

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT – PROBLEMS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

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OPSOMMING

In die lig daarvan dat Prestasiebestuur nie konsekwent aan verwagtinge voldoen het nie, is 'n opname van probleme wat met Prestasiebestuur ervaar word, gedoen. 374 middel- en senior bestuurders van nege groot Suid-Afrikaanse ondernemings is by die ondersoek betrek. Resultate dui op 'n hoë voorkoms van beduidend belangrike probleme. Aanbevelings is voorgestel vir die uitskakeling van probleme tydens implementering en instandhouding van die stelsel.

ABSTRACT

In view of the fact that Performance Management has not consistently met expectations, a survey of potential problems was conducted among nine major South African organizations. The sample comprised 374 middle and senior managers. Results indicate a high incidence of significantly important problems. Recommendations for alleviating problems with implementation of the system were made.

The inability of their established MBO programme to address employee developmental needs prompted Beer and associates at Corning Glass to develop a system that would combine the strengths of MBO orientation towards results and accountability with employee development (Beer & Ruh, 1976; Beer, Ruh, Dawson, McCaa & Kavanagh, 1978). The result was a Performance Management system that could be used to *manage, measure and improve* employee performance. According to Bevan and Thompson (1991), a "textbook" definition of Performance Management includes the following elements:

- A shared vision* of organizational objectives, or a mission statement, communicated to all employees.
- Individual Performance Management targets* related both to operating unit and wider organizational objectives.
- Regular formal reviews* of progress towards these targets.
- The review process used to identify *training, development and reward outcomes*.
- Evaluation of effectiveness* of the whole process and its contribution to overall organizational performance to allow changes and improvements to be made.

In a certain sense Performance Management could be considered as a system that provides a link between strategic planning and employee performance appraisal (Addams & Embley, 1988).

In contrast to performance appraisal which has elicited an enormous amount of research, little empirical research has been conducted in the area of Performance Management. Literature is limited to descriptions of actual implementation experiences (Addams & Embley, 1988; Mumford & Buley, 1988; O'Neal & Palladino, 1992; and Schneier, 1989), articles on creating or revamping Performance Management systems (Guinn and Corona, 1991; Schneier, Beatty and Baird, 1986; Sheard, 1992), descriptive articles on conditions for making Performance Management more effective (Day, 1989; English, 1991; Fowler, 1990; Pratt, 1991; and Romonoff, 1989) and two reports on surveys of the effectiveness of Performance Management Systems in the United Kingdom (Bevan & Thompson, 1991; Fletcher and Williams, 1992).

FOOTNOTES

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The critical role of Performance Management in execution of strategy has received little attention in the literature, with only one article dealing specifically with this topic (Schneier, Shaw and Beatty, 1991). According to the authors Performance management can be a vital tool for strategy implementation by "signalling what is really important, providing ways to measure what is important, fixing accountability for behaviour and results, and helping to improve performance" p279.

Of particular importance is the survey Bevan and Thompson (1991) conducted among 790 public and private organizations in the UK. They found no evidence that improved organizational performance is related to the operation of a formal Performance Management System. Possible reasons for this negative finding were suggested by the authors. These include the fact that many Performance Management Systems had been in operation for only a short period and that pre-tax profit growth might have been an inappropriate measure of effectiveness. A more likely reason, according to the authors, is the fact that organizational effectiveness is affected by a wide range of factors. Consequently, trying to measure the effects of only one of them will not provide conclusive results.

Two other observations were made. First, results indicated an incomplete and patchy emergence of Performance Management techniques in the UK. It seemed that most organizations apply some Performance Management activities, but that few appear to be integrating all of them successfully. Second, the authors were able to discern the operation – and conflict – of two broad Performance Management approaches. The one is categorized as a "reward-driven integration" and the other a "development-driven integration", with the former appearing to be the dominant one. Reward-driven integration emphasises the role of performance reward systems in changing organizational behaviour and is inclined to undervalue the part played by other human resource development activities. Development-driven integration, on the other hand, stresses the importance of ensuring that appropriate human resource development activities are available to meet the long-term objectives of the organization, and that business needs and human resource development are co-ordinated. The authors express the concern that tension between the two integration processes may cause both to malfunction and that the reward-driven strategy will dominate at the expense of the development-driven strategy.

