasted by people acting before they understand, prescribing before they diagnose, attempting to fix before they know what they are fixing.

Step No. 1

The first step is to describe the behavior you want to change as precisely as you can. Who is doing it? When? Where? To whom? How much?

Look for differences between situations where the behavior occurs and situations where it doesn't. Be very specific. For example, don't be content with broad diagnostic statements like those in A below if the corresponding statement in B is really all you mean:

A

People aren't coming to work on time.

B

The 10 people hired last month in Dept. X are still coming in up to 15 minutes late two or three times a week, and mostly on Monday.

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A

George is afraid to make difficult decisions.

Mary can't take shorthand.

You can't take those people at their word anymore!

B

George often lets quality get too far off on line A before he'll shut down . . . especially when Herman is the mechanic on duty.

Mary's speed is O.K., but she makes too many mistakes, especially when she takes dictation from Clark.

The men in Dept. B at location X regularly run up to three months past the date of their original project completion estimates. This seems particularly so on kinds of projects.

At this point, then, you will have something reasonably specific to focus on, and you are less likely to waste your time attempting to change things that didn't need changing. You know who the change target is, and who he isn't. And you know specifically what behavior of his you want to change. You can shoot with a rifle instead of a shotgun.

Step No. 2

The next step is to try to understand the most likely reasons for the target's present behavior so you can aim the corrective rifle at causes rather than symptoms. Possibilities to consider are:

- a. *Tangible Rewards*: Is there anything at stake here for him with regard to money, security, physical comfort, etc? Does he stand to benefit in any tangible way by persisting in what he is doing vs. changing in the direction you might like him to?
- b. *Expectations of Others*: What kinds of pressures might he be subject to here? Is anyone that is apt to be important to him (e.g., his friends, family, boss, etc.) exerting any pressures that have an effect on his continuing to do the thing you would like to change?
- c. *Time and Facilities*: Does he really

have the time, tools, funds, work space, etc., to do what you would like him to?

- d. *Intrinsic Interest*: Are any of the factors operating here ones that have to do with what kinds of things are interesting or challenging to him?
- e. *Knowledge and Skill*: The question here is whether he has (and believes he has) the ability to change in the direction you would like, even if he wanted to. Are there any prerequisite skills or knowledge he would need to acquire first?

The thing to do, then, is to list out under each of these categories anything that might be influencing the target to do what he is doing. Initially, no doubt, some of this will be strictly guesswork on your part, so look your hunches over carefully to see if in any instances you need more information to be sure.

Step No. 3

The next step is to select from your conclusions in Step No. 2 those factors you think are probably most influential in keeping the target person's or group's behavior where it is. Also mark those you think might be easiest for you to get some leverage on.

In general (and this is important)

you will do better if you look first for opportunities to alleviate or remove pressures that keep him doing what he is doing now, rather than piling on new counteracting incentives, pressures, or threats to overcome them. You can move a person by doing the latter, but if you haven't removed pressures on the other side, he still suffers a loss of some kind every time he does the new thing you want him to, and this may well take a toll on him in some undesirable way.

Illustration

To illustrate the whole sequence, suppose you are a circus manager and you have just hired a new cat man. You soon discover that one thing he never does in the grand finale of his act, though, is put his head in the lion's mouth. You want him to because you think the crowd would like it. He says he will sometime but he keeps putting it off.

Step No. 1

What is your problem? Have circus performers become irresponsible? Are they no longer interested in giving their best for the customers? Or do you only have a chicken-hearted lion trainer on your hands? No, none of these, necessarily.

All you know for sure is that this lion trainer won't put his head in that lion's mouth at the end of his performance.

Step No. 2

Why might this be? You do some checking around and decide:

1. As a matter of fact, he could lose his head if he did it.
2. Lions have bad breath.
3. His wife and nine children tell him daily to keep his head *out* of there.
4. The lion gets nervous toward the end of the act (it's a long act).
5. The lion trainer doesn't think of it as something that would be fun.
6. You aren't sure whether he appreciates just how much the crowd really would like it.
7. He probably does know how to do it, or at least he did, because you find out from another performer that he did have it in his act with another circus up until about six years ago. This was also the year he got married.

Step No. 3

What to do about it? What you could do is develop a new *How Our Circus System Operates* training program for all the performers to convince them of the need to keep the customers cheering or the circus will fail and they will all be out of a job.

Or you could tell the lion trainer you will never give him another raise if he doesn't get his head in there all the way and fast.

But you remember this checklist, so instead you look back at your conclusions in Step No. 2 and decide:

No. 1 is crucial—This is probably the big factor. If you could think of some way to make it really safer, you would probably have the problem solved.

No. 3 is probably what makes No. 1 factor so big, though, so maybe, if education is the answer, you need to direct some or most of it at the wife and nine kids, and not particularly at the lion tamer. Maybe you could also provide some insurance that would alleviate some of their concern.

No. 2—you can see where this could be pretty objectionable and decide it would be easy enough to have one of the keepers throw a little gargle in the drinking water right before the act.

No. 4 could be important, or at least you could find out by moving the

head-in-mouth thing up earlier in the act. This might make it a little safer.

No. 5 would be a nice factor if you could use it, but you decide you can't do much about that.

No. 6 and No. 7—He probably does know how much the crowd would like it, and he probably knows how

already since he used to do it.

Conclusion

If you go through these steps before concluding prematurely that your performance problem is one that can be solved by training alone, you are apt to save yourself a lot of unnecessary work.

Connecticut Chapter Training Man of the Year Award



Willy R. Peterson, Supervisor of training, Hamilton Standard Division of Pratt & Whitney, Windsor Locks, Connecticut, was recently cited for his outstanding contributions in the area of training and manpower development. Mr. Peterson has been chairman of the chapter's Educational Committee for the past three years. In addition, he has been active in programming and recently conducted a special program for The Hartford

County Manufacturing Association on supervisory training.

Prior recipients of this award were Doctor Paul Mali, Director of Training, Electric Boat, Groton, Connecticut and Professor Seigmar Blamberg, University of Connecticut. Presenting the award is John N. Middlemas (left), President Connecticut Chapter and Roger Williams (right), Travelers Insurance Company.