

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

A Guide to Effective Consulting
About Performance & Training Related Issues

©1998 MECCA
All Rights Reserved.
Management Education Consulting Company of America
40W919 Elodie Drive
Elburn, Illinois 20119

STEP 1. Describe the Performance Problem

Ask questions that will help to clearly identify the nature of the problem and why it is felt a problem exists. Ask questions like the following:

- What are the differences between what is *now* occurring and what *should* be occurring?
- What *specific* behaviors are occurring that should be changed?
- What are the characteristics of the “ideal” performer? How does the performance you are getting differ from the *ideal*?

ACTION

After specifically describing the performance problem, go to STEP 2.

STEP 2: Is the Problem Important?

Not all performance problems are worth the time and effort necessary to change them. You should try to find out whether the problem is important enough to warrant attention. Ask the following questions:

- What would happen if the problem were ignored?
- Are there other more pressing problems that need attention?
- How will business be adversely affected should the problem continue?

The intent of this step is to determine whether the problem is important.

ACTION

If it is important to business and is of high priority, go to STEP 3.

If it really is not important or is of low priority, go to STEP 10.

STEP 3: Is There a Skill Deficiency?

Performance problems typically are of two types: those that occur due to a lack of skill, and those that occur due to a lack of motivation. In other words, some persons may not perform satisfactorily because they don't know *how* to perform any better (lack of skill), or because they don't *want* to perform any better (lack of motivation). As you investigate the specific performance problems, ask questions like the following:

- Could the persons perform if their lives depended on performing?
- Do they possess the skills necessary for good performance?

ACTION

If they do not have the skills needed to perform, go to STEP 4.

If they have the skills but still do not perform, go to STEP 6.

STEP 4: Have They Ever Been Able to Perform?

A skill that is lost due to forgetting or a lack of practice requires less of a solution than does a skill that never existed. This question is designed to help determine if formal training is needed or merely some kind of “refresher” training. Ask the following questions:

- Was the performance *ever* satisfactory? When?
- Has the performance *always* been substandard?

ACTION

If they have *never* been able to perform satisfactorily, go to STEP 11.

If at *one time* they could perform satisfactorily, go to STEP 5.

STEP 5: Is the Skill Used Often?

There are two reasons why persons may lose a skill: a lack of *practice*, and a lack of *feedback* on how well the skill is being used. This question is designed to distinguish between these two situations. Ask the following questions:

- When was the last time they were called on to use the skill?
- How *frequently* are they called on to use the skill?
- How much time elapses between occasions to use the skill?

ACTION

If the skill *is not* used often, go to STEP 12.

If the skill *is* used often but performance is substandard, go to STEP 13.

STEP 6: Is Good Performance Punishing?

Sometimes people who possess the skills to perform a task, choose not to perform because of real or imagined negative consequences. For such people, the advantages of good performance are outweighed by real of *perceived* disadvantages. Since it isn't always obvious why a person refuses to perform, the following questions should be investigated:

- What *negative* consequences might occur if they perform as you desire?
- Do they perceive desired performance as geared to some sort of *punishment* or *penalty*?

ACTION

If good performance is somehow punishing, go to STEP 14.

If good performance has no negative consequences, go to STEP 7.

STEP 7: Is Poor Performance Rewarding?

Sometimes there are more or better rewards for poor performance (or non-performance) than there are for good performance. To determine whether this may account for the poor performance being investigated, ask the following questions:

- What rewards might they get out of performing poorly (e.g., prestige, status, peer acceptance, etc.)?
- Do they get more attention for poor performance than for good performance? Is attention something they desire?

ACTION

If poor performance is rewarding in some way, go to STEP 15.
If poor performance is not rewarding in any way, go to STEP 8.

STEP 8: Does Good Performance Matter?

Performance that is not followed (at least periodically) by some kind of positive consequence has a tendency to disappear. Desired performance may not be occurring because it doesn't seem to matter to the performer. In other words, they see no *positive* consequence for good performance, or no *negative* consequence for bad performance. Ask the following:

- Is there a favorable (and obvious) outcome for good performance?
- Is there an unfavorable (and obvious) outcome for bad performance?

ACTION

If there is no reward for good performance or no penalty for poor performance, go to STEP 15.
If good performance has obvious rewards, or bad performance has obvious penalties, go to STEP 9.

STEP 9: Are There Obstacles to Performance?

