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# From Elusive to Obvious: Improving Performance Management Through Specificity

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We have no doubt that performance management is broken and in that sense we agree with Pulakos and O’Leary (2011). On the other hand, the authors suggest that formality and “prescribed steps” should be replaced with informal communications or day-to-day activities, yet we suspect that formality alone is not the issue—we argue that *generality* is to blame as well. Pulakos and O’Leary state that “the formula for effective performance management remains elusive.” However, we believe that the “elusiveness” of performance management can be alleviated if managers resist the urge to generalize performance management.

## The Rise of Generality

For decades, researchers have stressed the importance of specificity in a variety of industrial–organizational-related activities—in criterion-related validity, in employee selection, in job analysis methodology, and in definitions of job performance (e.g., see Austin & Villanova, 1992; Guion, 1998). For instance, we know that we gain the most predictive validity in employee selection if we connect *specific*

individual traits to *specific* job performance criteria. In addition, specificity in identifying job performance criteria is equally as critical for developing objective performance management systems that are fair, unbiased, and practical for employee development.

However, the rapid growth in size and complexity of organizations has triggered a top-down demand for efficiency. Consequently, to meet this need, HR managers have cut corners by substituting specificity with generality. For example, many practitioners forgo job analysis procedures because it is cheaper to use general traits and abilities—like Conscientiousness or general mental ability—to predict a generalized performance criterion. In terms of performance management, it is seen as more efficient to use a generalized performance appraisal for all employees in an organization, or at best, to have three to four versions of a general assessment that can be used at a few different levels. In fact, for those of you readers who have seen your fair share of performance appraisal documents, how many were linked to the specific performance behaviors required for a particular job? We would venture to say not very many.

## The Need for Specificity in Performance Management

Before making the case for specificity, we would like to bring to light the main

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objective of performance management. Performance management is a process designed to monitor and enhance employee behavior in order to ensure that it supports the mission and goals of the larger organization. For instance, imagine an automobile manufacturing company. An assembly line worker in this organization might install parts on a chassis in order to contribute to the making of the product. An HR professional might handle the administration of employee benefits, or the hiring of line workers, in order to support the employees who carry out tasks more closely related to the assembly of cars. Moreover, an IT professional might manage the software or hardware used to coordinate the various lines of communication that assist in the making of automobiles.

The above example illustrates the division of labor in a modern organization and highlights the need for specificity. In a performance management system, we want to hold the HR professional accountable for hiring top-performing employees, but we would hardly consider the line worker or IT professional responsible for the same actions. This is why performance management should demonstrate a link between individual jobs and specific tasks or behaviors. Instead of calling out the specific tasks and responsibilities of distinct occupations, however, many organizations use a single cover-all performance appraisal with vague items, such as “demonstrates performance on special projects, assigned goals, and duties,” followed by a general rating scale and a line for comments. This generalized practice waters down the performance management process. Without explicit specificity, performance management loses its meaning.

### **A Cautionary Note About Generalized and Informal Performance Management**

For those readers who are still convinced that generality is the best way to save a

buck in practice, keep in mind that it is specificity—coupled with formality—that encourages fairness and objectivity in performance management. Without specific and objective job performance criteria, performance management can be particularly “broken” for stigmatized or minority groups in the workplace. Take women for example: Women in male-dominated fields can face unfair performance evaluations and career advancement prospects due to a perceived lack of fit between their personalities and the personality needed in a male-dominated role. Gorman (2005) provides an important study demonstrating how gender-related stereotypes operate within workplaces. Using a sample of law firms, she examines how women’s representation among new hires is profoundly affected by whether or not the hiring criteria emphasize stereotypically masculine or feminine traits. In this same manner, subjective behavioral rating scales used in multirater performance management assessments allow for the subconscious biases of managers—and even peers and subordinates—to negatively influence ratings of female employees. These evaluations can potentially lead to fewer rewards and promotional opportunities down the road.

Next, empirical research has shown that more bureaucratic organizations can actually enhance career rewards and advancement opportunities for women when compared to less bureaucratic organizations (Baron, Hannan, Hsu, & Koçak, 2007). Pulakos and O’Leary argue that interventions aimed at improving performance management should cease reinventing formal system features. However, in order for performance management to be more objective and fair for stigmatized groups, we argue that aspects of formal systems should be the focus of improvement efforts. In particular, we believe that performance management systems should clearly define the task-related behaviors needed for success on the job, and appraisal processes should be conducted systematically for each employee

in order to reduce bias against any minority groups.

In summary, we believe that formalization and specificity are needed for performance management to be practical for employee development and effective for organizational performance. These principles are necessary to maintain objectivity in workplace performance assessments, which can be especially important for marginalized workers. We hope that I–O researchers and practitioners take a moment to think back to the classes they had in graduate school and contemplate the importance of defining job performance more specifically for each job.

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