INTRODUCTION

Successfully managing human performance is based on the simplest of principles: people rise to the level of expectations. Set and reinforce high expectations and you'll get employees performing at a high level. Set low expectations, and you'll get what you deserve.

You see it in the federal government everywhere you go. Look at a high-performing agency and there's a simple underlying reason: they expect high performance. On the other hand, look at underachievers, and they're that way because they expect little out of their people.

Most readers are at least familiar with the Pygmalion studies in education, going back to the late 60s, where they found that elementary school teachers' preconceived notions about their students measurably affected the academic performance of the kids. Simply put, the studies are fascinating and if you ever have some spare time, you might want to go to the Internet or library and glance at them. However, the most significant finding of the studies was the simple truth that kids, within the limits of certain immutable characteristics, rise to the levels of expectations that we place on them.

And studies have found that it happens on the job as well—employees rise or fall to the level of the expectations. And federal managers do it the same way as teachers do. Think about it.

Don't you always give the toughest work assignments to the ones you think are more capable? If your predecessor told you that one of your employees was a dud, you're never going to give him or her a job that you know that they'll probably mess up. The ones you think are good get better because they're sharpened by the experience of tougher work, while the ones you think are dullards never get the chance.

Or when you're having a staff meeting, don't you always call on the people you think are smart for their opinions, and even encourage them to disagree with you because you so value their opinions? Yet, you'll never call on the one you think is the office fool.

When you give feedback, don't you give more feedback more often to your superstars? If one of them makes a mistake, like the teacher, you jump the person right away because you expect more of them. Yet if your slug makes a mistake, why bother, because he'll never figure it out anyway.

So it all comes down to the way that you set expectations, reinforce them, and reward them. When you set high expectations, everything else also falls into line. Numerous studies have shown that the overwhelming majority of American workers would rather work in organizations with high standards and work for supervisors who demand high quality work. So when you set high standards, good people remain in your organization, high quality people are attracted to work there, and everyone is more motivated.

This book is about nothing more than setting and maintaining high expectations—managing the performance of federal employees under the various agency performance management systems. We'll look at how to plan performance, how to reinforce it, how to reward it, and how to deal with the problems within the context of the federal rules and regulations.

The first section of the book will go through the phases of managing performance in federal service: writing performance plans, monitoring performance, giving feedback, appraising performance, and rewarding performance. This will suffice for the overwhelming majority of your employees. However, some will not rise to your expectations, and we will devote the second half of the book to carrying you through the steps in handling performance problems.

SECTION ONE

Performance Management: The Positive Side

CHAPTER ONE
PRINCIPLES OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Life is too short to be spent in a constant struggle separating the good from the bad, there is barely enough time to separate the excellent from the merely good.

—Quentin Crisp, British Gay Activist and author of *The Naked Civil Servant*

What we in federal service call Human Resources Management is the management function that deals directly with its employees, and is broken into five functional areas that follow a loose chronological sequence:

- *Position Management*—This is both a one-time and recurring function. You create the job by adding duties and responsibilities to what may or may not be a vacant position. Your HR office will then, comparing the duties you've chosen with OPM classification standards, slap a title and grade on the job. Position management is also an ongoing function, as management has an absolute right to add or remove duties, whether or not memorialized in the position description, at any time it wishes.

- *Hiring*—Once you've created the job, you fill it from a variety of potential internal and external sources. While the HR office will execute the administrative functions, it is management that chooses the source of selection, decides what assessment measures to us, and decides whom to pick for the job. Now that you have the employees on the job, you have three more responsibilities: making sure they do the work they're supposed to do, making sure they behave, and making sure that come to work on time and are there for the time they're paid.

- *Managing Time*—Once you've hired the employee, now you have to get him or her to: (a) come to work, and (b) spend at least the majority of paid time doing work. This includes scheduling work hours, leave administration, ensuring work hours are used for legal purposes, and controlling absenteeism.

- *Performance Management*—Performance management brings together federal performance planning, pay, tracking, feedback, appraisal, and reward systems to improve both individual and organizational effectiveness.

- *Maintaining Discipline*—You must make employees behave, starting with proactive measures—setting and promulgating rules, dealing with little problems before they become big ones—and then turning to both formal and informal disciplinary actions to enforce both the written, but more important, the unwritten rules of the workplace.

This is not a tough book to follow, but to understand how to manage performance, you have to grasp these principles.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IS MORE THAN JUST PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

I don't want to bore you with ancient history, but you have to understand this distinction: from the creation of the federal civil service in 1881 up to a few years from its hundredth anniversary in 1978, it used the term "performance *appraisal*" to denote the management function of dealing with employee performance. This was not simply an arbitrary choice of words but reflected the operative notion that the way a supervisor dealt with performance was virtually entirely passive and retrospective. During the rating period, the supervisor's role was to assign work, review it, and criticize or welcome the speed, value, and effectiveness of individual work products, but almost never within any overall context. Then, at the end of the year, the supervisor filled out a form that evaluated the employee in all manner of traits, behaviors, attitudes, social graces, and then almost as an afterthought, performance in the critical areas of the job. And it was common, as I can personally attest to, for supervisors to avoid confrontation by slipping the appraisal form into the employees' inboxes when they weren't looking.

Then in 1978 a new OPM administration overhauled the federal performance *appraisal* system, and changed not only the name to "performance management," but made federal agencies and supervisors deal with performance as a cyclic process the key feature of which was front-loading performance expectations. This cycle has five stages:

- *Planning*—Consistent with this idea of front-loading expectations, the supervisor sets performance goals for the employee and the organization. Supervisors commonly do this with performance standards or other similar media at the beginning of a performance rating period or an agency business cycle.