The present study was conducted to survey the views of South African middle and senior managers on problems experienced with the application of Performance Management in organizations. This information could be useful for the design and implementation of Performance Management systems.

METHOD

Sample

Three hundred and seventy four middle and senior managers from nine South African organizations representing both private companies and utility corporations were surveyed in this study. These nine companies were not randomly sampled from the universe of South African companies. Rather, a snowball sampling technique was used to identify the major companies involved in Performance Management processes. It was decided to involve middle and senior managers in the survey on the assumption that, with the advantage of the "helicopter vision" associated with senior management levels, they would be able to provide better insight into the processes of Performance Management than lower-level managers and supervisors. Managers were randomly selected by the Performance Management facilitators of their organizations. Performance Management facilitators, also called Performance Management leaders, acted as co-ordinators of an organization's Performance Management effort, and were usually part of the human resources function.

A distribution of managers per organization and sector as well as the percentage of questionnaires returned is presented in Table 1. It can be seen from Table 1 that varying numbers of questionnaires were provided to organizations for distribution. This number was determined by the Performance Management facilitators on whom the researcher was dependent for co-operation in the research process.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF MANAGERS PER
SECTOR/ORGANIZATION AND RESPONSE
TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Sector/ Organization	No of Ques- tionnaires distributed	No of Ques- tionnaires returned	Percentage of Ques- tionnaires returned
Financial sector			
S.A. Mutual	300	93	31
Absa	25	25	100
Absa (Bankfin)	40	40	100
Bankorp	80	45	56
	<u>445</u>	<u>203</u>	<u>46</u>
Utility corporations			
Eskom	200	63	32
Transnet	65	34	52
	<u>265</u>	<u>97</u>	<u>37</u>
Commercial and Industrial sector			
Columbus Joint			
Venture	30	28	93
ISM	35	26	74
SAB	40	20	50
	<u>105</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>70</u>
Total	<u>815</u>	<u>374</u>	<u>46</u>

It is not clear why the response rate varied considerably. In the case of all participating organizations except S.A. Mutual, respondents were requested to return questionnaires to a specific person within the organization. S.A. Mutual respondents returned questionnaires directly to the author. The lowest return rates, namely 31% and 32%, came from organizations where large numbers of questionnaires were distributed. In both cases very large, national and decentralized organizations were involved.

Development of the measuring instrument

In order to develop a questionnaire to survey the opinions of line managers on Performance Management, it was decided to interview Performance Management facilitators of organizations that had applied this system for more than one year. In view of their theoretical knowledge and practical experience of Performance Management, these facilitators were considered experts in their field, able to provide significant inputs into the

construction of the questionnaire. Being directly involved in the application of Performance Management at various organizational levels, in various departments and in various geographical locations, it was assumed that they would have a wider perspective on contextual and content-related problems of Performance Management than the average line manager would.

Interviews were conducted with facilitators from 12 organizations. These interviews were relatively unstructured, allowing participants to describe their experience with the system. Nonetheless, two questions were asked in all of these interviews: "What problems do you experience with Performance Management?" and "What could we do to make the system work?" So many concerns were raised by the first question that one was compelled to ask the second question to maintain some balance!

In view of pervasive problems brought to light by the interviews, especially the negative impact of some organizational systems (for example, the reward system), it was decided to develop a systems model of Performance Management. This model is presented in Figure 1. The systems model which is described elsewhere (Spangenberg, 1993) was developed with assistance from Performance Management facilitators who participated in the survey described above.

Throughout, the model was tested against the relevant literature. In addition to clarifying the reciprocal relationships between Performance Management and other organizational systems, the model serves to synthesise the various impacting issues to form a holistic picture. It provides a broad framework for Performance Management implementation and as such reminds managers of critical elements of the process that have to be attended to on an ongoing basis.

