

# The supervisor's Job is Performance Support

By

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## Introduction

Karen Thomas, the VP of International Business kept reading the long string of emails that had been copied to her by her recently promoted Overseas Operation's manager, Tom Kelly. As she was reading, it became increasingly evident that the topic of discussion was irrelevant to her; even more, it was irrelevant in itself. In spite of that, the successive "reply to all" messages from an increasing number of unsolicited participants kept growing in number and getting longer and angrier, each adding his input to a gathering "blamestorm".

The more recent messages already contained digital "shouts" exchanged in CAPS, a clear sign that the situation was out of control.

The situation was puzzling for her: Tom had forged a reputation in the firm for his nonsense, practical approach and his ability to get things done and obtain results. The manager she had promoted and the angry writer of the email rebuttals and accusation she was reading did not seem to be the same person. However, unfortunately, they were.

Karen decided to intervene to calm the waters and casually dropped by Tom's office to have a conversation. Tom smiled and offered her a coffee. The scene around him said nothing about the conflict: an uncluttered, well-organized desk, pictures of his children and several achievement awards were neatly organized on the wall next to his recently installed, state-of-the art computer workstation, connected online with the offices across the Atlantic that were now under his supervision.

Then, Tom spoke:

"You know, Karen, I think that I'm not the right person for this job"

"What? What happened?"

"Well, I cannot get these European guys in the other offices to understand that I am in charge here and I need more speed and changes in their operation. They just don't get it, and worse, they pretend that they can't." Tom's face was red; his voice became agitated as he started to walk around the office.

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“Every morning, when I arrive at my office, I find these long emails from them informing me of changes and concessions that they want to make to please their clients. They seem to spend all day sitting at their desks and writing; that is all I get from them!”

“Look, Karen, you know I’m an organized person, that’s why you asked me to take this new job, but every morning I have all these guys in Zurich and Barcelona instant messaging me to see if I can make a last minute exception so they can close their after lunch deals and sip their cognacs in peace. By the time I finish with them, half of my day is gone without results. It drives me nuts!”

“What did you do?”

“I sent an email to all the European offices telling them very clearly that I would not take any more excuses or b.s., that’s what I did!”

“Did things get any better?”

“Not at all; they just started to argue like a pack of lawyers. I cannot understand: they have the best product line, the best technology and the best resources in this industry. They should be delivering and meeting the goals, not spending all their time writing to me.

Beyond the frustration of things breaking down and people disappointing him, Tom was in the dark about what to do. And he should know. They promoted him, didn’t they? This wasn’t the kind of situation where a simple application of a formula or troubleshooting procedure would do the trick. Something more was required. But what?

Every day, good performers find themselves trapped in this “Peter’s principle” paradox: promoted for their past performance to management positions, they find themselves suddenly confronting conflicts and pressures that they were unaware of, coming from what they and their bosses thought were familiar colleagues, teams, and operations.

What changed was not the individuals, the processes, the goals or the resources, but a new, invisible and powerful component: ***the performance system and their position and role within it.***

As an effective supervisor, you must be able to deal with the performance environment and performance issues as they arise. You set the context, direction and expectations for what gets accomplished. You must understand how the performance system works, as well as how people work, in both their rational and less rational (emotional) states. The tone you establish for working relationships and how those relationships work influences individual and workgroup performance and productivity. Your awareness and capacity to manage people in their work context includes managing yourself and your own reactions.