Performance may be substandard because there are obstacles that prevent good performance. In other words, they would perform if there weren't things getting in the way. Determine if there are obstacles to good performance through investigation and by asking the following questions:

- What is or might be preventing them from performing better?
- What resources are missing that might make it hard to perform?
- Do they lack authority, time, tools, etc. for performing better?

ACTION

If there are likely obstacles to good performance, go to STEP 16.

If there are no obstacles to good performance, go to STEP 1 and proceed through the process again. Increase your investigative efforts.

STEP 10: Ignore the Problem

Ignoring the problem may, at first, seem like a bad course of action. There are many examples of organizations that ignored problems only to have them cause greater difficulties later. However, not all problems are worth the time and effort needed to solve them. Given the nature of business there are usually many problems demanding attention, so one needs to be *selective* in deciding what problems to tackle. For now, the performance discrepancy being considered is judged as not critical to business. In other words, if the performance discrepancy were to continue there would be no negative repercussions. The performance problem, however, should be watched to ensure that it does not grow more critical or affect business in some unanticipated ways.

STEP 11: Arrange for Formal Training

Your investigation has uncovered this fact: those persons whose performance is substandard never received the skill training necessary to be better performers. Before anything else, these persons should be trained to perform. Training, under these circumstances, may be more difficult because the poor performers may have developed bad habits that will have to be “untrained.” Formal training can take many different forms. Perhaps the most common is classroom training, but it may not be the most effective. On-the-job training conducted by an effective coach may prove more efficient and effective. Whatever type of training provided, it should make no assumptions about skills of the trainees, since they have never been able to perform the task. Adequate practice and skill testing are critical to improving performance.

STEP 12: Arrange Practice

Persons who have skills may lose those skills simply because they are not used often enough. Such a situation poses a different problem and requires a different solution than does a situation where persons never had a skill to begin with. Rather than arranging formal training (which would be more of a solution than needed), a skill practice or skill maintenance program is indicated. In other words, provide an opportunity for the poor performers to *redevelop* their dormant skills through “refresher” training or practice sessions.

STEP 13: Arrange Feedback

It's possible that a skill practiced often may deteriorate due to lack of feedback. In other words, people who must use a skill often, but who get no information on how well or how badly they are performing, may show a decline in performance. The simple solution to such a problem is to develop some kind of feedback mechanism so the performers get

regular information on how well they are performing. Production reports, counseling sessions, timely performance appraisals, feedback discussions, etc. all can serve to provide the necessary information to keep performance at acceptable levels. Seek ways to keep performers informed of their performance levels and they may “self-correct” their performance problems.

STEP 14: Remove the Punishment

After investigating the reasons for substandard performance, you may discover that people are not performing because they feel that good performance is somehow punishing. “Punishments” may be difficult to isolate because they are often not obvious and sometimes they are not easily removed. Nevertheless, attempts should be made to eliminate any negative consequences that come about as a result of good performance.

STEP 15: Arrange a Consequence

If non-performance is somehow rewarding, or if performance doesn’t really matter in the minds of the poor performers, then the solution is to arrange for some kind of consequence. Consequences are of two types: negative and positive. Negative consequences are those that *threaten* some kind of punishment to those who do not perform or who perform poorly. Positive consequences offer some kind of *reward* or *incentive* for those whose performance is up to standard. Positive consequences have been shown to be more effective in increasing good performance than have negative consequences in reducing bad performance. Rewarding good performance increases the likelihood of that performance being repeated, while negative consequences for poor performance may have unpredictable outcomes.

STEP 16: Remove the Obstacle

All kinds of things can get in the way of better performance. Instead of trying to “train” away obstacles to good performance, the solution lies in removing the obstacles. Obstacles can take many forms: outdated policies, counter-productive processes, poor workplace layout, distractions, poor working conditions, etc.

By carefully investigating the conditions that work against better performance, the obstacles to performance can be identified and eliminated or reduced.

Resources & Bibliography

The following resources have either been used to develop this guide or offer additional insights into effective consulting and the causes of performance discrepancies within organizations.

Analyzing Performance Problems, Robert Mager & Peter Pipe, David S. Lake Publishers, Belmont, CA, 2nd Edition, 1984.

Flawless Consulting, Peter Block, University Associates, Inc., San Diego, CA, 1981.

How to Grow People into Self Starters, Thomas K. Connellan, The Achievement Institute, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI, 1980.