



How to Develop Competent Employees

Six Block Model identifies the root causes of performance failures and shows how to provide employees with the information, tools, resources, incentive and training necessary to perform well.

By Mac McIntire

One of the many challenges managers face is being able to identify the competent workers from the incompetent, the capable from the incapable, and the willing employees from the unwilling.

Most managers automatically assume they know which workers are good or bad based upon their observations of the employee's performance, behavior or attitude. But highly competent workers sometimes mask their goodness in off-purpose behaviors. Conversely, totally incompetent employees can fool managers by acting like they are working hard when they really are not. What one sees is not necessarily what one gets.

It is impossible for managers to manage employee performance until one knows in which category an employee falls.

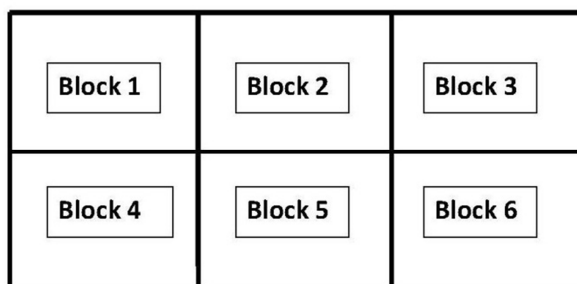
The good news is most employees have the ability (or could have the ability) to be totally competent performers. Only a very small percentage of employees are truly incompetent. Sadly, some employees are incompetent only because their manager is incompetent. The employees fail because their manager has not done all she or he can do to develop competent employees.

The key to creating competent employees is to determine where to focus one's intervention. When employees are not performing to expected standards the manager has the responsibility to discover the reason for the performance failure. This requires separating out symptoms from the root cause of the incompetence.

Several years ago I worked for a company that created internal "consulting" groups consisting of experts from each functional area within the company. There were teams of consultants from operations, finance, sales, marketing, information technology, human resources and the other specialty areas of the company. These internal consultants were organized into what were called *Strategic Strike Teams* (SST). Like airline crash investigators,

members of the SSTs were sent out at a moment's notice whenever and wherever problems arose within the company that fell within that team's specialty. The job of the SST was to quickly troubleshoot the problem, find a solution, and fix the problem so it didn't happen again.

I was the leader of one of those SSTs. My team was the "human performance" SST. Whenever there was a mass failure of human performance in any department at any level in any of our company subsidiaries, my team was sent out to turn the situation around. We literally had our bags packed; ready to go the minute we were notified there was a human performance problem somewhere in the company.



The Six Block Model

After many months investigating human performance "crashes" I noticed a pattern develop showing why those performance failures occurred. I discovered the root causes of human

performance problems were consistent from company to company, department to department, or person to person. It didn't matter which type of business the company was in, where it was located, what the skill or education level of their employees might be, or any other characteristics. Human performance failure always seemed to be caused by the same root issues. And those root issues always fell within the same six areas.

From these experiences I developed a model that identifies the root causes of human performance failure. I call my assessment tool the *Six Block Model* (see graphic) because there are only six primary reasons why people fail to perform to standard. The Six Block Model lists these root causes in the priority order in which the root cause of the performance problem can be found.

Invariably the primary cause of most human incompetence can be found in block one. By far the greatest percentage of performance failures (80 to

90 percent) are caused by block one issues. This means managers should always look first in block one to find the root cause of an employee's performance failure.

If the cause of the performance discrepancy is not found after assessing all of the possible issues in block one, the manager next should look for the cause in block two, then block three, and so on through block six. The probability of finding the real cause of the performance problem is greatest in the first block and decreases exponentially through the five other blocks. Very few performance problems are caused by block six issues. Yet, historically, block six is where most managers begin their search for the problem.

Block six issues resulting in poor employee performance include the **MOTIVATION, MORALE, ATTITUDE**, or **WORK ETHIC** of the employee.

