

CHALLENGING PERFORMANCE

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We work in organisations to gain the most from collective effort, sharing of knowledge and complementary skills. The ability to work in teams is frequently a selection criterion for job applications and one for which candidates practice answers to impress interview panels. But despite the value we place on group and cooperative effort, organisations give too little attention to supporting individuals to play their part in the teams that we so carefully assemble. This particularly applies to team leadership and management positions, where success at interview is assumed to mean that a new manager carries all the prerequisites for effective performance with their team.

We can all perform better. And most individuals are open to feedback on their performance. While we like training courses and opportunities for professional development, most of us equally value constructive and developmental comments on our work provided confidentially and in person. We like to discuss the challenges we face and reflect on interactions with customers, partner organisations and community members.

Responsibility for fostering a culture of improvement in individual performance lies with senior managers. Good practice exists in staff appraisals, probation assessments, 360-degree feedback processes, peer reviews and other approaches that have gained ground in the workplace culture of many organisations. But gaps are often found in smaller non-government and civil society organisations. Here, providing feedback can be considered too managerial, a luxury compared to the day-to-day delivery of services or simply a corporate fad. Equally, many senior managers in the community sector have themselves missed out on support to their skills in conducting appraisals, providing feedback and contributing fully to the development of staff within their own teams. In the meantime, high turnover, workplace disputes and limited capacity in organisations bedevils the sector. These problems can be attributed, at least in part, to shortcomings in developmental processes for key individuals.

So, without an unwieldy investment in resources and processes, how can better outcomes be achieved? There are three steps.

The first is to recast feedback on performance as a developmental process and not a managerial one. After all, support to better performance meets a need for support in this area from individuals, even if it is poorly-understood within most organisations.

The second is to foster a culture of better performance in this area through training key individuals in leadership positions. The approach required is similar to that adopted by organisations that become 'learning companies'. It includes commitments to individual development in job descriptions and in overall organisational outcomes. The idea is to maintain the subject as a central part of the underlying conversations that lie at the heart of organisational culture.

Third, the role of coaching needs to apply not only to executive positions. It needs a place in developmental practice for other key individuals within organisations. As a discipline, workplace coaching is well-developed but its use remains limited. A thoughtfully-designed and focussed coaching process based on genuine collaboration between an organisation, an individual staff member and a coach can yield benefits that far outweigh the cost.

A starting point for an initiative in this area is to pick one or more of the suggestions above, engage specialist assistance and start a conversation on challenging performance.