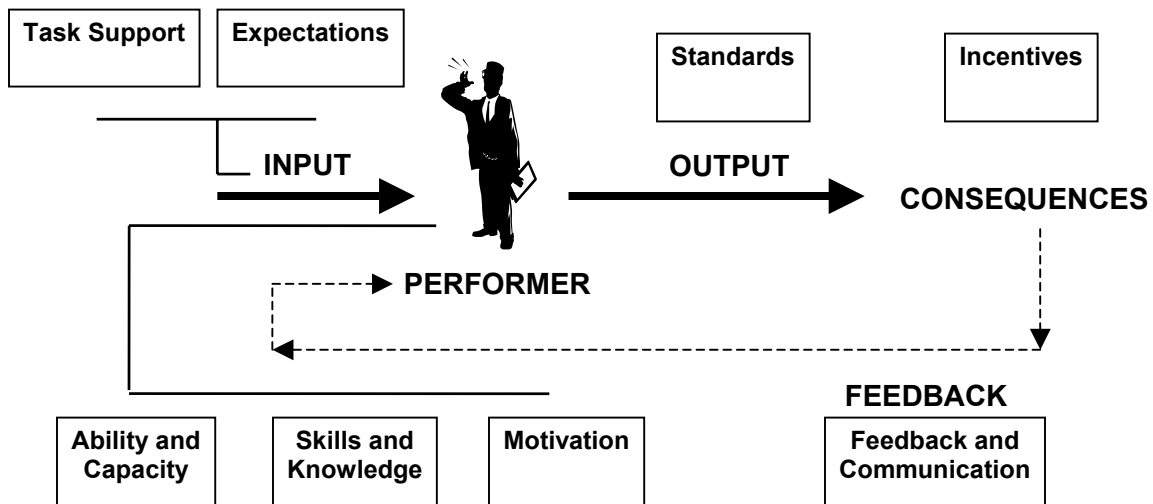
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Let's look closer at how this happens. To set the stage, consider there are two perspectives that enable us to characterize and understand the work situation and where to intervene.

### Perspective One: The Performance System

Tom Gilbert (1962) told us that performance is determined by different factors, some of them related to the individual performer (such as individual ability and capacity, skills and knowledge, and motivation), others coming from the organizational context (such as standards and expectations, feedback and communication, task support and incentives). See Figure 1. Those seven factors interact *regularly* in a performance system, where inputs (what the performer has), processes (what the performer has to do), and outputs (what has to be accomplished) have to be aligned in order not only to achieve, but to *sustain*, good results.

Figure 1: Human Performance System (Gilbert, 1962)



The role of the supervisor is to manage the performance system, not only the performer. As Dean Spitzer's model (1986) shows, the supervisor's unique position makes him/her an indispensable "filter" and "organizer" that can act as a "King Midas" either by correcting and improving "bad" factors, or as the opposite. Every supervisor, good or bad, consciously or unconsciously, creates an ongoing, constant "Pygmalion effect"<sup>1</sup>. Their (often unspoken) expectations influence their relationships and actions and affect the performance environment as well (motivation, expectations, feedback, and task support).

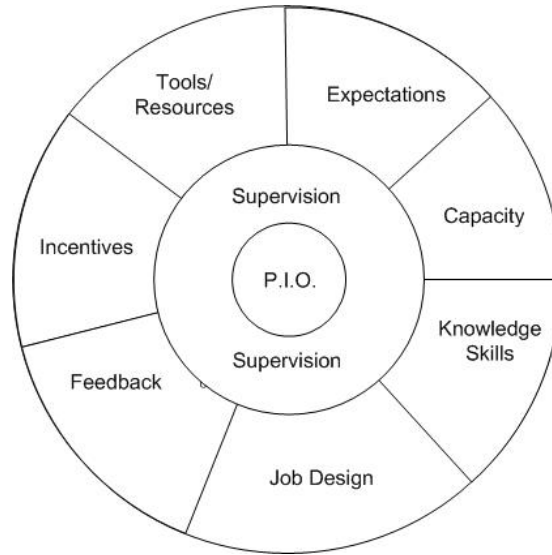
<sup>1</sup> Livingston (1969).

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Our supervisors condition the way we perceive and experience our performance and our conditions to perform: they can make us feel miserable with a promotion or work enthusiastically to overcome a computer system breakdown.