The vast majority of managers attribute poor performance to motivation problems. They typically describe the reason for a performance failure by saying such things as, "The employee is not motivated," "They don't care," "They have a bad attitude," "People don't want to work hard these days," or "You just can't find good employees today." Invariably these statements are wrong. Low motivation or morale, a lousy attitude, or a poor work ethic usually are *symptoms* of a problem, not the problem itself.

When I hear managers make statements like these I ask the manager to identify the employee in their work area who they feel has the poorest motivation, the lowest morale, the worst attitude, or the laziest work ethic. I then ask them to describe what that employee's behavior was like on the first day they were employed at the company. I ask if the employee seemed excited about their job when they came to work on that first day. Did they seem to have a good attitude about being there? Was the new employee anxious to prove themselves as a good worker? Did they want to perform well? In most cases I receive an affirmative answer to these questions.

If this is true, I point out, obviously at one time the now poor performing employee was motivated, did have high morale and a positive attitude, and he or she was willing to work hard. Consequently, if the employee now lacks motivation, has low morale or a negative attitude, or doesn't seem to want to work, something must have happened to this employee after they came to work in the manager's department. In other words, the root cause can be found in something that happened after the first day the employee came to work. Whatever caused the employee to lose his or her motivation, morale, attitude, or work ethic happened at *work*. Consequently, the root cause is more likely to be

found somewhere at *work* rather than somewhere inside the employee. In other words, the employee doesn't have a problem; the *company* has a problem! It is not a motivation, morale, attitude or work ethic problem intrinsic to the employee.

Once I point out the employee's behavior changed *after* they started work at the company, most managers reluctantly accept the idea that the cause of the employee's performance failure is not motivation, morale, attitude, or a poor work ethic. Grudgingly they accept that the root cause of the employee's "incompetence" is not in block six.

Invariably the manager then will shift the cause of the performance failure to issues that can be found in the fifth block.

"Okay. You may be right," the manager usually concedes. "It may not be a motivation problem. Maybe the employee's problem is he's stupid. He can't seem to do anything right. He doesn't have any common sense."

These statements describe causes that would be found in block five – **CAPACITY**. Capacity issues deal with whether or not the employee has the physical or mental capacity to perform at acceptable levels.

In reality few employees lack the physical ability or mental capacity to do the job for which they were hired. I usually can stop managers from using capacity as the excuse for poor performance by asking them how many employees they have hired who actually fall into the "imbecile" category on an IQ test. Fearing being accused of falling into that category themselves for hiring the employee, few managers admit to hiring idiots.

Most employees are intelligent enough to do the job they were hired to do. Otherwise they would not have passed the job interview. Likewise, most employees are physically capable of doing the job as well.

Blocks five and six are the last two places managers should look for the cause of incompetence simply because they are rarely the primary cause of the problem. Managers should concentrate their performance improvement assessment in the first four blocks, starting with block one. These four blocks focus on the conditions surrounding the employee. Managers will be more successful in finding the root cause of the performance problem by looking at the work environment rather than trying to perform some type of psychotherapy regarding the employee's motives or capacity.

Block One

As stated earlier most performance problems are found in block one. The number one reason why people fail to perform to the manager's expectations is because they lack the **INFORMATION** necessary

to perform well. They don't know specifically what performance is wanted.

To achieve exceptional results employees must know exactly what is expected of them. They need to clearly understand their job and what results they're expected to achieve. They need to know the goals and direction of the company and the goals of their specific position in the company. They need clarity of their role, their boundaries and their authority level. They also need feedback regarding both how to perform well and how well they are performing.

Unfortunately many managers actually create incompetent employees by not providing their workers with the information they need to do their jobs well. Too often managers fail to tell employees what is expected of them or fail to hold employees accountable for specified results. They don't tell their employees how well (or poorly) they are performing. Or, worse yet, they give people misleading or unclear information about their performance.

Clear direction and expectations combined with reliable performance feedback are the best indicators of whether or not employees will exhibit competent performance. To perform well employees need significant, informative, and reliable guidance both as to how one should perform and how well one is performing.

