

THE DAILY REPORTER

What is the First Step in Performance Management?

By Kelly Allan and Lara Lebeiko

Over the past 21 years, we have noticed that the majority of “employee performance problems” on which we have been asked to consult often are not about performance at all. Rather, they stem from numerous misunderstandings about the work managers assign to employees.

In these situations, the employees believed they understood exactly what the assignment entailed. As it turns out, their interpretations of the assignment differed widely from how their managers believed they had described the assignment!

So, does the problem rest on the shoulders of the employees or the managers? The answer is: the problem is really about process, not about people. How can managers and employees alike improve the odds for successful outcomes and performance? They can focus on thorough, process-oriented tasking.

We have developed a simple model to help alleviate this problem; in fact, it’s so simple many people don’t believe it can work. But it does. We call the model “The 3Ts: Tasking, Tending, and Trust-building.”

All three Ts are important, but the most powerful is the first one—Tasking. “Tasking” refers to the assigning or delegating of a task or project, and is important because it is the starting point for clarity about performance expectations.

Below, we have provided five guidelines for effective Tasking, but first we want to provide two root reasons for why tasking problems arise.

The first is based on the misconception that most of us hold about how we communicate. Most managers believe they do a great job of explaining the assignment (tasking), and most employees feel they do a great job of understanding the task being assigned to them. In our experience, however, most tasking is hurried, incomplete, and unclear – leading to late delivery, incomplete assignments, and poor quality. Sloppy tasking (and sloppy performance) will continue until managers and employees commit to use a reliable process—such as the one below—to communicate explicitly and thoroughly about assignments.

The second root reason is managers often don’t share with employees enough of their thinking, assumptions, and decisions about an assignment. Too often they just do a “solve this problem” dump on an employee without explaining their thinking about the task. Then, when they discover the problem was solved in an incomplete or ineffective way, they are shocked. “But it is so obvious what needed to be done,” managers lament. “I have morons working for me,” they conclude. Yet most of the time, key aspects of the task (such as what needed to be done, how it should be done, and why) were never made obvious to the employee.

Here are the five guidelines to help with Tasking. They take the form of the acronym: C.L.E.A.R.

C stands for “context.” Context encompasses the views and beliefs that the manager has about the task including the background and specifics that make the task worth completing. Why a specific employee is suited to working on the assignment is also part of the context. Leave out the context, and the risks of being disappointed by what the employee delivers increase significantly.

L stands for “list of steps.” This is especially important for new tasks and for new ways of doing tasks. Discussing the steps and the methods to use in working on the task will bring greater clarity to how the task needs to be done. Discussions about steps and methods also help bring to the surface a lot of the unspoken assumptions and thinking about the work. Those assumptions—when left unspoken—virtually assure that the employee won’t meet expectations.

E stands for “expectations.” We suggest you include both qualitative and quantitative expectations in your Tasking conversations. Many managers forget to communicate the specifics of exactly what they expect; they simply hand off work and expect the best. Our clients hear this line a lot from us: no tasking is complete unless the manager and the employee know “exactly what, by when, and at what level.” In other words, “Here is what I’m expecting, by this date, and at this level of quality/quantity.”

A stands for “ability.” Too often managers assume because they know how to work effectively on the problem, that everyone must also know how. A brief discussion of how comfortable the employee feels about her ability to be successful using the methods (List of steps) within the time and quality requirements (Expectations) gives the employee opportunity to realize where she is uncertain about the assignment, or where she may be unsure about whether she knows how to do what the manager is asking.

R stands for “return.” Return explains why the task is important: it is what the task means to the organization, the department, the manager, the employee, the customer.... Again, don’t assume that this is obvious!

One final tip for effective tasking: recognize that both the manager *and* the employee have equal responsibility to make absolutely sure the task is understood in all of the dimensions of Context, List of steps, Expectations, Ability to be successful, and Return. An employee or manager who walks away from a tasking conversation without exploring all the aspects of the C.L.E.A.R. process is placing himself and the project at risk. Both the employee and manager have individual responsibility for their own success—and for the successful outcome of the task.

C.L.E.A.R. Tasking is the first step in performance management. It is a simple process. If managers and employees alike participate in thorough tasking, managers will have more successful employees and employees will have greater joy in work. Not a bad outcome!

Is it C.L.E.A.R. what you need to do next?!