Spitzer's model (see Figure 2) shows how the supervisor organizes and orchestrates all the factors that contribute to good performance:

Figure 2: **Managing the Performance System** (Spitzer, 1986)



Here are some examples of specific actions that the supervisor can (and should) take to manage each one of the performance factors:

Table 1: **Performance Factors and Opportunities for Improvement**

<b>Performance Factor</b>	<b>Role of the Supervisor for Performance Improvement</b>
Individual ability and capacity	Select and replace personnel for fit to job and organizational culture, intelligence, emotional intelligence
Skills and knowledge	Provide timely and relevant training and information
Motivation	Organize work and improve work design; remove barriers to performance
Expectations	Provide and clarify performance expectations
Feedback	Improve timeliness and specificity of feedback
Task support	Provide and improve tools and resources; remove barriers to performance
Incentives	Provide meaningful incentives for performance

Of the seven factors that influence individual performance, the first three are internal to the performer. In other words, their initial 'level' comes with the person you hire for or transfer into the job. The last four occur in the performance environment and are provided by the organization, including you, the supervisor. But in fact, you can

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influence all performance factors. Thus, you have the opportunity to impact the quality of performance as well as the quality of the work experience for the performer. You can ask yourself these questions:

- What can I do to make wise decisions about the basis I select who is placed in the jobs that are to be done?
- How can I ensure the performer gets skilled cost-effectively for the tasks to perform?
- How can I design work to be meaningful, efficient and free of obstacles to performance?
- What can I do to provide timely and useful feedback about what's accomplished and how it's done?
- How can I make wise decisions and allocate organizational resources about what kinds of training, education, tools, information, etc. will be given to support performance and when they will be available?
- What choices can I make that will increase the quantity and quality of desired performance and decrease the frequency of undesirable performance?

Your answers to these questions distinguish and provide opportunities to refine your approach to performance support. What you say can provide relevant information and context. How you say it gives workers a sense of its importance and also tells them how you feel about the job and even them. You have the chance to engage the workers on both rational and emotional levels. Extensive research by the Gallup Organization<sup>2</sup> indicates that when a company fits workers' strengths to the jobs at hand and supports workers with great management, employees are engaged in the work to be done and are willing to give extra, discretionary effort. They, in turn, engage and delight their customers, leading to sustainable growth and profitability.

### Perspective Two: The Emotional Side

As Tom and Karen are starting to realize, to manage performance, the supervisor has to know how to manage his/her own emotions and reactions, as well as those of his/her collaborators under the pressures and demands of the performance system. This is the second perspective.

Emotions and reactions are the “fuel” that powers performance. As with any combustible, wise and careful handling can produce desired performance; sloppiness or neglect can provoke explosions or even spell disaster. In order to keep the team on track, the supervisor has to be able to promptly and safely “*fuel*” the emotional side, and to *direct* the released energy toward achieving meaningful goals for the organization and the performers.

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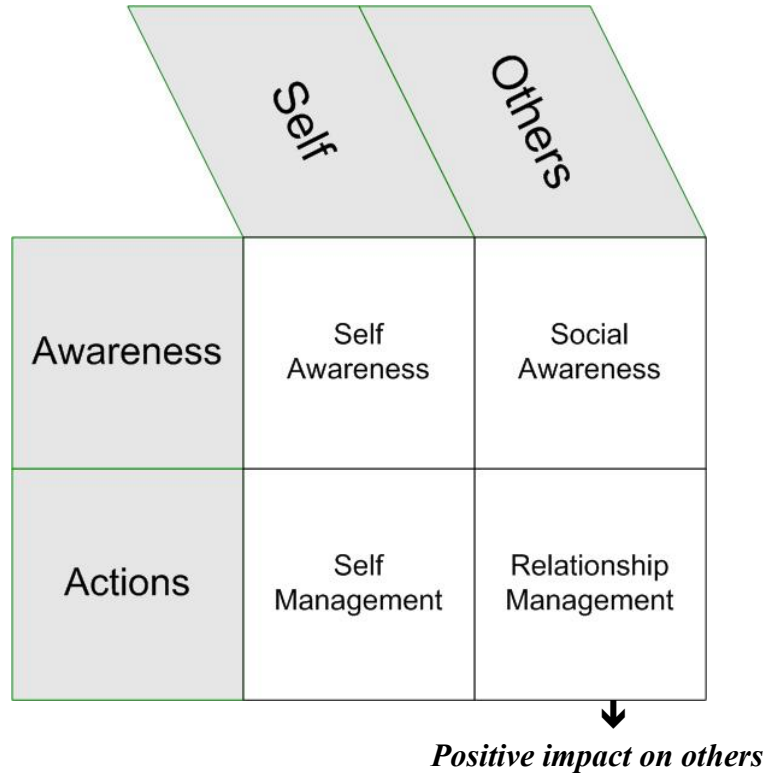
<sup>2</sup> See Coffman and Gonzalex-Molina (2002) for the four key strategies of great managers; see Buckingham and Coffman (1999) for the twelve conditions necessary for understanding and developing your workers.

