

Six Factors Affecting Performance Alignment

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"Performance Alignment" occurs when actual performance matches expected performance. Six factors affect Performance Alignment: Clarity, Commitment, Competence, Cooperation, Connections and Circumstances. This paper examines those six factors.

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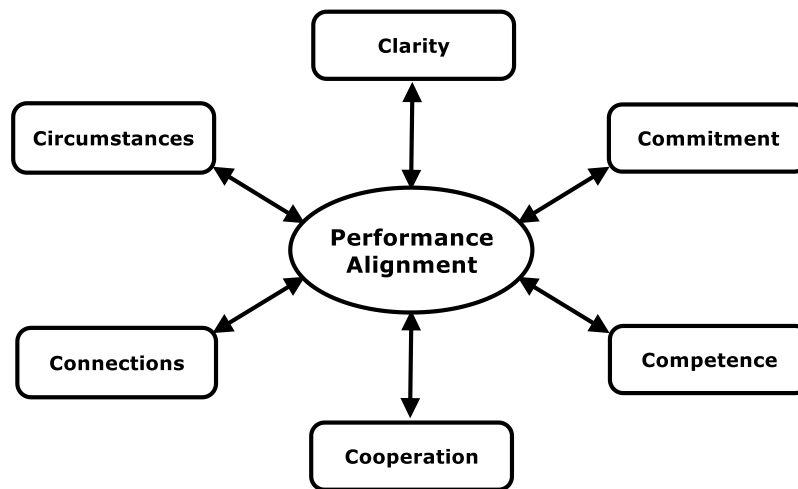
Performance Alignment

Expected performance occurs when a person’s behavior or actions produce the intended results or outcomes. “Performance Alignment” exists when actual performance matches expected performance.

As we all know, actual performance often deviates from expected performance – in good ways as well as bad. Occasionally, we surprise ourselves with the quality of the performance we turn in (good or bad). The same is true for the cost of achieving it (under or over). One of your ongoing aims – whether as a manager, a consultant or in relation to your own performance – has to be that of aligning actual performance with expected performance.

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The diagram in Figure 1 shows six factors that contribute to “Performance Alignment.” All six tie to a view of people as “living control systems,” as purposeful beings who try to make their perceptions match their expectations (Powers, 1989). Each of the six factors is discussed below.



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Figure 1 – Six Factors Affecting Performance Alignment

Clarity

One characteristic of people who exercise control is that they compare their perceptions of the current state with what they want to see – their goal state. A goal state specifies the desired or intended value for some workplace variable. To achieve a goal is to bring that targeted variable

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to its specified value. Clarity entails being clear about (a) the variable in question and (b) its intended value. Sales might be the variable and some dollar amount or number of new accounts might be the specified value. Or perhaps the variable is the error rate or waste level in a process and its value is set at fewer than three parts per million. Whether as a manager or as performer you must be clear about the results or outcomes to be achieved. It is the joint responsibility of the manager and the performer to ensure that such clarity exists regarding (a) the variable to be controlled and (b) the value it is to satisfy.

Commitment

Another characteristic of people who exercise control is that they are committed to achieving the goals they have set for themselves. This is not necessarily true of people with respect to goals that have been set for them. Consequently, managers and employees must both take steps to ensure that sufficient commitment exists. Two factors come into play here: (1) Contribution and (2) Consequences. Managers and employees are well served by expending effort in understanding the contribution that the outcome in question makes to some larger goal or initiative. Commitment to achieving an outcome is also helped by ensuring that the anticipated consequences of achieving it are, on balance, positive instead of negative. It pays you as a manager to be especially alert to any punishing or negative consequences associated with an assignment and take steps to remove, mitigate or negate them. As a performer it is in your best interests to bring such issues to your manager's attention.

Competence

Yet another characteristic of people who successfully exercise control is that they are able to vary their behavior as required by the circumstances at hand. This enables them to achieve fairly constant results under varying conditions. It stands to reason that the person's repertoire must be up to the task at hand. Managers should ensure that the person they assign to achieve a certain outcome possesses the necessary skills and is also sufficiently proficient at them to achieve the outcome. Two people might have the same skill set needed to achieve a certain result but one of them might be much more proficient than the other. Consequently, the kind of capability and the level of competence must both be considered in assigning an outcome to a particular person. As the performer, you need to make sure you are up to the task.

