The Performance Triplet Method v3

Creating performance standards in four steps

You will usually perform this process after you have defined the top 3-5 Outcomes for a Role.

In this process, for a given Outcome, you'll define a Performance Standard with Thresholds and Metrics, such that anyone can tell if the work is being done adequately.

For a given Outcome, the Performance Triplet tool provides a method for defining, managing, and communicating regarding *work performance*. Use it when you need to *define performance standards*.

The Performance Triplet method involves four steps:

Step 1: Describe Not Good Enough Performance

Find or ask for examples to illustrate an instance of substandard performance. This roots out current trouble areas. Performance at or below this level is grounds for firing a person.

Step 2: Describe Good-Enough Performance

Find or ask for examples of performance that is acceptable. A person at this level will keep their job.

Step 3: Describe the Best Performance

Inquire about how the best employees approach this work. What do the superstars do? This brings to light the practices leading to true excellence.

Step 4: Forge the Performance Triplet via Behaviors and Process Steps

Together with your team, craft a Performance Triplet, outlining the 'Not Good,' 'Good Work,' and 'Excellent' levels. Bring your top performers on board and get their help and buy-in. (The **Process Steps** live in a different document entirely; correctly following them should lead **reliably** to at least Good Enough performance.)

Example

Performance Triplet Example: **Proactive Communication**		
Not Good	Good Work	Excellent
The employee leaves critical updates to the eleventh hour, sparking team chaos. Performs work but does not tell others that it's done.	The employee delivers essential updates promptly, giving the team time to adapt. Performs work and reports completion promptly to whoever asked for it.	The employee shares updates quickly and also foresees potential problems, proposing solutions, and keeping the team one step ahead.

Tips

1. **Be Specific**. Vague language in your triplets will lead to confusion and misinterpretation.
   - Not this: "An employee is rated 'needs work' if they're not communicating well."
   - But this: "An employee is rated 'needs work' if they frequently provide critical updates at the last minute, causing unnecessary stress within the team, or perform work but don't report to relevant stakeholders that it is complete."

2. **Use Concrete Examples**. Abstract descriptions, or descriptions based on conclusions, are often hard to grasp. Use real-world examples to make the triplet more readily understandable.
   - Not this: "Uses effective time management."
   - But this: "Plans their work in advance, ensuring all tasks are completed before the deadline and the quality of work is not compromised. Blocks out work time on calendar."

3. **Focus on Observable Behaviors**. Subjective descriptions invite disagreement. Describe actions that can be seen or heard.
   - Not this: "Be respectful in meetings." (The word "respectful" is subjective and represents a conclusion about behavior; it does not describe the behavior itself.)
   - But this: "Waits for others to finish speaking before offering their own input. When not sure, asks if the other person is done speaking, in a polite and patient tone."

Employee's View

The Performance Triplet is a mirror for the employee to self-assess. It allows them to rate their own performance, and enables self-improvement. It also allows employees to know when their peers are performing well or not, based on the standards of the firm.

Manager's View

The Performance Triplet is a map for the manager. It shows the path from poor to good to great, making it easier to guide employees.

Customer's View

The Performance Triplet can serve as a starting point for providing a Service Level Agreement (SLA) for the customer. It shows what they should reasonably expect. Do NOT use the Triplet directly as your SLA, but do link them tightly so employees and customers know what to expect.

Triplet - First Conclusion

This method forces managers to define the gap between poor, good, and great performance. Once written, the definition provides the employee a bridge from good behaviors to great ones.

It also provides a basis for performance feedback.

For example, for an employee performing below Good Enough, look for the specific behaviors that are at or above Good Enough. When you see one, give positive feedback: "You got a second? When you <behavior> the impact is <impact>. Keep it up!"

Measures and Thresholds

We can complete the Triplet by adding a measure of performance. These measures, given for each of the three categories of performance, set the thresholds for below-standard vs acceptable performance vs excellent performance.

These thresholds can be used in performance feedback, in a review, and in a Performance Improvement Plan.

Performance Triplet Example: Proactive Communication with Thresholds			
	Not Good	Good Work	Excellent
Definition	The employee leaves critical updates to the eleventh hour, sparking team chaos. Performs work but does not tell others that it's done.	The employee delivers essential updates promptly, giving the team time to adapt. Performs work and reports completion promptly to whoever asked for it.	The employee shares updates quickly and also foresees potential problems, proposing solutions, and keeping the team one step ahead.
Threshold	Misses **three** or more deadlines for work assignments in a quarter, or, customers or peers complain **two or more times** per quarter about lack of announced delivery.	Misses **two or fewer** deadlines per quarter, and **no more than one** customer or peer complaint per quarter.	No misses, no complaints, and customers / peers express gratitude regarding timely and proactive communication.

With the measure defined for each of the three levels of performance, the thresholds are set. The manager can tell each employee where they are, how they know, and what they need to do to improve.

Tips for Measures and Thresholds

Performance measures cannot be subjective or vague. Two different observers should not assess the same performance and come up with two different ratings. The thresholds should be based on rational foundations, such as historical complaint levels, or an explicit management strategy (e.g. following the Manager Tools guidance on One on Ones and Feedback).

If you're not sure how to measure a particular kind of performance, you're not alone -- this is a common struggle for managers. Fortunately it's the topic of the excellent book *How to Measure Anything* by Douglas Hubbard. This guidance is drawn from his work.

Questions for Intangibles

1. What really matters? If you're trying to measure X, imagine two cases, one where you had an abundance of X, and one where X is wildly insufficient. How can you tell? What are you seeing and hearing that tells you that X is high in the first case and low in the second? (This might be all you need to do. If it's not sufficient, read on.)
2. How can I break X down into components? Some of these will be more easily measured. Example: "employee morale" might be hard to quantify, but you might choose to break it down into components like Absenteeism, Responses on surveys, Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS), Turnover, and Productivity. These, too, can be broken down further if that feels useful, or just pick the subset that's most accessible.
3. What's already being measured? You might be surprised how much of the data you want, once you've broken your X into components, is already available somewhere in your organization.
4. How can I start to measure any needed components that aren't already measured?
5. How can I usefully combine the components' measures into a useful, single proxy measure of the thing I care about? Maybe I can mix Absenteeism (inverted), Productivity, and eNPS -- via a formula -- that yields a result I can track over time.
6. Ask your team for their answers to the above questions.

Some Example Components to Measure Intangibles

Training effectiveness:

- Students behave differently after training vs before training. They make fewer mistakes.
- Students are engaged during the training. They ask questions and follow-up questions.
- Students give the training positive numeric scores and say good things in the post-training survey.

Leadership effectiveness:

- Team morale is high (you might break this down into components like Absenteeism etc.)
- Inter- and intra-team squabbles are low; complaints to HR are low or zero
- Downstream teams don't complain about team behavior or the quality of the team's outputs
- Team's results/outcomes are high quality and improving over time
- Number of the team's process quality improvement ideas implemented is growing
- The quality of outcomes is improving as costs decrease and First Time Quality grows