Do you have a people problem?

John Seddon challenges those managers who assume they have people problems to consider firstly of all the things that affect a person's performance. In doing so, you may find you don't have people problems, you have a management problem!

In my experience, managers probably exhibit more dysfunctional behaviour in their attempts to manage people than in any other activity. Today the model of the sports coach is so prevalent in the mythology of management and motivation. Achieving extraordinary success in sport, sometimes against all the odds, is so often accomplished with the inspiring, threatening and even punishing behaviour of the coach. The idea that the manager is a 'coach' is promulgated by trainers of courses on 'people management'. But I recommend that you don't be fooled. Regular readers of this column will know that I am a committed systems thinker and systems thinkers know that the major causes of performance problems are not with the people but to be found in the system, and that is the responsibility of management.

The 'coaching' model of management assumes two variables: having the 'right' people in place, and exhibiting the right management behaviour when managing those people. Both assumptions are ill-founded. Using the following model as a guide to analysing performance problems will help correct both assumptions. Performance problems are very seldom problems with the people and effective management behaviour to improve performance is rarely to do with aping the kind of behaviour exhibited by sports coaches.

The Performance Management Model, as its name implies, is concerned with improving performance. To perform well any individual needs three things -

- Information related to the performance required – 'what have I got to do?'

- The wherewithal or 'tools' to use – 'how and with what?'

- Willingness to do the job – 'I'm into doing this, I like and want to do it'

The Model recognises that some elements of these requirements are supplied by the performer's work environment and some elements are supplied by the individual's own repertoire of behaviour.

Application of the Model enables the manager to identify deficiencies in either the **environment** or the **individual** and take appropriate action. When using the model, you must start at the start and work through. To make the exercise of most value, I suggest you think of a person whom you currently label as a 'performance problem' and work on your answers to each of the questions.

And before we start, let me make one other observation. Many managers treat 'people problems' with training 'solutions'. As you follow the Model, you will discover how far down the list of possible interventions training appears. Despite its popularity, training is rarely the right solution. Many organisations I work with waste enormous resources on training. Sad to say they rarely evaluate the impact of training in terms of its effect on performance. If they did, perhaps they would waste less of their resources.

The Performance Management Model - Questions to ask about people performance:

The performer's work environment:

 1 Information:

Does the individual know the accomplishments that are expected of them and what the standards are - in operational terms?

Are the right things being measured - measures that relate to purpose - and does the individual have ready access to those measures?

Consequently, are they informed as quickly as possible and with sufficient frequency how well they are currently performing?

Are these measures both accurate and easy to understand?

Do these measures refer to performance over which the individual has genuine control?

Do these measures tell the individual in what respect they are not performing well?

Are there adequate guides or job aids to exemplary performance so that memory isn't critical?

Are these guides or job aids models of simplicity and clarity?

How certain are you that the individual actually gets this information when needed and in a user-friendly manner?

If information is in any way a problem, it is the responsibility of management to remedy the deficiency.

If information is not the problem, the focus moves to the next consideration.

2 Wherewithal:

Are the tools, materials, work methods and the work-flows or processes designed in a way that supports optimal (waste free) performance?

Could they be better designed to support optimal performance?

If wherewithal is a problem, it is the responsibility of management to remedy the deficiency.

If wherewithal is not the problem, the focus moves to the next consideration.

3 Nature of motivation:

Are there 'extrinsic' motivators (incentives, piece rates, awards etc) distracting from adequate performance – encouraging people to 'get the reward' rather than 'do the job'?

Is the individual's job designed such that he/she experiences sufficient 'intrinsic' motivation (from the actually doing the work well) to perform to their best? Intrinsic motivation relies on knowledge of results – how well the individual is performing versus purpose.

If incentives are a problem, it is the responsibility of management to remedy the deficiency.

If incentives are not the problem, the focus moves to the next consideration.

The person's repertoire of behaviour:

1. Knowledge:

Would the individual fail to perform to exemplary standard if their life depended upon it - even when they have adequate information, wherewithal and forms of motivation to do so?

Does the exemplary performer seem to know something that other people do not know?

If the answer is 'yes' to either of these questions, training should be considered as a useful strategy.

If knowledge is a problem, it is the responsibility of management to remedy the deficiency.

If knowledge is not the problem, the focus moves to the next consideration.

2. Capacity:

Is it certain that one must have special aptitudes, intelligence scores, verbal skills, manual dexterity and so on, in order to perform in an acceptable, if not exemplary, manner?

If the answer to this question is 'no' and all the prior conditions for adequate performance are in place, then some form of training or education is almost certainly required.

If capacity is a problem, it is the responsibility of management to remedy the deficiency.

If capacity is not the problem, the focus moves to the last consideration.

3. Willingness:

Is it impossible or uneconomic to redesign the job to achieve a sufficiently productive 'fit' between the required performance and what the individual would be willing to do?

If the answer to this question is certainly 'yes', then you have a 'people' problem.

This is the wrong person for the job.

So… do you have people problems or management problems?