Block one, the information block, includes everything that deals with guiding employee performance and providing feedback on that performance. The simple act of providing workers with clear information about the goals of their work has more potential for creating competent employees than any other tactic. When goals are clearly defined, objectives set, and work parameters established, employees confidently step forward and accomplish valuable results.

As stated before, the root cause of an employee's incompetence can be found in block one more than 80 percent of the time. Managers will have greater success turning employee performance around by focusing on the information provided to the employee.

Block Two

If the root cause of the performance failure is not an information problem, the manager next should look for the cause to the problem in block two.

If an employee has all of the information she needs to perform well and still is not performing to standard, the reason may be because she lacks the **TOOLS** or **RESOURCES** needed to achieve satisfactory results.

A worker is only as good as the tools she has at her disposal. A Front Desk Clerk in a hotel cannot

serve the customers in line any faster than the speed of her computer or the time it takes to program the room key on the key-coding machine. A Pot Washer cannot work any faster or clean the dishes any better than the dishwashing machine he uses. A Secretary is limited by the capacity of the software on his computer. A Car Rental Agent can be no faster than the speed of the printer she is using, regardless of her efficiency level.

Resources entail such things as staff, time, facilities, materials, and the dollars needed to obtain the resources. If there isn't enough staff to perform the work to satisfactory levels the work will not get done no matter how motivated the few employees might be. When there are seven teller windows in the bank, yet only two tellers, the line will be long even if the two tellers are exemplars of customer service.

Likewise, a manager who is overwhelmed with work will not take the time to write well-thought-out and thorough performance appraisals of her employees when she has no time to do so, regardless of how well the manager is trained on the proper way to do performance evaluations. People who do not have time to do something seldom do it, even if they have the good intention to do so.

Companies who lack the money to hire the appropriate amount of staff or provide the tools and materials needed to do the job will find their workers perform at a lower production level than those companies who do provide proper tools and resources.

Employees who are overworked or working in cramped quarters with faulty or non-existent equipment may initially have the internal motivation to perform well despite these shortcomings, but their enthusiasm will wane unless the situation is rectified. Eventually the struggle to perform well in unsatisfactory conditions will lead to low motivation, poor morale, a negative attitude, and a diminished work ethic (block six).

Block Three

If employees have the information, tools, and resources necessary to perform well yet they still are performing below satisfactory levels, chances are they lack the **INCENTIVE** to perform better. This is the third block.

Incentives constitute the monetary and non-monetary rewards that cause people to move toward a specified result or behavior. Even though an employee may have the information, tools and resources one needs to perform competently, there may not be significant enough incentive to induce the employee to perform to standard. Employees must feel work-related rewards and recognition are

directly connected to and contingent upon good performance. Workers who are paid poorly perform poorly. Salaries and wages do not have to be high, but they must be adequate and appropriate to the labor performed. There also needs to be ongoing rewards and recognition to keep people motivated. Inequitable wages or insufficient rewards are a disincentive to those who wish to work hard.

Sometimes natural disincentives in the workplace can override a manager's positive effort in the other blocks of the model. For example, high potential employees often are disincented by slothful colleagues who tell them to slow down because they're making the less productive employees look bad. Marginal workers may tell motivated workers that hard work will get them nowhere. Bad workers often tell good workers their effort will not be recognized or appreciated by management. Unions, in many instances, disincen workers from maximizing their effort in order to create the illusion that more union laborers are needed.

Managers themselves can disincen their workers by failing to recognize the contributions of their employees. The greatest motivator of people is verbal praise. Yet too many managers fail to effectively utilize this easy and inexpensive communication tool.

Managers can also dampen the enthusiasm of their employees when they give blanket praise or across-the-board pay raises that reward poor performers as well as the good. Managers lose the commitment of good workers when the exemplary employees see slothful performers go unchecked or undisciplined.

Incentives need to be directly related to performance. Exemplary performance should be praised and recognized, while poor performance should be corrected. Non-monetary rewards and recognition should be used copiously. Career development and other advancement opportunities also should be tied to performance. Nothing disincen employees faster than seeing poor performing or incompetent employees promoted to higher levels of responsibility. Incompetent managers are the greatest disincentive to competent employees.