Inputs, which comprise strategic drivers and internal stakeholders, emphasise the importance of aligning Performance Management with the strategic direction of the organization as well as the importance of empowered management and employees.

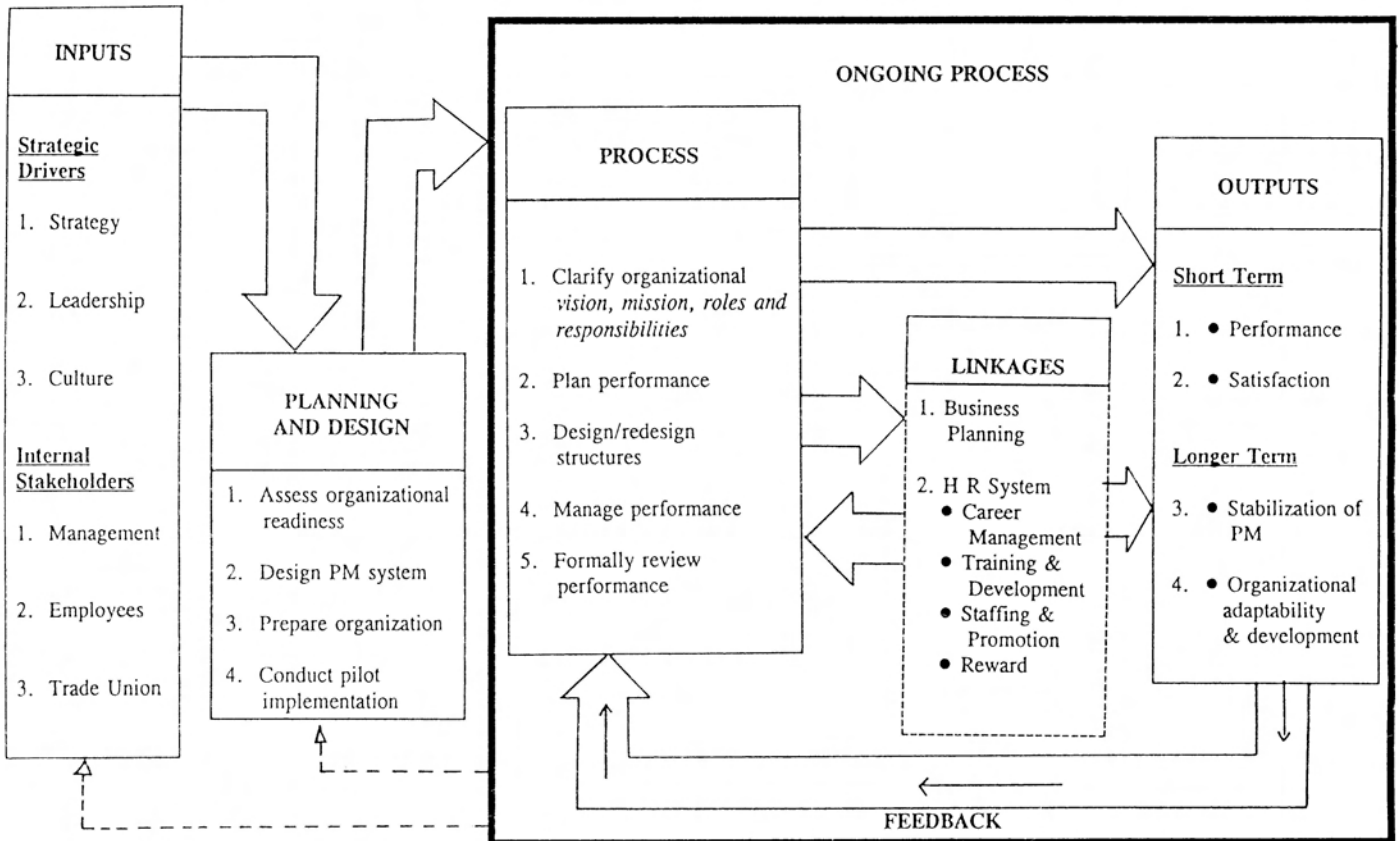
Process, outputs and linkages form part of the *ongoing process* that comprises the core of Performance Management. The whole section is put in a dark frame to remove it slightly from inputs as well as planning and design. It emphasises the ongoing, cyclical nature of Performance management, with an annual clarification or confirmation of the vision and mission of operating units or divisions. Obviously, major changes in inputs like strategic shifts will have a strong influence on divisional or departmental strategy and Performance Management. The dark frame also highlights the relatively distant position vis-à-vis corporate head office.

