

Employers Talk Performance, Employees Talk Happiness. The five needs that put employers and employees on the same team

David Harding, Excelerate Learning & Development Australia

The Elephant In The Room

In every workplace the 'elephant in the room'¹ - the topic so obvious that it couldn't possibly be missed, but which no one knows how to address and so no one wants to talk about - is that employers and employees fundamentally want different things. More than that, their wants are thought to be mutually exclusive; because employers want *performance* and employees want *happiness*.

Different Languages

In the book 'Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus' John Gray described the key challenge of male-female relationships; the differences between men and women. In much the same way employers and employees also come from different places, want different things and as a result speak different languages.

Of all the words that comprise the language of employers - words like accountability, empowerment, engagement and teamwork - it is the word *performance* that is the most controversial because:

In the language of employees,
performance is a dirty word.

What Employers Want: Performance

Achieving a solid and consistent level performance is harder for employers today than it ever has been in history.

Technology such as the internet, email, mobile phones and net-conferencing has made the world smaller, and massively increased the volume and the pace of work. At the same time this has introduced more distractions from work. The tasks that people are paid to do now have to compete with the temptations of Facebook, ebay, Twitter and 20,340,000,000 other websites².

The work itself is far more complex and involves more considerations than ever before: occupational health and safety, employee diversity, environmental impact, risk management, good governance to name a few.

To meet these ever-changing demands employees need to have a broader skill set. Regardless of what they do just about everyone has to be a quasi-IT guru, customer service specialist, expert negotiator and a communications technician.

All of these changes and the challenges they bring occur in the context of a relationship that, despite the modern conveniences of family-friendly policies, incentive programs, flexi-time and kitchens with Italian coffee machines, remains at its core a master-servant relationship.

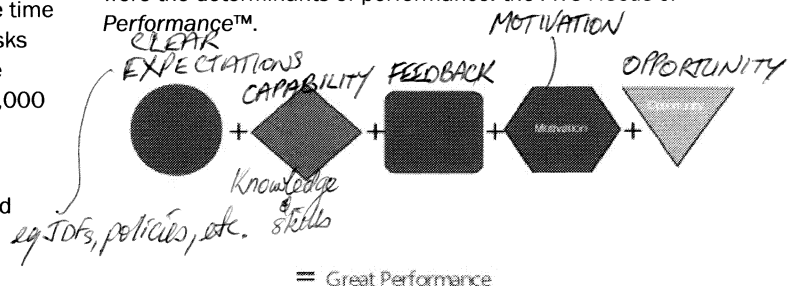
Even though performance may be a greater challenge than ever before we shouldn't be fooled by the complexity over despair over the enormity of the challenge because the key to high performance is actually very simple: simple, but not simplistic.

The Five Needs™

Over the past ten years I have worked with thousands of people and a diverse range of organisations. From retail to manufacturing, ice cream companies to defence contractors, financial services to mining companies, grass-roots community organisations to Local Government and State Government, start-ups through to publicly listed companies all with the aim of helping them improve the performance of their staff.

Across a thousand people with a thousand different performance objectives or performance issues there weren't a thousand different causes. There were only five. But they were an important five.

They weren't just five things that would be good to do or nice to have. They were needs. Like bread water for survival, these five needs were the sustenance of performance. Not only that they had to come together. You couldn't swap one for the other. Each of the five needs had to met. When they were, great performance was the result. When they weren't performance suffered. Their performance may still have been ok if most needs were met, but it was never near potential. When performance was really bad it was that one or more of the needs was significantly not satisfied. Collectively they were the determinants of performance: the *Five Needs of Performance™*.



Sometimes the simplest things in life are also the most powerful. In this respect you can appreciate the *Five Needs™* are not only logical they are also fairly obvious. For this reason, you might be tempted to dismiss them. Don't. Remember *simple* and *simplistic* are two entirely different concepts.

In applying these *Five Needs™* the organisations I worked with were able to achieve significantly better performance. For managers, people performance was no longer a mystery. They actively managed to meet the *Five Needs™* and in doing so gave their employees *the best chance of success*.