- *Monitoring*—Once the expectations have been defined as clearly as possible, the supervisor created either casual or sophisticated tracking systems to monitor progress towards the goals.

- *Feedback*—Closely following monitoring, the supervisor communicates the results, both good and bad, of the performance against the expectations discussed at the beginning of the cycle.

- *Appraisal*—At the end of the performance rating period comes the final appraisal, measuring performance against the standards earlier set. If the supervisor has taken the steps seriously, the final appraisal, unlike those before 1978, should be no surprise.

- *Linkage*—Unlike the earlier system, the appraisal is not the end. Something has to happen as a result of the employee performance. Performance must have consequences. Employee who meet all expectations receive the positive consequence of annual step increases. Above average and higher performance will and *must* be rewarded beyond what the satisfactory performers received. Marginal performers must not receive the same step increases as those with better performance; and unacceptable performers must be removed or demoted.

PERFORMANCE IS DIFFERENT FROM CONDUCT

We'll spend much more time on this topic when we reach Section Two of the book on handling performance problems, but an important principle in managing performance in federal service is that federal civil service, unlike most other personnel systems—military, private sector, and other levels of government—makes a sharp distinction between performance and conduct. We must, in managing employees, completely separate the way we handle the two.

We deal with performance issues—quantity of work, speed of the work, quality of the work, and other indicators—through our performance management system. And we deal with conduct problems through other means, through the disciplinary process and other measures.

MANAGE PERFORMANCE, NOT PEOPLE

As a federal manager your job is to manage performance, not people. You cannot change the way people are, you can only affect how they perform their jobs. You cannot modify their attitudes, feelings, emotions, likes, or dislikes; you can only alter their behaviors at work. It is not your job to be a therapist, psychologist, counselor, or rehabilitator. You are a teacher and a leader whose job is to develop people's talents and abilities and then point them in the right direction.

Never feel ashamed or inferior because you cannot figure out what motivates an individual employee, or because you are unsuccessful in changing an employee. You can only do so much and you can only play with the cards you are dealt. What this means is that throughout the performance management cycle, you must focus on results.

PERFORMANCE DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY FIND ITS OWN LEVEL

A common misconception among supervisors is that employees will always perform up to their ability regardless of what a supervisor does. Many think that employees with outstanding talent will always perform in an outstanding manner no matter how we treat them. It's not true. Performance, especially good performance, is fragile and needs constant attention and nurturing. Good people need encouragement and direction to become good. And to become better, outstanding people need continual reward and reinforcement. Even solid average people can fall below average without direction and reinforcement.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IS A MANAGEMENT FUNCTION

Performance management is a management function, not an HR function. It is true that many of the consequential actions, such as removals, awards, and demotions, may involve your HR department in an administrative capacity. Your HR office may take care of the paperwork for you, but it is management that assigns duties, sets priorities, establishes goals, evaluates employees, and decides the rewards and sanctions. In the area of performance management, your HR office may give you advice and assistance, but management has the total responsibility and final say about performance standards, ratings, awards, removals, and demotions.

BUILD ON STRENGTH

Do not try to use performance management to create the perfect employee. A defect of traditional trait-based appraisal systems is they focus less on building up employee strengths than on eliminating their weakness. Classic performance feedback and final appraisal sessions, and many readers have experienced this from both sides of the desk: "Yeah, Mike, you really did great in meeting deadlines, and never missed an important due date, but sometimes people say you don't participate enough in office functions, like the last Christmas party when we had the Secret Santa, and you…I really wish you'd try to correct that." "We're getting great feedback from the engineers about you, and you're really making us look good in the organization, but you talk too much during staff meetings." "You're our best

Forester in the field of…, but…," "Nobody's better than you at interviewing witnesses, but…" until you're dismissed and walk away, partly feeling like you just went through one of those interventions they do for addicts where everybody you know exposes and details all your faults.

Unless it's some characteristic or trait that is at the heart of the job, forget it. Focus on those few crucial areas, what we'll call elements and critical elements, and either dance around, just accept, or deal with through other media all other annoyances or shortcomings.

This is not a new concept in management, Peter Drucker, one of the greatest management theorists in history, said back in the 60s, "Build on strength." Drucker, in this context, was talking about hiring, encouraging managers to find candidates who did a few things great and forget trying to find people with no weaknesses. As he added, "People with no weaknesses also have no strengths."

The same thought applies to managing performance. The good news is that more and more organizations, public and private, have embraced the idea. Often when I'm bored, I like to Google "Performance Appraisal Form for…" and then fill in the name of some corporation, non-federal government agency, or other entity, and the results are interesting. For example, I just looked up the performance appraisal guidance and forms for many of the parts of the University of California system and all those I saw were talking about the performance management cycle starting with planning, setting performance standards or goals, and appraising employees. Not one single mention of traits or attitudes, but on how well employees achieved the goals at the end of the cycle.

I don't know any details on this because it's going on as I write this, but in the Spring of 2018 Amazon is radically changing its approach to managing employee performance. In a statement to Geekwire in April 2018, it described its new "Forte" system, "We're launching a new annual review process next year that is radically simplified and focuses on our employees' *strengths, not the absence of weaknesses*. We will continue to iterate and build on the program based on what we learn from our employees." [Emphasis added.]

Now, let's get started on the first part of the performance management cycle—planning.