For the purpose of the questionnaire, the model was to be used as a broad framework for classifying problems.

Based on information from the interviews, a first draft of the questionnaire was developed. It contained 54 items including a number of problems described in the literature. This initial version of the *Problems Questionnaire* was circulated to Performance Management facilitators of the participating organizations. They were asked to rate each of the items as being either a minor, important or very serious problem. In addition, they were asked to comment on the items and add items as they saw fit.

The returned questionnaires were analysed and meaningful comments converted into additional items. The final questionnaire consisted of 70 items as well as four questions dealing with linkages between Performance Management and some organizational systems. These were the planning and budgeting process and three HR systems, namely the reward system, the training and development system and manpower planning/career management systems. The items in the questionnaire were further refined by means of three successive discussion sessions with expert colleagues. During these sessions matters of con-

Figure 1: Systems model of Performance Management



PSYSTEM

tent, clarity (language and elimination of ambiguity) and statistical adequacy were dealt with respectively.

Internal consistency of the questionnaire was tested by means of both product moment correlations and chi square statistics. More specifically, the association between variables within sections, i.e. items belonging to a specific area (for example, goal setting), was examined. Responses were coded 1, 2 and 3, where 1 indicated a most serious problem, 2 an important problem and 3 a minor problem. Hence these coded responses could be considered rank scores and correlation coefficients could be computed to test for association. Furthermore, for each pair of variables a cross-tabulation was made which allowed testing for association by means of a chi square test. Both statistics indicated highly significant association, attesting to internal consistency. The only exception was the area of environment which contained three items, two of which were highly diverse and not significantly correlated (items 4 and 5).

Procedure

Of the twelve organizations involved in the construction of the questionnaire, nine participated in the actual survey. For practical reasons three organizations were unable to conduct a survey of this nature at the time. One organization had just completed a national Performance Management audit, while a second was involved in a major restructuring. In the case of the third organization the Performance Management facilitator, a training and development manager of a mining house, could not make practical arrangements for conducting the survey at the specific time. Questionnaires, including a covering letter explaining the purpose of the study, were made available to Performance Management facilitators for distribution. With one exception, questionnaires were returned to the facilitators who in turn forwarded them to the researcher.

Respondents were not asked to identify themselves, but only to indicate whether they were line or staff managers from middle or senior levels.

RESULTS

The level of response on each item for the senior and middle managers as well as for line and staff managers was compared by means of chi square tests. These tests indicated significant differences in 4 out of 74 cases for senior and middle managers and 9 out of 74 for line and staff managers. In view of these small numbers of apparently significant differences, the data of middle and senior/line or staff managers were pooled for subsequent analysis.

Of the 74 items listed in the questionnaire, 43 problems and 3 linkages proved to be significantly important. The criterion used was developed on the basis of a hypothesis of no preference in any direction. The expected number of responses at each level (i.e. 1, 2, and 3) was N/3. The standard error of the number at each level was $\sqrt{N(\frac{1}{3})(\frac{2}{3})}$. Therefore, a highly significant ($p < 0,001$) departure from the expectation was indicated by the observed number of responses falling outside the interval $N/3 \pm 3 \text{ times } \sqrt{N(\frac{1}{3})(\frac{2}{3})}$.

With few exceptions N was in the range of 368 to 374. For N = 370 the limits given by the rule above were between 97 and 150 and these limits were used in scanning the questions so as to select those which showed significant departure from expectation. By way of an example item 5 is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES FOR A SINGLE ITEM.
N = 371

Item	0	1	2	3	Total
5	3	239	90	39	371

The above item represents a highly important problem.

