

5 Hidden Barriers to Performance

Helping employees overcome them and achieve breakthroughs in overall performance

by Geraldine Markel, PhD

When the owners of a local grocery chain enlisted the help of a coach, they explained that the new operations manager lacked communication and relationship skills. They described her as grumpy and short-tempered, unable to locate records without help, and frequently needed employees to explain their jobs to her. By contrast, the previous manager was efficient, energetic, and on top of all the details. For 20 years she'd overseen rapid growth and prosperity, but when she left, the efficiency left with her. The coach determined that the new manager wasn't lacking interpersonal skills. She simply didn't know how the department functioned.

More and more, businesses bring in coaches to deal with employee performance problems. Often, they assume the problems stem from negative relationships or poor communication between leader and staff, supervisor and employee, or among team members. The coach, however, may discover the problems are not actually with particular individuals, but are part of the larger system. Communication



could be just a surface issue, and focusing on it may mask the true, often hidden, barriers to performance. These include:

1. Fuzzy or constantly shifting goals
2. Unclear directions, processes and timelines
3. Overwhelming distractions and interruptions, permitted by the system
4. Inappropriate multitasking
5. Lack of timely, relevant feedback.

Coaches who help employees overcome these barriers can achieve

significant breakthroughs in overall performance. Here's a closer look:

Fuzzy or constantly shifting goals

Leaders in management and training have promoted SMART goals for decades.¹ To be effective, goals need to be Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound. Yet, many workplaces still operate with unclear expectations. Employees don't know whether they've met the goals or what their bosses actually want. Or there may be incompatible goals and demands between

Coaching Tips: Dealing with Performance Barriers

Performance Barriers	Coach listens and observes the employee	Coach helps access information	Coach provides opportunities for practice of strategies
Fuzzy/ constantly shifting goals	"I'm not sure what's wanted. Each team member has a different idea." "Are goals listed/ public/visible?"	"Have you considered asking for a written set of goals?"	"Can you list one possible goal for the team or project?" "Might this be an example of a goal for this project?"
Unclear directions/ processes/ timelines	"I'm not exactly sure of what's wanted. Each person on the team seems to have a different idea."	"What training was provided?" "Has a process been described to show how the project should be implemented?"	"Is there a model of a similar project that has been completed recently?" "Who is the expert on this topic?"
Overwhelming distractions/ interruptions permitted by the system	"Someone is calling or interrupting me all day. If I close my door, they say I'm non communicative, but I can't think under these conditions!"	"How often do you have 15 to 20 minutes of undistracted time to think, solve problems or be creative?"	"What would it take to develop Quiet Zones or Electronic Lock-downs during which there are no interruptions or gadgets used for brief periods?" "Just for 15 minutes, try working in a quiet, non distracting location with all but necessary digital equipment turned off."
Inappropriate multi-tasking	"I'm doing three or four things at once. My mind is racing and I feel frustrated and scattered."	"Describe the times during which you are most productive?"	"Would you be willing to set aside some Think Time, during which you'd do one thing at a time with intense focus? This would be especially useful when problem-solving is required."
Lack of timely, relevant feedback	"No one says anything about my work, good or bad."	"How aware are you of the scheduled times and procedures for employee evaluations?"	"What are questions you'd like answered about your performance?" "Would you need to practice requesting such information?"

departments or teams. Given the current economy, it's tempting to just stack new goals on top of previous ones, without alignment or resources.

The coach listens for clues that reveal ill-defined goals, such as, "I'm not exactly sure what's wanted. Each member of the team seems to have a different idea." When goals are unclear, the coach helps employees develop new ones that are concrete and well defined. The result is enhanced individual and system performance where goals are monitored, measured, and at-

tainable in a reasonable timeframe.

Unclear directions, processes and timelines

The importance of providing clear processes for employees to follow has been emphasized since the middle of last century, as a key to achieving quality results.² If the employees or teams aren't sure how to complete tasks, they may feel like they are spinning their wheels and begin to look for ways to avoid work. That makes them more vulnerable to distraction, procrastination, or perfec-

tionism. The more detailed, boring, or long-term the task, the greater the vulnerability.

The coach listens for clues that reveal a lack of clarity, such as, "The supervisor said, 'Take the ball and run with it.' How does that help me know what to do?" Success or failure may hinge on clarity, or lack of it. The coach's task is to help employees voice their needs for information, resources, or instructions, perhaps by suggesting questions to get them started: "Is the timeline realistic?" "What resources are available?"