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Experience is a great provider of lessons on managing the emotional side of performance, but as Karen is realizing, the lessons can be too harsh and expensive for those who are not ready to learn effectively.

Daniel Goleman's model (1995,1998), based on the brain research of LeDoux (1986,1992), provides fundamental tools to deal with the emotional side of the managerial work:

Table 2: Emotional Intelligence (EI) Competency Domains



Emotional Intelligence (Table 2) tells us how well we:

- Are aware of our own emotions.
- Manage the impact of those emotions on ourselves, including the ability to motivate ourselves.
- Are we sensitive to the emotional state of others.
- Are we able to use that social awareness to build constructive working relationships.

In the context of work, you as manager must have strong working relationships with those doing the work. The competencies in the Relationship Management quadrant contribute to the ultimate desired outcome of producing the results on a more 'local' level that lead to overall business results. The Relationship Management competencies are strongly influenced by one's competence in the quadrants of Self-Management and

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Social Awareness. And these, in turn, are based on the competencies found in the Self-Awareness quadrant. *Self-Awareness is the foundation.*

Recent research provides proof of this developmental progression. (Burckle & Boyatzis, 1999) If we are aware of our emotions, we have a 50-50 chance of demonstrating self-management. Without that awareness, we have almost no (4%) chance of doing so. With self-awareness, we have a 38% chance of being aware socially. Without it, we have only a 17% chance. Therefore, when we are unaware of what is happening with ourselves emotionally, we are:

- Virtually incapable of regulating our own behavior.
- Only minimally aware of what's happening with others in the workplace.
- Unlikely to have good working relationships.
- Unlikely to have the desired positive impact on others' performance.

We act like bulls in a china shop, triggering negative reactions, shaking trust, straining or damaging relationships, or hindering the coordination of actions. Teams underperform and business processes work below capacity. Productivity and morale suffer.

At a physiological level of description, the culprit is the *amygdala*, a small, evolutionarily ancient structure deep within the brain. The amygdala is the storehouse of emotional memories, thus it controls personal meaning and significance. It provides an automatic answer to the question, "Are you going to eat me or am I going to eat you?" and triggers an instantaneous 'fight or flight' reaction. When we 'act without thinking it through', we react strongly, emotionally and behaviorally. This 'emotional hijack' is often inappropriate to or inconsistent with the current situation. As we develop and learn (become more mature or wise), we become better able to recognize and regulate behaviors and emotions that are disruptive. This is the foundation for appreciating others' experiences and using that sensitivity to foster respectful, functional supervisory and managerial relationships.

Looking closer at the generic EI competencies model (see Table 3), you notice that several competencies are in bold. This indicates the primary importance of that competency for that quadrant since not all competencies contribute equally to overall competency for that domain.