It was found that probably the best way to present the results in terms of conciseness and understanding was to classify summaries of highly significant items according to the systems model. (See Table 3.)

TABLE 3
SUMMARIES OF HIGHLY SIGNIFICANT PROBLEMS

Systems Element	No	Item (Problem) Summary
Inputs		
Environmental issues	4	Impact of high inflation on performance-reward linkage
	5	Productivity and quality not entrenched South African values
Strategy	43	Changes in corporate strategy not resulting in behaviour changes
	8	Lack of integrated management
Culture Management	15	Lack of trust and openness
	12	Insufficient line management support
	13	Managers lack effective people-management skills
Planning and design	19	Often superiors not au fait with day-to-day functions
	28	Real goal of performance review and planning mistrusted
	29	Achieve "mind shift" towards output and away from input
	33	Performance Management not viewed as an open system
Implementation (Ongoing process)	38	Difficult to demonstrate direct investment-return relationship
	39	Performance not <i>managed</i> : emphasis is on controlling
	40	Managers not assessed on Performance Management implementation
Process	42	Applying strategy in the work situation
	44	Changes in business plan not followed by changes in departmental/individual objectives
	46	Groups moving in different directions
	47	Inadequate linking of individual/group/departmental objectives
	48	Losing focus in cascading objectives downwards
	49	Formulating meaningful objectives and performance standards
	51	Complex objectives not supported by action plans
	52	Action plans inadequate
	53	Managers/supervisors inadequately trained in Performance Management
	54	Subordinates inadequately trained in Performance Management
Managing Performance	55	Insufficient coaching and assistance given to employees
	56	Appraisal overemphasised at the expense of development (in periodic performance reviews)
	57	Performance reviews not followed up productively
	58	Viewed as administrative requirement.
	59	Performance information insufficient
Formal performance review	60	Unclear perception of satisfactory performance
	61	Maintaining objectivity
	62	Employees resisting "labelling"
	63	Erroneously accepting inadequate performance is mainly employee's fault (rather than organizational system's defect)
Outputs	34	Implementation mechanistic because of focus on measurables
	36	Application not monitored on ongoing basis
	37	Long implementation process weakens enthusiasm

Linkages	Performance Management unproductively linked to:
Serious problems relating to the reward system	71 Reward system
	73 Manpower planning/career management
	74 Organization's planning and budgeting process
	64 Equitably linking salary/bonus to performance
	65 Rewarding group performance equitably
	66 Rewarding only superior performance
	67 Applying a forced distribution to ratings
	68 Applying non-financial rewards adequately
	69 Person's self-image affected by unfavourable rating
	70 Principle of proximity of reinforcement negated by tying performance to reward only once annually

In interpreting the results in Table 3, it was clear that quite a large percentage of problems were considered to be important. This was not surprising seeing that most of the items included in the questionnaire were verified by Performance Management facilitators as important, while the rest were identified as such in the literature.

An overall view of Table 3 revealed a fairly strong influence of environmental and organizational issues on Performance Management. At the front end of the system the two environmental issues, i.e. impact of high inflation on productive performance-reward linkage and a lack in this country of values such as productivity and quality, were viewed in a very serious light. Equally noticeable, at the back end of the system, were the pervasive problems related to the linkage of Performance Management to some organizational systems. Not only were linkages to the reward, manpower planning/career management and planning and budgeting systems considered as problematic, but all seven problems dealing with rewards were significantly important! These combined results strongly underline the importance of contextual issues in the application of Performance Management.

Problems relating to two strategic drivers, i.e. strategy and culture, were important but not pervasive. An item on clarity of vision and mission and the downward communication of these was listed in the questionnaire but not confirmed as a serious issue. On the negative side, serious concerns included the fact that changes in corporate strategy were not converted into corresponding behaviour changes and, finally, a lack of trust and openness was experienced.

