Improving Personal Performance and Management Productivity[1]

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Most of us find, as consumers, a notion of instant gratification attached to available goods and services. Much of this learned behavior is carried to our places of work and results in a measure of anticipation of immediate solutions to the problems of management. Scientific and mathematical models generally have served us well in projecting and analyzing natural phenomena; however, they may hinder the development of social skills. Management productivity is extremely difficult to measure directly because so much of it is nonquantifiable. However, marked improvement in both real and perceived performance can result through stress reduction, effective group cooperation and competition and the establishment of appropriate standards. Prescriptive solutions may not succeed because of the inappropriate use of rational models to describe nonrational or emotion-laden situations. This paper will focus on pragmatic elements of professional management as they relate to the technically oriented manager.

Much of what we call learning has resulted from didactic situations deliberately contrived and structured by various institutions in our society, the purpose of which is to inculcate in the individual consumer (student) the notions thought appropriate by that institution. To some extent, this reflects a meeting of societal needs as they are perceived by the population at large, i.e., group consensus. Unfortunately, many of these didactic situations have been flavored more by the needs of the instructors than by those of the students or consumers. As we are all imbued with the scientific method, we tend to put all learning into cause and effect relationships. More importantly, structured situations tend to deal with technical or technically related skills, whether engineering, mathematics, accounting, legal, medical or whatever. The learning process that we undergo results in an analytically oriented approach, such that some of the most interesting historical and literary works, not unlike mathematical problems, are chopped up into segments, whereby their flavor and, to a large extent, the essence of what the author was attempting to accomplish is lost.

The other form of learning is what I call incidental or perhaps even vicarious. In this case, we observe many behavioral forms and are stimulated by them in different ways. The critical aspect of incidental learning is our level of unawareness while participating in the process. As a consequence, we learn a whole range of responses and behaviors of which we are not even aware. In addition, this incidental learning tends to be very strongly flavored with an intuitive as opposed to a scientific approach toward the subject matter. The most poignant example of incidental learning is in the area of social skills. Many of the skills we have acquired

come from models encountered over the course of our lifetime. Most of us never question the appropriateness or effectiveness of our behavior, nor the models from which we copied. It is possible that we have learned inappropriate behaviors which we think are appropriate.

We have additionally learned that most problems should have immediate solutions or, in consumer terms, there must be, as a consequence of spending money, instant gratification of the needs that we express. This message, the basis of advertising and promotion for a variety of products and services, is presented to us innumerable times throughout the day. It is understandable, therefore, that we expect to be able to meet whatever problems or desires that arise with some form of instant success or gratification. This message of instant relief from stress is reinforced by some of our most revered institutions.

Many problems that we face in the emotional or nontechnical sphere of our activity are primarily interpersonal or social in nature. We often can fool ourselves into thinking that nontechnical problems are really technical in nature, but the application of scientific principles and the scientific method in fact may not yield appropriate solutions. Worse than that, this approach may further aggravate a situation by increasing the stress level that results from not achieving a satisfactory solution to or modification of it, thus not alleviating what we perceived to be the problem.

Since we have been inculcated with the idea that the world runs on some measure of rationality, we search constantly for rational explanations to the situations we face, not recognizing that some are deliberately or inadvertently contrived to meet someone else's personal needs and have been masked with a notion of technicality. Probably the best example of this kind of situation could occur in inventory taking. The owner of an operation might like to have a particular value for her inventory of goods. As a clerk, you count and subsequently value all these items, but the total is not what was needed or desired. Because the result does not meet the need of the inventory taking, solutions are sought in terms of technical problems: e.g., "We don't count it properly; we didn't value it properly; we didn't add it up properly." In fact, the process may have been carried out correctly but the final value is not what the boss was looking for. She then seeks a rational solution to a problem raised as a result of a personal or business need unrelated to the technical activity of counting and valuing.

When a discrepancy exists between anticipation and actuality, a situation arises which psychologists refer to as cognitive dissonance. We anticipate that problems lend themselves to solutions that result from applying rules of logic and the scientific method. However, the realization that rationality does not solve all problems, particularly in a highly technically oriented industry, creates discord. Because we have

learned our lessons well, most particularly in the areas that are scientifically bound, we feel that we must be looking at an anomaly and promptly discard the reality. After doing this for a few years, we become almost unrealistic in our expectations and view situations such that the world must be adjusted, as opposed to adjusting our own perspectives. It rarely dawns on us that our models may be inappropriate rather than the reality being incorrectly interpreted.

Improving Personal Performance. While there is a myriad of factors which affect our personal performance in a vocational activity, there are three which we have found to be key. When addressed effectively, they will result in much less stressful work circumstances as well as improved efficiency and effectiveness.

The first factor is clarity of purpose. Our experience has shown that, notwithstanding the plethora of job descriptions available, many individuals within an organization don't really understand what their jobs are. Much of what they infer to be their jobs is the result of attempting to read the behavior of their boss. Worse than that, often their readings of the situation and drawing of conclusions are wrong. We frequently hear such statements as, "He has never done it right since the day he joined the company."

Functions to be performed by an individual within an organizational role amount to three or perhaps four at the most. If there are 23 items in your job description, only three or four of them are really meaningful in terms of performing the role effectively. If you select the wrong three or four, or try to do all 23, you will not be particularly successful in your endeavors. The most important aspect in role clarification is to ensure that you understand the requirements of the role clearly. It is not necessarily from the objective data that you will be able to do this. You must learn to read situations very carefully and must spend as much time analyzing that aspect of your role as in solving many of the technical problems which arise in the course of day-to-day activity. Our sense of work ethic and achievement may drive us to total ineffectiveness rather than accomplishment, by focusing our attention on individual task needs as opposed to organizational needs.