One might wonder why incentives are listed in the third position instead of being the first block. Unions declare that the only way to get workers to produce more is to pay them more. But this is contrary to human behavior. There are countless examples of employees who have left a company to go work for another company for less money. Likewise, there are numerous stories of employees who have stayed with a company even though they were offered more money to go somewhere else. In

both cases the employees worked for less money when they could have made more. When asked why they left a company or stayed with a company the answer often has nothing to do with money. It usually has to do with block one and/or block two issues. They left because they could not get the information, tools or resources they needed to succeed -- and they felt unmotivated because of it. Or they stayed because they had all of the information, tools and resources they needed to win at work -- and they felt motivated because of it. Their motivation, morale, attitude and work ethic was affected by the preponderance of, or lack thereof, of the information, tools and resources needed to perform well.

Looking at it another way, managers could offered to triple the salary of workers who are over worked because of staffing shortages in order to get them to work longer and harder. And, initially, employees may jump at the offer. However the employees will eventually become exhausted and burned out from the lack of staff, the added hours, and the time spent away from their families. In such circumstances employees quickly learn that time off and quality time with their family is far more important than the incentive of three times their pay. Block one and two needs supersede block three needs every time.

Block Four

Now on to the fourth block. If an employee has the information, tools, resources and adequate incentive to perform well, yet they still are not performing to standard, perhaps the worker doesn't know how to do the job right. The employee requires proper **TRAINING** to perform to standard.

Amazingly, sending employees to training seems to be management's solution to every performance problem. Whenever employees are not performing well, management cries, "Send them to training." Yet, more often than not employees return from training without being "fixed." This is because very few performance problems are caused by the lack of skills from the employees. Most performance problems can be found in the previous three blocks. In such cases training is a waste of time.

Customer service training is an excellent example of people being sent to training when training is not the cause of the performance problem. Many companies send their employees to customer service training because they've discovered their employees are not smiling or being friendly around the customers. The managers think that by sending the employees to training they will come back from the session smiling more and acting friendlier. But lack of training is not the problem.

How does one know? If the non-smiling and non-friendly employees have ever smiled or been friendly anywhere at any time, then they already know how to smile and be friendly. They don't need to go to training to learn how to do what they already know how to do. Since they can smile and be friendly the question isn't one of skill; it's a question of why they are not doing what they already know how to do.

Perhaps they are not smiling or being friendly because they did not know it was expected of them. This is a block one (information) issue. Maybe they're not smiling because they're frustrated because of a slow computer or other faulty equipment (tools). Possibly they're overworked because of staff shortages (resources). Maybe they lack the motivation to work because of deplorable working conditions (resources). Perhaps the never-ending high volume of customers makes them too tired to maintain a constant friendly attitude (incentive). Or they may have financial problems at home that are causing them to be distressed and distracted (incentive). Maybe there is no payoff for being friendly (incentive). Any number of higher level problems could be the real cause of the performance failure rather than a lack of skill. Thus training is not the solution.

Too often companies invest huge amounts of money to provide training that is totally unnecessary or poorly targeted.

Companies send people to training to learn how to do things they already know how to do, but are not doing because no one told them it was wanted or expected (information). Training is often used to rectify a problem when the delivery of simple information could resolve it.

Training sometimes is given to people who cannot perform at a higher level, regardless of newly taught skills, because they lack the tools or resources needed to perform at exemplary levels. I'm often amused at companies who send employees to computer training to learn how to use computer equipment to which they don't have access (tools). At the same time, supervisory training programs that teach complex management methods requiring a lot of time to implement will find those tools are seldom used by overwhelmed managers who are too busy already (resources). In the same fashion, employees who go unnoticed or unrecognized for altering their behavior after they've been trained (incentive), may soon abandon those behaviors that don't receive supportive feedback.

Interestingly, training is one of the least valuable interventions for fixing performance problems. Training should only be provided when an actual deficiency in skills has been identified. When there are actual skill deficiencies it is imperative to determine the best type of training and the best method of delivery for the specific skills that are lacking. Classroom training often is the least effective method of training, while on-the-job training is a valuable way to transfer skills.