Problems with regard to internal stakeholders reflected classical management issues reported in the literature, namely insufficient management support, lack of effective people-management skills and the fact that superiors often are not au fait with the day-to-day functioning of individuals. The ability of low-level employees to use Performance Management technology was listed in the questionnaire but was not viewed as a serious issue. Since productive trade union participation was considered by Performance Management facilitators as a *prerequisite* for effective Performance Management implementation, a question in this regard was not included in the questionnaire.

In the area of planning and design, particularly regarding the Performance Management system per se and individual and organizational readiness, only one of seven items were confirmed as very important, namely mistrust in the real goal of performance planning and review. With regard to preparing the organization, achieving a "mind shift" towards output and away from input was confirmed as problematic.

The numerous problems pertaining to implementation of Performance Management are cause for concern. They covered

both general and specific issues. General problems include: not viewing Performance Management as an open system, performance not being *managed* (with emphasis rather on controlling) and, typically, managers not being assessed on the quality of their Performance Management implementation.

The fact that Performance Management was not considered an open system characterized by flexibility, interaction with other systems and adaptiveness was confirmed by its inadequate linkages discussed earlier. The need for a dynamic open system approach, where the major drive is for managing rather than controlling performance, certainly puts heavy pressure on organizational leadership.

The problem of applying strategy in the work situation was raised by an internal consultant of a large insurance company. Specifically the issue was not knowing how to take strategy and apply it in the daily working situation. For example, what does a value such as client care mean in practical, everyday work?

Of 23 problems dealing with process issues classified under planning performance, managing performance and formally reviewing performance, 20 were significant! Goal setting at strategic, departmental, team and individual levels seemed to be problematic. Particularly disconcerting was the fact that key issues in goal setting were viewed as serious problems. For example, changes in the business plan were not followed up by changes in objectives lower down. Small wonder that the setting of individual objectives was plagued by inadequate linkages and loss of focus. Setting objectives per se also seemed to be problematic.

Problems experienced with goal setting were compounded by the fact that complex goals were not supported by appropriate action plans. In all, action plans seemed inadequate.

Managing performance was hampered by inadequate Performance Management training of both superiors and subordinates, which led in turn to inadequate coaching and assistance to subordinates. In periodic performance reviews the emphasis seemed to be on appraisal rather than on development. Furthermore, periodic performance reviews were not followed up productively. The fact that these problems are mentioned repeatedly in the literature does not detract from their seriousness.

Problems with the annual performance review pertain to some basic issues such as lack of clarity on what satisfactory performance entails and insufficient or inadequate performance information. The combined problem constitutes a serious indictment and it was therefore not surprising that maintaining objectivity was considered problematic. Important from a psychological point of view is the fact that "labelling" of employees was considered by line managers as a very serious issue. Finally, performance reviews could have been negatively influenced by the erroneous belief that performance problems were mainly the employees' fault.

Three implementation issues had a bearing on stabilization of the Performance Management process. Two of them represented danger signals. First, implementation of the system might have become mechanistic because of too great an emphasis on measurables. This mechanistic approach corroborated the tendency of emphasising the *appraisal rather than development* dimension of periodic performance reviews. Second, dwindling enthusiasm because of the long implementation process (approximately three years for medium-sized companies) was a concern raised by a number of Performance Management facilitators before it was confirmed by the line managers. If one adds the third issue, namely not monitoring application of Performance Management on an ongoing basis, the need for planned stabilization of the system cries out for attention.

DISCUSSION

The above results stimulated some meaningful discussion and provided salient pointers towards effective Performance Management application:-

1. The very fact that a multitude of Performance Management problems identified through open-ended discussions with facilitators could be logically and meaningfully classified according to a literature-based systems model, in a certain sense confirmed the usefulness of the model. Evidence of internal consistency further enhanced this view. Of much more importance, however, was the fact that this *multitude of problems by its pervasiveness throughout the systems model emphasised the need for such a model*. The need for a systems approach was accentuated further by the reciprocal relationships between Performance Management and other organizational systems described earlier.