The second key factor in improving personal performance is to make use of measurable and observable data that is available. That is, ensure that the goals and objectives are measurable and clear in your mind and that you understand where you are when you start a project or assignment and where you will be when it's finished. It is very important to understand when the achievement has been made. The other area in which you must use observable data effectively is the behavior of others. Too frequently, we attribute concrete and measurable behavior to things like motivation and statements of intent. To put it colloquially, there are many people who talk a good game but when called to play, do it relatively poorly. While the "sizzle" is extremely important in getting a person's attention on a product, if you do not have the steak to deliver, it will be hollow and seem so. Similarly, people may state and expound principles and ideas, but if, from an organizational point of view, they are not translated into deeds and acts, they are hollow statements. It would be foolhardy to suggest that you

cannot proceed through a career by doing precisely that; there are enough examples to suggest the contrary. However, to be successful without doing anything usually requires astute political skills and possibly a heavy bank roll.

In the area of measurable data, it is important that performance appraisals reflect identifiable achievements. In general, because roles are not clear, the expectation of performance is not clear between you and your boss or certainly between the individual and the organization. As a consequence, what the individual thinks in terms of doing a good job may be viewed by the boss as poor performance. It is necessary therefore to ensure some measure of agreement as to what is to be done, by whom and when. A performance appraisal then becomes almost redundant, for if you understand what has to be done and what it will look like when it is finished, you don't need anybody to tell you whether it has been completed satisfactorily.

The final factor in improving personal performance is the area of relationships—between individuals and between the individual and the organization. Many of us, because of our formal education, come to believe that we actually understand some situations and know what we are talking about. Perhaps the worst aspect of this is that we begin to take ourselves too seriously and sometimes believe our own fantasies. Very often we lose our sense of humor about ourselves and the situation. If the world weren't put together with some measure of humor, it would be not only a dull but a very uninteresting place to be. One effective way to improve your relationships is to take yourself not quite so seriously. There are serious situations against which you must apply your technical skills, but those do not include everything. There is humor to be found in every situation. The question is: can you find it, identify it and make use of it in building a relationship? A relationship seems to go best when nobody worries about it. This will usually arise when there is some humor involved in the interactions.

By focusing your attention on at least these key factors in terms of your personal performance, you can reasonably expect to see some improvement. Trying to eliminate your defensiveness toward these key factors—that is, the rationalization of what you are doing in terms of them—may be a good starting point. Look at what needs to be done to be more efficient and effective; then do it.

Management Productivity. Management productivity has been a hot topic in recent times because organizations have found themselves burdened with heavy indirect costs or overhead. The bulk of this overhead seems to be management salaries and expense. Productivity in general can be seen as the ratio of a measurable output to a measurable input. Several numbers result from that ratio which provide an indication of productivity changes. In most businesses, output can be measured in terms of what we call the top line or gross sales and the input in terms of the direct cost of making the product or providing the service which generates those sales. The other cost is the indirect cost or overhead; the difference between the output and the total cost is the bottom line or profit. One inherent danger in focusing solely on the numerical description of a business is that instead of

describing the activity, the numerical measurements themselves become the end. As a consequence, organizations and managers may undertake actions which in a sense will correct the numbers but don't address the problems. That can be most dangerous when an organization's survival is at stake.

When you look at the productivity of an industry or business activity, it is very difficult to determine where management fits in terms of productivity. I think that looking at what role management plays in the activity may help to clarify thinking in this area. The purpose of management is to achieve goals and objectives and has as functional elements such things as planning and organizing, controlling and developing, and decision making and problem solving. In a sense, management doesn't do anything productive; it generates responses to changes and perceived changes in the environment such that goals and objectives are achieved. Good management has occurred when both organizational and individual needs have been met. Good management is therefore a post facto evaluation rather than a prescribed activity. It is highly pragmatic in nature, and similar managements can be good or bad depending on the consequences they generate. It is for this reason that prescriptive solutions to managerial problems tend not to be applicable in a recipe fashion. Experience has shown that when the functional elements are well done, things tend to go better. However, like commodity markets, nobody can tell you what the price of soybeans will be tomorrow, any more than they can tell you whether this particular style or that particular function is going to yield the desired results. It's a statistical item in that sense, with a measure of risk associated with it.

Many of the prescriptive solutions in today's literature tend to be somewhat glib and apparently manipulative. Rather than addressing the needs of the business or organization, individuals within an organi-zation will be tempted to implement programs that are suggested to fix adverse circumstances. In the same way that public school children can spot a manipula-tive teacher, people within organizations can see the same in one of their leaders. The most important aspect of improving management productivity is effective relationships and efficient communication. The organizational needs that must be met are, in order of importance, survival, maintenance and adap-tation and growth. The individual needs to be met are security, opportunity for achievement, material and personal rewards, and growth. Organizational needs are met directly through the functional activity of the organization. Individual needs are met in the course of performing the function. The single word that best describes good management is integrity—the oneness achieved when both organizational and individual needs are met. Most problems faced by organizations are not new in the sense that they appear one morning out of the blue. They have developed over a period of time and represent the cumulative effect of a series of decisions, both good and bad. Consequently, to anticipate or expect a quick fix or a "recipe" solution is quite unreasonable.

In addressing these problems, it is a must that a situation be carefully analyzed, the shortcomings of the organization be identified clearly, and the roles and functions of the individuals be articulated. The solutions begin when the first small step is taken to address problems with the expectation and under-standing that it will take some period of time to achieve correction. One generally is not in a situation which is going to turn magically around.

Like that of an individual, an organization's per-formance depends upon its clarity of purpose—what is its raison d'être; its commonality of interest—do the members share the purpose, and its commitment to execution—whether we only talk a good game.