At the same time, employees better understood what they needed to perform and were motivated to take ownership in meeting these needs for one very important reason above all others: when the Five Needs™ were met, they were happier at work.

What Employees Want: To Be Happier@Work

The average person will work around 100,000 hours in their lifetime. This represents more than 50% of their waking hours in the period between 20 and 60 years of age with the result that they will spend more time at work than with family and friends or doing the things they might choose to. The impact is not just a matter of time - it's also a matter of happiness.

A 2009 study of employee engagement found:

“One in five Australians is going to work and is extraordinarily unhappy there³”.

A conservative estimate would place one out of five at the other end of the scale: people who are very happy at work. Where does the other three out of five employees stand?

While most people may not describe themselves as being *unhappy* at work many would agree to at times feeling frustrated, disappointed, uncertain, unappreciated, angry, directionless and demotivated. Consult a dictionary and we see these are words typically used to describe *unhappiness*. The result is:

Three out of five people may not be unhappy but experience unhappiness at work with some regularity.

Dozens of books tell us if we can find a job we genuinely love, develop meaningful relationships with people we enjoy working with and are able to cast aside negativity and embrace a positive perspective we can be happy at work. While we should not give up the search for many these are unrealistic goals. Sadly most will never find their dream job. Not everyone thinks the glass is half full. While enjoying good relationships at work is important are any of these measures powerful enough to overcome what commonly causes people to experience unhappiness at work?

When Happiness Met Performance

In applying these *Five Needs™* the organisations I worked with were able to achieve significantly better performance from their people. However it soon became apparent that something more was at stake in meeting these *Five Needs™* than just performance: there was also their happiness. Not only were the *Five Needs™* the key to performance but somehow they were also the mechanism by which people could be happier at work. How could these two seemingly disparate wants – the two things that couldn't possibly go together - come together?

I found that the people who were *happiest* at work were those who, in the language of employers, were *performing*. It wasn't that they were more naturally motivated people and if you asked them, none would say they wanted to *perform*. When they were *able* to do their job well because these *Five Needs™* were met they also *wanted* to do their job well. By virtue of that they performed better which gave them a sense of purpose, the self-satisfaction of achieving something, a degree of appreciation and recognition and created more positive relationships with their manager, co-workers and customers.

The things that commonly cause people to feel unhappy at work – uncertainty about roles and tasks, feeling unappreciated, tasks being beyond their capability and a job made more difficult than it need be by factors outside of their control - are the result of the *Five Needs™* not being met.

The Common Language

When employers talk they use words like accountability, KPIs, deadlines, responsibility and outcomes. When employees talk about what they want they use words like fulfilment, respect and meaningful work. To each, the other's language sounds foreign. Not so foreign that they can't understand the language, but foreign to the extent that the language sounds unusual and from a different, far off place. The language they speak serves to reinforce the ideological differences between them.

In applying the *Five Needs™* employees are able to perform better by understanding what they need to perform and taking ownership for meeting the *Five Needs™* to the extent they can, because it is in their best interests: their happiness at work. At the same time Employers are motivated to do what they can to help meet the *Five Needs™*, because it is in their best interests: performance.

The *Five Needs™* brings together two seemingly opposing interests - *performance* and *happiness* - and in doing so creates a common language that puts employers and employees on the same team.

¹ This is based on the idea that an elephant in a room would be impossible to overlook; thus, people in the room who pretend the elephant is not there have made a choice. They are choosing to concern themselves with tangential or small and irrelevant issues rather than deal with the looming big one (source: wikipedia, 2010)

² Source: Yahoo November 2009

³ Gallup Employment Engagement Survey: Australia 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr David Harding
Excelerate Learning & Development Australia
Email david@local-government-training.com

Over the past ten years David has been a management consultant, trainer and coach, he has worked with over 40 Councils across Australia in a variety of areas from team development to customer service, staff performance to process improvement. In addition David continues to work with a small number of private sector companies and non-Government organisations including BHP, Tenix Defence, Wendy's, Allied Brands and more.

