

Exemplary Performance: Driving Business Results by Benchmarking Your Star Performers

Paul Elliott and Al Folsom

Jossey-Bass, 2013

\$40.20 or \$38.19 for the Kindle Edition, 241 pages

Reviewed by Paul Harmon

Over the years different groups have been concerned with business process improvement. Quality Control experts, Business Analysts, Software Developers, Business Managers and Training and Human Resource specialists have all worked, at various times, to improve business processes. The group of training and human resource specialists that is most concerned with the human performance aspects of business process improvement is the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI). Over the years this organization, prompted, initially, primarily by Susan Markle, Bob Mager, Donald Tosti, Thomas Gilbert, Joe Harless and Geary Rummler, has evolved a systematic approach to human performance improvement which they usually term Human Performance Technology (HPT) [1]. There are a number of diagnostic tools that are widely used by human performance technologists, and a new book by Paul Elliott and Al Folsom focuses on a subset of those tools that are used to analyze employee or managerial performance.

Obviously if we focus on specific performers, we have drilled down and are focusing on how specific activities are performed. This isn't process architecture or major process redesign, it more like when the IT group comes in and focuses on automating the customer contact operation. If you were analyzing the customer contact operation and people were involved, it would make sense to ask if the customer contact employees were doing a good job. Assuming you had some measures, you might well ask if some were doing much better than others. Similarly, you might ask how the manager of the group was doing: Was he or she, providing feedback to employees, was he providing incentives, and so forth.

The authors start out with a discussion of organizational performance. As they note, individuals can have talent, they can have competencies, but organizations don't succeed because they have potentials, they succeed because they produce results. Thus, although it's important to know that employees have skills and, more important, to structure the process or the organization so that it focuses on, and rewards, results. Indeed, the authors promote an idea, first introduced by Tom Gilbert [1], that performance analysts should focus on accomplishments rather than what people know (competencies) or what they do (activities). In essence, an accomplishment is a valued output of a process – it's what is left, of value, after the work shift is over and the employees go home. A heavy focus on employee accomplishments assures that the business analyst maintains a process focus, or, more important, perhaps, a focus on

value creation.

Another key idea the authors rely upon is the idea of an exemplary performer – the employee or manager who is doing a great job and generating the best results. In a typical workgroup or office, there is one or a few employees who are exemplary and many others who aren't doing quite so well. It's unrealistic to imagine that you can quickly double the performance of everyone in a group. It's probably unrealistic to assume you can get everyone to perform as well as the exemplary performer is currently performing. But it is very realistic, in typical employment situations, to plan on significantly narrowing the gap between today's average performer and today's exemplary performer. HPT practitioners routinely do this, and ISPI has worked hard to define the levers that an organization needs to push or pull to achieve this goal.

Put in slightly different terms, we begin by establishing the accomplishments of the exemplary performers, compare that to the accomplishments of average performers, and then work to narrow the gap, moving the average toward the exemplary.

Elliott and Folsom follow Rummler in identifying six concerns that the performance analyst needs to understand. They include:

- Expectations and Feedback
- Rewards, Recognition and Consequences
- Motivation and Preferences
- Skill and Knowledge
- Capacity and Job Fit
- Environments, Systems and Resources

Elliott and Folsom do a good job of explaining the importance of each of these concerns, illustrating each concern and ways of measuring employee performance relative to each concern. They cite a wide variety of literature as they describe each of the concerns. Their discussion is general enough that this book could be read by either a business analyst trying to analyze employee performance, or by an operational manager trying to figure out how to improve the performance of the people he or she manages.

In describing the various concerns the authors offer good advice on how one might establish measures and gather data to track employee performance.

In essence, one wants to begin by using the six concerns to define a specific performance situation. Then one needs to gather data to define how well each employee performs. Finally, one wants to consider the differences between the exemplary performers. Figure 1 uses a radar diagram to illustrate what we are doing. (This figure is not from the book being reviewed.)

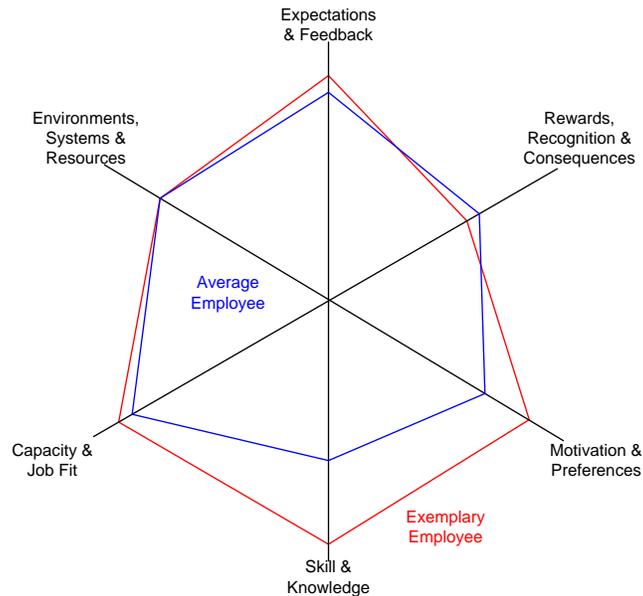


Figure 1. Average and Exemplary employees compared

As you can see, average and exemplary employees only differ in two areas, and one of those, *motivation and preferences*, may actually depend on the success the exemplary employee achieves. The key difference is in the knowledge or skill of the two sets of employees. Assuming the study was done with sufficient diligence, we need not institute generic knowledge or skill training, but can offer highly targeted training that only focuses on the specific knowledge or skills that actually differentiate the average and the exemplary performers. Targeted training is always much more valuable and cost-effective than generic training.

As I said earlier, people seek to improve processes for many reasons, and too many focus on just one or another aspect of a process. Some focus on the quality or consistency of the product, others focus on whether some tasks can be automated or whether specific activities add value and really need to be done. HPT professionals, like Elliott and Folsom, focus on how the employees who implement a process perform. When you think about it, employees and their managers constitute a major part of any large process. This book provides readers with a good introduction to some of the important ideas that HPT experts use when they seek to improve how people perform process work.

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Notes

[1] For more information in ISPI, please check www.ispi.org. See also the BPTrends Columns of some of today's leading ISPI practitioners, Alan Brache, Cherie Wilkins, Guy Wallace, Roger Addison and Carol Haig.

[2] For more information on Tom Gilbert, see *Human Competence* (1996). This is a very idiosyncratic book, though full of ideas that will challenge you. Most process practitioners would

probably do better to reader Geary Rummler and Alan Brache's *Improving Performance*, which is a much more process oriented presentation of Gilbert's key ideas.

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