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Table 3: EI Competencies Model (Goleman, 2001)

<b>Self-Awareness</b>  <b>Self-Confidence</b> Emotional Self-Awareness Accurate Self-Assessment	<b>Social Awareness</b>  <b>Empathy</b> Organizational Awareness Service Orientation
<b>Self-Management</b>  <b>Self-Control</b> Trustworthiness Conscientiousness Adaptability	<b>Relationship Management</b>  <b>Influence</b> Inspirational Leadership Developing others Building Bonds

Researchers have also created competency models for several types of jobs and related them to EI competencies. (Spencer and Spencer, 1993) What is of interest to us is the competency model for managers, one that facilitates or influences others.

Table 4. EI Competencies Model for Managers (Jacobs, 2001)

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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Self-Awareness</b></p> <p><b>Self- Confidence</b> Emotional Self-Awareness <i>or</i> Accurate Self-Assessment</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Social Awareness</b></p> <p><b>Empathy</b> <b>Organizational Awareness</b> <i>or</i> Service Orientation</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Self-Management</b></p> <p><b>Self-Control</b> <b>Trustworthiness</b> <i>or</i> Conscientiousness <i>or</i> Adaptability <b>Achievement Orientation</b> <i>or</i> Initiative.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Relationship Management</b></p> <p><b>Influence</b> <b>Inspirational Leadership</b> <i>or</i> <b>Developing others</b> Building Bonds <i>or</i> Teamwork and Collaboration <i>or</i> <b>Conflict Management</b> <b>Change Catalyst</b></p>

Table 4 shows that model and what competencies are found to be crucial for distinguishing outstanding from typical (average) managers. Notice that there are groupings of competencies where any one competency in the group would suffice, though the bolded one is most important. For example, in the *Relationship Management* quadrant, a manager could be competent with either *Building Bonds or Teamwork and Collaboration or Conflict Management*. Nevertheless, Conflict Management is most important.

### Interaction of the two perspectives

Modern organizations require faster, global and technology mediated performance systems. The speed, reach and complexity of computer-mediated collaboration in distant, global teams, can provide decisive competitive advantage, but also demands two different but complementary competencies of the supervisor: system thinking and emotional intelligence.

Given his unique position in the performance system, the supervisor –and only the supervisor- can integrate, control and “filter” positively all the critical factors that affect the final result, clarifying standards, setting expectations, ensuring timely feedback and task support, coaching and improving skills, and balancing the incentives and consequences that keep the team members productively motivated.

The emotional competence of the supervisor –and the team members- works as a “lubricant” of the high performance system, reducing friction and conflicts, keeping the

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emotional temperature of the team at safe and stimulating levels and helping to open minds and attitudes to diverse inputs and ideas.

Understanding the performance as a system will help the supervisor to perceive the connections between factors and prevent problems or improve results. Emotional awareness and self-management will keep the supervisor in safe ground and enable to positively affect the behavior of the team members.

The four external factors mentioned above can be either performance enhancers or inhibitors. What is critical, according to Buckingham and Coffman (1999), is how the supervisor:

- Provides clear expectations.
- Gives opportunities to perform and be recognized.
- Sets an understandable environment of inclusion.
- Offers the chance to develop.

### **Putting the two competencies into practice: the Supervisor's Perspective**

One of the common pitfalls of traditional performance consulting approaches to supervision problems is that they provide a comprehensive “map” of mostly static, analytical information about the performance system malfunctions from a company-wide perspective. This “reengineering” approach is too slow and general to be applicable to the day-to-day, instant and changing realities of supervisory and management work.

While performance engineering focuses on improving work processes' rational dimensions, it fails to address the issues of motivation and interpersonal dynamics. This keeps actual workers and managers and their critical emotional energy contributions to the problems and the solutions out of the picture.

In order to implement changes, effective supervision requires integrating the emotional dimension and other “soft” factors to find his position and way in the dynamics of interpersonal interaction.

Traditional management and soft skills training approaches, on the other hand, often fall short because although they help to deal with interpersonal interaction and its emotions, they provide short-lived solutions that focus on individual or interpersonal behavior. These do not address the systemic problems and the “hard” factors that contributed to create it. This kind of behavior-centered, therapeutic approach usually has only a brief impact: as soon as the performance system accumulates new problems and pressures, the stress reactions and interpersonal conflicts reappear.