Block Five

As mentioned above, the fifth block is **CAPACITY**. Capacity is the physical and mental ability to perform the job to satisfaction.

Some employees may lack the mental or physical capacity to perform to standard, but capacity issues seldom are a problem. Even if an employee has a specific disability, most capacity failures can be overridden with a tool or resource. Equipment can be altered so an employee with a disability can operate it effectively. A prosthesis can replicate the performance of an incapacitated limb.

The work environment also can be adapted or reshaped to meet the physical requirements of an employee with a disability. Flexible scheduling may help by matching the peak physical or mental capacity periods of an employee.

Information	Tools and Resources	Incentive
Training	Capacity	Motivation Morale Work Ethic

There are a plethora of tools available to help overcome mental deficiencies such as memory lapses, poor math skills, poor decision making abilities, or other perceived mental inadequacies. For example, a checklist helps people remember things they may forget. Mnemonics can be used to firmly plant in someone's mind something they must remember. A calculator accurately computes the math for those who have problems with numbers. A decision tree takes a person through the logical process for devising an acceptable solution to a problem. Someone with damage to one part of their brain can be taught to use another part of their brain to override the deficiency.

If a tool or resource is unavailable to overcome a capacity failure, either the job requirements can be adapted to the capacity of the employee or the employee can be moved to a job that better suits one's capacity. In many companies there is a job that matches the physical and mental capacity of most people. Thus most capacity failures can be rectified.

with a tool or by moving someone to a job within their capacity.

Block Six

As can be seen, most employee performance problems are caused by a lack of information, tools, resources, incentive, proper training, or the alteration of the job to match the capacity of the employee. When all of the elements from the first five boxes are provided by management the odds are great that employee will be motivated to perform to standard.

However, if an employee still exhibits a deficiency in **MOTIVATION, MORALE, ATTITUDE** or **WORK ETHIC** (block six) after a manager has done all he or she can do in the first five boxes, there are only two possible actions a manager can take to rectify the situation.

The manager can counsel the employee and ask the worker whether he or she wants to continue to work at the company. If the employee answers in the affirmative, all the managers need to do is tell the worker to start working. The employee already has the information, tools, resources, incentive, training and capacity to perform to standard. The only thing the worker lacks is the willingness to do the work. It is now up to the employee to decide whether he or she wants to do the job.

If the employee is unwilling to do the work, the manager should set the employee free. The employee is not motivated because he doesn't want to be motivated. He has a bad attitude because that is the type of attitude he has. He has a poor work ethic because he does not want to work. If this truly is the case, the manager should take the action necessary so the employee doesn't have to worry about coming to work each day. The employee should be terminated. If an employee really is not motivated, has low morale, truly does have a poor attitude, or doesn't want to work, then the manager should help that employee achieve his objective of not working. The manager should remove the worker from the place that is causing him to have a bad attitude or to feel unmotivated.

Managers that truly have done everything within their power to establish a productive work environment wherein employees could be motivated if they want to be motivated should not hesitate or feel bad about terminating employees who are not motivated.

The key question, of course, is whether or not the manager has done everything possible to help the employee to perform well. Getting productive work from people is not so much a matter of having motivated employees as it is one of having supportive management. Managers can help

employees become more competent when the managers view their job as largely manipulating the *work environment* (rather than the motivations of the employees) in order to achieve greater employee competence.

Managers themselves increase their own competency when they let their employees know what is expected of them, give them adequate guidance to perform well, supply them with the adequate tools and resources, reward them well, and give them useful training. Competent employees are a result of competent management. §

Innovative Management Group offers a highly effective management course designed around the Six Block Model. If you would like more information about how you can use the Six Block Model to create competent employees in your company, or for a free Troubleshooting Guide that identifies the real cause of performance problems, please contact Innovative Management Group at 702-258-8334 or by e-mail at mac@imglv.com.

If you would like to find out how to create competent managers, please request a copy of the article entitled: "*How to Create Competent Managers.*"

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