Knowledge Worker

The Quality of Performance Matrix

(August 2018)

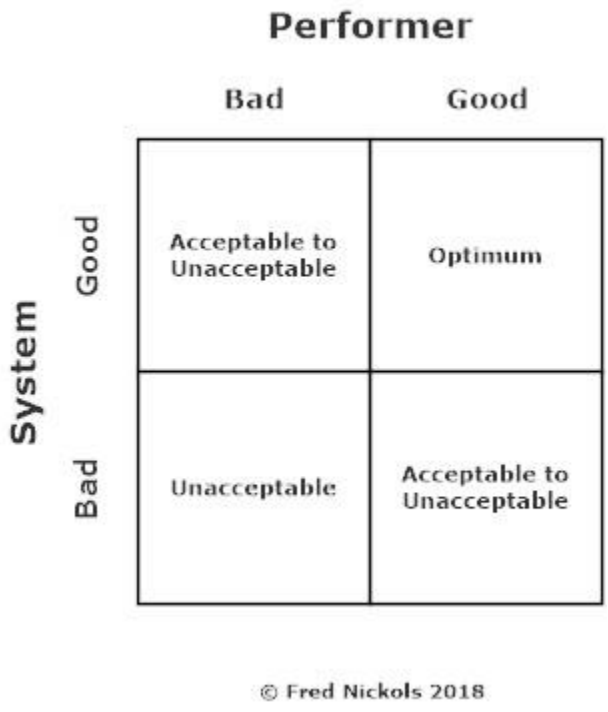
Good Performers and Bad Systems

You've no doubt heard or read the late Geary Rummler's oft-quoted statement that if you put a good performer in a bad system, the system will win every time. That's true. Good performers in a bad system cannot achieve optimum performance. But what happens when you put good performers in a good system? What about bad performers in a bad system or bad performers in a good system? There are different levels of performance quality to be expected depending on the mix of good and bad performers and systems and how good or bad those performers and systems are.

The Quality of Performance Matrix

I recently put up a new tool in the Knowledge Workers' Tool Room – a matrix that depicts the four possible good-bad, performer-system pairings and the level or quality of performance to be expected from each pairing. That tool is shown below.

Quality of Performance Matrix



Clarifying "Good" and "Bad"

Before getting started, let's make it clear that so-called "bad performers" are not bad people in the sense of being evil or wicked. In this context, they are simply not up to the tasks at hand; in a word,

their ability to perform is inadequate. They might lack the necessary skills and knowledge or perhaps their ingrained attitudes or basic abilities might not be a fit with the circumstances.

The same is true of "bad" systems. Bad or inadequate systems are of low quality; they are usually poorly designed and marked by inefficiencies and ineffectiveness, especially duplication of effort, poor interfaces with people and the infamous "rat race" loops.[1] Sometimes bad systems can be repaired and sometimes they must be replaced.

Ultimately, what we're talking about here are notions of adequacy and quality – the adequacy or quality of the performers or people and the adequacy or quality of the system. So, when discussing good or bad performers or systems, keep in mind that we're talking about their adequacy-inadequacy and their quality, be it high or low.

Good Performers in a Good System

Good or high-quality performers in a good or high-quality system is of course the ideal. With both in place, you can expect optimum performance.

Good Performers in a Bad System

Good performers can and do compensate for and overcome some or even most of the faults of a bad or inadequate system, but they can't overcome all of them. Sometimes, even the best performers are overwhelmed by a system of extremely low quality. In any case, optimum performance cannot occur. Depending on how inadequate the system is and how high the quality of the performers is, the quality of performance realized can range from unacceptable all the way up to acceptable.

Bad Performers in a Good System

Bad performers can foul up a high-quality system. Really bad performers can completely foul up even the best of systems. If the performers are only modestly inadequate and the quality of the system is very high, it might be possible to realize acceptable performance or close to it. Otherwise, performance will be lower, and if the performers are extremely inadequate, the performance realized can be completely unacceptable.

Bad Performers in a Bad System

And, of course, bad performers coupled with a bad system will produce unacceptable performance.

Putting the Quality of Performance Matrix to Work

Basically, it's a matter of examining a few basic factors and asking some basic questions.

[1] For those who don't know, a "rat race" loop is a term that applies to the following situation, which I've encountered on more than one occasion. A computer processing operation performs an edit on the data being processed. An error is encountered, and the data are rejected for reason A. The resolution for reason A causes a reject for reason B. The resolution for reason B causes another rejection for reason A. In short, the data are caught up in a rat race loop inside the computer.

- What kind of performer-system mix are you up against? Is it bad or inadequate people in a good, high-quality system; high-quality people in a bad or inadequate system or are both inadequate? How inadequate are they?
- If it's a case of inadequate people in a good system, what needs to be done to improve the capabilities of the people? Training? Job aids? Or, worst case, do they need to be replaced?
- If it's case of good people in a bad system, what needs to be done to improve the quality of the system? Tweak it? Major fixes? Completely reengineer it?
- If both the system and the people are bad, inadequate, or of low quality, what needs to be done on both fronts?

Don't Lose Sight of Rummler's Basic Caution

In the meantime, don't lose sight of the basic caution implied by Rummler's famous statement: Whenever you are confronted by a performance problem involving people, look first at the system of which they are a part and in which they are expected to perform. Chances are, you'll find more factors tied to the quality of the system than to the quality of the people.

About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the managing partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Workers' Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*.