Such a model can serve at least two very important purposes. First, it can help to understand the multifaceted nature of Performance Management as represented by the multitude of factors that influence performance at all levels. In a sense it serves to synthesize these various impacting aspects into a meaningful holistic representation. Second, it can serve as a broad framework for planning for Performance Management implementation and ensuring that critical elements of the process are duly attended to during implementation.

2. The strong impact of organizational contextual issues at both ends of the model, serious problems with Performance Management processes, and problems with stabilization of the system call for the *use of organizational development (OD) principles* in the implementation of the system. Based on the literature and consultations with Performance Management facilitators, especially OD experts, a four-phase, 13-step OD implementation plan is currently being developed.
3. Pervasiveness of problems over virtually all stages of the *Performance Management process* calls for intensive orientation and training of both management and employees. In addition to obvious training topics relating to the five stages of the process, managers and supervisors should be trained in both organizational and people dynamics. For effective Performance Management implementation, managers must at the same time understand organizational issues like the emergent nature of strategy and goal development as well as employee behavioural dynamics. At employee level managers and supervisors must, for instance, understand the often negative effect "labelling" may have on employees. The development of leadership, coaching and feedback skills is an absolute prerequisite.
4. The pervasiveness of problems with regard to *rewarding performance* evident from this survey is in line with generally negative findings from a survey conducted by Horwitz and Frost (1992) involving 150 South African companies which are members of the Institute for Personnel Management of Southern Africa. Their survey shows, for example, that there is no definite tendency to link reward to specific strategic organizational objectives, that rewards given are not proportionate to effort involved and that little clear evidence exists that organizations are using performance appraisals extensively in determining reward.

It must be borne in mind, however, that compensation is a complex process with diverse objectives, methods, target groups and time frames. As such it can have a decisive influence, often negative, on Performance Management.

In view of the above there seems to be no alternative but to separate rewarding performance from the annual Performance Management cycle. The seriousness of reward issues contradicts the logic of ending the Performance

Management cycle with rewarding performance. In large, open organizations the dynamics involved in directly linking reward to performance are probably too complicated to manage effectively. In smaller, more mechanistic organizations a direct performance-reward link may be more viable.

5. An important implication of separating Performance Management and the reward system is that Performance Management then has to function as an *independent system*, with reciprocal linkages to a number of other systems, including the reward system. This means that it has to rely on its own usefulness and contribution in order to survive. To be useful and acceptable it has to serve a clear *purpose* and be aligned with the strategic direction of the organization. It must contribute in a meaningful way both to the short-term outcomes of production, productivity and employee satisfaction and longer-term aims of organizational adaptability and development. It must contribute materially to individual and organizational learning and development.

The generally negative trend of the findings from this survey to a large degree confirms Bevan and Thompson's (1991) conclusion that Performance Management is at the crossroads. A development-driven integration approach that forms part of an open systems strategy and is facilitated by a continued OD support system may go a long way to get Performance Management on the high road – where it belongs!

A possible weakness of this study is the small numbers of respondents from some of the participating organizations. Larger numbers would have made possible meaningful comparisons between and within sectors. The effect of restructuring, and often downsizing of organizations due to larger economic factors is, however, a reality in South Africa in the early 1990's and may have a dampening effect on studies of this nature.

The study has identified some areas for further research. First and foremost is the impact of organizational issues on Performance Management design, implementation and effective application. This calls for further research and validation of a systems model like the one proposed in this study. Implementation and stabilization of Performance Management could be greatly enhanced by considering it a system-wide OD intervention and treating it as such. Further research into actual implementation procedures, based on an integrative model of planned change like the one proposed by Bullock and Batten (1985), could assist greatly in predicting and eliminating stumbling blocks.

Another important area for further study would be to identify prerequisites for successful implementation. Items could, for example, be generated through brainstorming sessions with representative groups of line and staff managers. Items could be classified either according to a systems model to ensure proper coverage, or according to a stepwise OD implementation plan, depending on the specific need. A "prerequisites questionnaire" could be used either as an aid to implementation of Performance Management or as a survey of its effectiveness.

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