Cooperation

There are some genuine individual contributors in the world of work but most of us work in concert with others. Think of the workplace as a giant network of living control systems, of people working together and independently to achieve outcomes that add up to larger achievements. Cooperation is usually a necessary ingredient in performance. As a manager you play a key role in obtaining any necessary cooperation from others. This is one of the more

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productive uses of your authority. One of the hallmarks of effective cooperation is open, honest communication, a reliable flow of information about what is going on, changes in plans, surprises, altered assumptions, roadblocks encountered and so forth. As a manager or performer you have an obligation to provide, support and encourage good communication – upward, downward and laterally.

Connections

Although it is true that performance consists of the performer's behavior and the effects or outcomes of that behavior, the outcomes in question are often far removed in space and time from the performer's direct, immediate actions. Thus it is that we take action "over here" so as to realize some result or outcome "over there." Achievement, like change, is often indirect. If the end result is in fact to be achieved, the performer must know the connections that tie his or her immediate actions to the ultimate result. There is a path connecting the two and that path must be known or else performance cannot meet expectations except by chance. Charting that path in order to identify the connections between actions and outcomes is a key factor in aligning actual and expected performance. (For an in-depth treatment of linking actions with outcomes see my paper titled "Solution Paths: Getting from Here to There.")

Circumstances

A person exercises control as a result of comparing actual with desired conditions and then acting to close any gap between the two. We have already discussed the importance of goal clarity and the fact that actions or behaviors need to vary. That brings us to other actors and factors that can affect the target variable and thus affect performance. The world of work is filled with obstacles and barriers, impediments to performing as expected. And there are often other actors who are bent on controlling the same variable on which we are focused and not necessarily seeking the same outcome. We can be overwhelmed by circumstances beyond our control. Support from you as the manager is a key element in success. You can and should support performers in helping them remove or overcome obstacles and barriers and negate or offset the effects of other actors and factors.

It's a Numbers Game

In the end there are no guarantees. Although we are living control systems, our control is far from perfect. It's a numbers game. But we can stack the deck in our favor; we can do our best to make the probability of achieving a particular result as high as possible; we can tip the scales in our favor. And we can do the same for other people. The six factors just discussed are helpful in that regard. In parting, consider this: Whether you are a manager supporting the performance of someone else or whether you are focused on managing your own performance, you can use these six factors to facilitate and improve alignment between actual and expected

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performance; in other words, you can use them to make what you get match what you want. To help with that here is a simple checklist:

Clarity

- Can the performer identify the variable that is expected to be affected?
- Can the performer indicate the expected value that targeted variable is to possess?

Commitment

- Does the performer understand the contribution the expected results make to larger goals or initiatives?
- Does the performer see the balance of consequences as positive?
- Can any negative consequences be offset or mitigated?
- Can any positive consequences be increased or enhanced?

Competence

- Does the performer possess the necessary knowledge and skill?
- Is the performer sufficiently proficient?

Cooperation

- Have those who must cooperate in the achievement of the outcome been identified?
- Has their cooperation been solicited and agreed upon?
- Does open, honest communication exist between and among the various parties?

Connections

- Can the performer identify those places where results or outcomes will be assessed?
- Can the performer identify those places where direct, immediate action can be taken?
- Can the performer trace the paths that connect points of actions with places of assessment?

Circumstances

- Have potential obstacles and barriers been identified?
- Have other actors and factors that might affect the targeted outcome been identified?
- Have measures been taken to offset or mitigate any circumstances that could negatively affect achievement of the outcome?
- Have provisions been made for dealing with interfering factors that might crop up later on?

References

1. Powers, W.T. (1989). *Living Control Systems*. Gravel Switch, KY: Control Systems Group

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Additional Reading

1. Nickols, F.W. (2015). "Solution Paths: Getting from Here to There." Available on the web at <http://www.nickols.us/SolutionPaths.pdf>

About the Author

Fred Nickols is the managing partner of Distance Consulting LLC. He is a long-time student of human performance and a long-time member of the International Society for Performance Improvement. His [web site](#) contains more than 200 articles, book chapters and white papers, many of which focus on performance, whether of people, processes or organizations. All are available free of charge.