Focusing instead of aiming - when performance counts!!

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When it comes to achieving peak performance, the focus of attention works better than small-minded goals. We are familiar with focus from sport when it comes to performance. We associate goals with 'management by objectives' in organizations (MbO: management by objectives, target agreement and performance evaluation). We want to achieve goal orientation, motivation and coordination throughout the entire organization.

Just because everyone is doing it doesn't mean it's good. Practically every organization leads through MbO, practically every employee is obliged to do so, and practically every good manager wonders inside how this is supposed to motivate top performance. For the proponents of MbO, managers as users, HR specialists as developers and consultants as gurus, in other words for most of you: just because MbO is apparently easy, because everyone is doing it, because you have already invested so much or because gurus are making a lot of money with it does not mean that it is good for people's performance! The topic of MbO is probably the most debated topic and a controversial discussion in leadership science. There are convincing reasons for both supporters and opponents. This is the reason why it is worth considering alternatives. Focus of attention is not only an alternative but also fulfills the requirements of the information age for leadership.

MbO comes from a bygone era. Target agreements originate from Peter Drucker's original idea of target orientation. It has now become MBO. Organizations also call it performance management

and use it to mean prescribing targets and evaluating employees. Over time, 'prescribe' was replaced with 'agree' and 'evaluate' with 'improve' without changing much of the idea - if you leave out the rhetoric surrounding the topic. The underlying assumption of MbO is that employees withhold performance from the organization. 'They need to be motivated and aligned', so it goes. The original well-intentioned idea of goal orientation has unfortunately been perverted into instruments that are stuck in the industrial age. At best, they can be used to move galleys.

People are goal-oriented by nature. Modern employees want to achieve something, they are intrinsically motivated, want to learn and grow in their work. So why do we insist that detailed target agreements are drawn up to motivate performance? Quasi-successful MbO depends on negotiating skills rather than the ability to perform well. If you ask senior managers what motivates them every day, "my personal goals" is rarely at the top of the list. Real leaders are motivated by the purpose of their idea, what makes them work hard every day from early in the morning until late at night. It is the weak bosses who call for targets from employees and advocate bonus programs to motivate them.

Targets cannot cope with a dynamic environment. Greater dynamism is the norm. And when control fails, we install more of it. But, in dynamic times, targets are slow because they always need to be adjusted as situations change. Due to the sheer size of the organization, this increases transaction costs dramatically! Every agreement has to be renegotiated. If goals were taken seriously, they would always have to be adjusted when things change. So we rely on employees to abuse the system intelligently - to their own detriment! 'We expect our employees to be flexible and adapt to new situations' and then 'We'll sort it out with the targets'. This is unfair and a breach of contract in the true sense of the word. The system sabotages the well-intentioned purpose.

Leading dynamically with the 'focus of attention'. The focus of attention is the only effective concept for people's personal performance. As observers, they direct the focus of attention to the critical and important things and use information as feedback. Physics calls this the observation effect. Through non-judgmental observation, learning takes place and change sets in. Focus of attention is the fastest way to enable performance. Athletes know

exactly what the focus of attention does for their performance. It is often equated with concentration. Goals interfere with attention; they give orders as 'do this and that', which inhibits performance. The focus of attention cannot be prescribed, it has to be found again and again. Managers support this by creating clarity of focus and an environment that enables employees to find and maintain the right focus. This has immense advantages in a volatile and uncertain time: employees perceive quiet signals, reinforce them through feedback and are able to constantly realign themselves. This is probably the fastest leadership concept of all.

Motivation: Motivation stems from (self-)responsibility, requires freedom of choice and demands meaning. Tapping into these sources of motivation is not so much a question of agreeing individual targets, but requires an entrepreneurial culture, indirect leadership and systems with which meaning can be found: An environment in which employees focus properly.

Alignment: The coordination of what is done, the exchange of knowledge and the alignment of direction are important communication tasks for management. These cannot be replaced by MbO. Objectives serve as an instrument for communication but not for controlling people. Sharing the right focus takes care of the need for coordination. Use vision, mission, strategy and values for workshops that provide direction and enable alignment.

Key figures: These should be used to provide good observation points for employees - so that everyone is looking at the right and important things and so that they provide information for good feedback on performance where the work is being done.

Goals: They destroy the effect of attention. Again about sport. "The moment I focus on the goal, I have already lost". Unfortunately, we often combine key figures with targets. Since most employees know exactly what the right performance standards are, they don't need constant reinforcement through tight targets.

Meaning: There is no doubt about the positive aspects of goal-oriented action. We are built for goal-oriented action, and performance is part of every human being. Accordingly, employees look for work with goals that make sense to them, and

work with a purpose that has meaning for their own lives. Employees are looking for a playing field where they can develop their potential. This means that organizations must offer meaningful playing fields instead of prescribing goals.

For HR, this means thoroughly examining the negative effects of MbO and increasingly gearing management training towards helping managers to focus and learn what they can and cannot really control. Industrial methods of leadership need to be replaced with those for knowledgeable employees.

Focus of attention is an effective tool for goal orientation. What about goal orientation in your organization? Does your management support the creativity and performance of your employees?

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