“If we have questions, who can we call?” “What metrics or accountability issues are involved?” Uncertainty often results in unproductive behavior, whereas the ability to ask questions is a valuable tool that promotes workplace productivity. The coach may need to examine work guides, project management sheets, or policy manuals for clear directions.

Overwhelming distractions and interruptions, permitted by the system

More than ever, distractions at work have become epidemic, causing employees to operate on the basis of continuous partial attention. According to one study, work interruptions consume 28 percent of each workday (more than two hours per employee).³ Interruptions include visits, phone calls, texts, e-mails, not to mention self-inflicted interruptions like checking social media sites or surfing the Internet. Employees and management alike are aware of the distractions, but few attempt to set policies or enforce existing policies that limit these distractions.

The coach may hear something like this: “Someone is calling or interrupting me all day. If I close my

door, they say I’m non-communicative, but I can’t think under these conditions.” The coach can improve performance by drawing attention to the sabotaging effect that partial

simultaneously often results in inaccuracies and omissions. As the brain shifts rapidly between tasks, time is lost in the process. Most jobs do involve some multi-tasking, and this

“The ability to ask questions is a valuable tool that promotes workplace productivity.”

attention has on accuracy and completeness. He or she can monitor the drag distraction has on productivity, by observing employees as they try to complete tasks.

Inappropriate multitasking

There is a widely accepted myth that the average person can successfully multi-task. Recent studies show that “only two percent of people can multi-task effectively.”⁴ Employees and management may think they are saving time by multi-tasking, but in reality this practice actually saps energy and drains productivity. Research shows it’s generally not possible to pay simultaneous attention to two demanding tasks. Attempting to perform two challenging tasks

may work well with some habitual or manual tasks. But when analytical thinking, problem solving, or creative endeavors are involved, this is inappropriate. Employees need to focus on one task.

The coach listens for statements like this, “I’m doing three or four things at once. My mind is racing and I feel frustrated and scattered.” The coach can help enhance performance and productivity by having employees identify the types and frequency of multi-tasking on the job.

Lack of timely, relevant feedback

Positive, constructive feedback has been acknowledged through decades of research, as an effective way to improve employee performance.⁵ The relationship between feedback and improved performance is remarkable, but too often, employees lack the information they need. Adequate performance feedback helps employees determine what works well and what changes are needed.

The coach may hear statements like this: “No one says anything about my work, good or bad,” indicating the employee may feel un-

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¹ Deming, E. *Out of the Crisis*. Cambridge: Center for Advanced Engineering Study, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1986.

² Doran, G., Miller, A., and J. Cunningham. “There’s a S.M.A.R.T. Way to Write Management’s Goals and Objectives,” *Management Review*, Issue 11, Vol 70, 1981.

³ Spira, J. & J. B. Feintuch. *The Cost of Not Paying Attention: How Interruptions Impact Knowledge Worker Productivity*. Executive Summary Basex, Inc., 2005. (<http://www.basex.com>)

⁴ Stolovitch, H. D. and Keeps, E. J. (Eds.) 1992 *A Handbook of Human Performance Technology: A Comprehensive Guide for Analyzing and Solving Performance Problems in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass: 1992.

⁵ Sundem, G. “This is Your Brain on Multitasking,” *Psychology Today*. February 24, 2012. (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brain-trust/201202/is-your-brain-multitasking>).

appreciated and uncertain about his or her performance. On a system level the coach can identify existing processes for giving and getting feedback, and whether they are effective, or harmful. If feedback opportunities are sporadic, or are just a thinly veiled vehicle for per-

sonal attacks, they are likely to be damaging. Some companies avoid feedback altogether, out of fear of conflict. If there is a feedback procedure, the coach should determine if it is integrated at all system levels.

Lack of integration will make it hard to track what is going right,

what is not working, and what corrective actions need to be taken. The coach can promote an atmosphere in which a performance problem is not seen as a personality defect, but as an opportunity for information exchange, problem solving and support.

The path to high employee performance is strewn with concealed barriers. The coach starts by identifying these barriers and working with employees to overcome them. The key is to separate individual communication or relationship issues from those caused by system inadequacies. Uncovering and dealing with even one of these hidden barriers can dramatically improve employee performance.

Performance Barriers: Employee Quick-Check

1. I need more specificity about the performance goals for which I'm responsible.
2. I am unclear about the process or instructions for completing tasks or projects.
3. I feel overwhelmed by interruptions and distractions when I try to complete my work.
4. I try to multitask, but I'm not completing tasks on time or with accuracy and completeness.
5. I need more relevant, specific and useful feedback about how I'm doing.

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