By integrating the performance model with the emotional competencies, the supervisor can not only get a correct analysis of the performance problems, but also detect the role that his own emotions produce in the situation, manage himself and get support and commitment from his collaborators.

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Let's see how these competencies could help Tom to solve his current problems:

An analysis of the performance factors could help him to detect several possible causes for the performance problems of his team other than incompetence or lack of commitment. The performance model could help him to discover critical components of the problem, such as unclear expectations and standards, inadequate feedback and support, lack of reciprocal knowledge and different cultural contexts.

Emotional competencies such as emotional awareness could help him to pay attention to signals of emotional reactions (feedback) covered over by the limitations of text-based, computer-mediated communications. Those same competencies would have helped him to follow a different course of action, creating opportunities for his team to have richer verbal or face-to-face interaction. Voice conversations, conferences calls or videoconferences could have helped Tom and his team to express doubt, fear, disagreement in less formal ways, ways that give chances the members to reduce their anxiety, defuse tensions and even "save face" in unwanted confrontations.

How could an experienced supervisor like Tom ignore these possibilities? Because he was "taken over" by his emotions and unaware of how they were creating a negative self-reinforcing cycle. Tom's analytical strength was not balanced with emotional skills. The pressure of a high-performance, virtual, computer-mediated environment with its instant, text-based communications did the rest.

The supervisor sets the direction, focus and standards for desired performance on a daily basis and over the course of the year. Under your guidance, performers know what to do and to what standard. When you do well, performers are loyal and can produce exceptional results. When you perform poorly, you become the supervisor from hell; the person who makes true the adage that "you join a company because of its reputation and leave it because of your manager." Furthermore, 'leaving the company' may not only happen when a position is vacated but also when a performer decides to do only the bare minimum to avoid your supervisory attention.

Breakdowns can occur in several places. From a *content* (what you do) perspective, your support may be inaccurate, incomplete or untimely. But even when you fulfill your content obligations, your context influences (how you are and behave) remain. Are you able to manage yourself emotionally? Do you exercise appropriate behaviors in a specific situation? If not, then it's likely you will act in ways that undermine the strength of working relationships, relationships that must work for people to be as productive as they can be. You will inadvertently demotivate those you support, giving them reasons to justify less than their full effort. Your expectations may contribute to poor performance in two ways. If you do not recognize and share your expectations, others won't know them and will be less likely to fulfill them. In addition, our expectations are often negative. Whether we state them or not, we will communicate them to others and influence their responses in that direction. (Livingston, 1999)

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On the other hand, when managers are skilled in the areas that operationally define emotional competence and are able to choose and use the 'right' managerial style for the situation, they are more productive and effective. Their competence tends to be reflected in the increased productivity and business results produced by those they manage, as well as reduced turnover. (Spencer, Klemp & Cullen, 1978, Goleman, 2001, Spencer, 2002) Employee satisfaction is suggested through these two models as the variable that contributes most to business productivity and profitability. (Coffman & Gonzalez Molina, 2002)

### Conclusion

We live in an era of unprecedented improvements in business productivity and increasingly sophisticated, high performance systems. Computer-mediated communications provide companies, managers and teams 24/7 global reach and unparalleled business opportunities. By simplifying and speeding up business communications, technology often creates the illusion of a "conflict-free", purely rational work environment. Experience so far shows consistently the opposite. (Bernardez, 2002, 2003)

To manage effectively computer-mediated communications and virtual teams, supervisors and managers like Tom and Karen have to develop a fast and effective understanding of their performance system and to improve substantially their emotional awareness and competence.

As work systems move fast from *information technology* toward *collaboration technology*; the systemic-thinking and emotionally aware supervisor's role becomes critical to make the potential of high performance workplaces and virtual teams a successful and sustainable reality.

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