

# The Mansis Update

## FIX THE SYSTEM NOT THE PEOPLE

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### Introduction

Organizational leaders ranging from military commanders 4000 years ago to the leaders of today's corporations – commercial, government, even professional sports organizations – learned that the cardinal advantage of an organization is that success for the organization can come from a group of average, competent people working together, and not necessarily from a collection of harder-to-find experts. In fact the world's best are often not successful working in an organization. Being able to work as a contributing member of a team, with personal skills that improve over time and guided by effective processes and procedures (structure), are more likely the determinants of success – than any individual's superior skill-set and knowledge.

This age old lesson has been ignored by a rash of writers and consultants who promote a politically correct but largely unsupported thesis that success in organizations comes from selecting only the best people possible and weeding out the less than exemplary, as if to purify a gene pool. Ranking employees and dismissing the bottom level; using an array of tests and measures with questionable validity during the recruiting process to predict future job performance; fast-tracking and mentoring the designated “cream of the crop;” and sending employees with any and all performance problems for the “cure” from the plethora of organizations, associations and special interest groups marketing extended lists of topical training seminars; are all consequences, to differing degrees, of this questionable strategy.

The facts and experience show that this philosophy isn't very successful in strengthening organizational performance, as the proponents want us to believe. Many times the results are the opposite. (Kent 1988, Pfeffer & Sutton)

### Don't The Best Organizations Have the Best People?

The assumption is that quality organizations require quality people, and so leaders should make sure that only top-notch skillful people are recruited, selected and placed in the organization. Great people will produce great results, and especially when they feel engaged and have the freedom to perform.

The flaw in this strategy is that it overemphasizes the personal influence of individuals over the culture and design of the organization.

Smart, skillful, “qualified,” eager-to-please employees are of course very beneficial to an organization, but they're of little value to the organization if they don't know what they're supposed to do. If the successful performance of a job is random or dependent upon an individual's intuition, both the organization and its leadership are of no purpose.

And clear, unambiguous, timely, appropriate direction is critical but also of little value if it's not followed.

And if direction isn't followed or employee performance is inappropriate, incorrect or unacceptable, then corrections must be implemented quickly or the organization is spending resources to go in the wrong direction.

And good performance is not going to continue if employees aren't sure that they are, in fact, performing correctly or if good performance is ignored or inadvertently punished.

And because changes happen in the organization's environment and its employees, performance towards the organization's objectives must be accurately monitored.

And if individuals are not meeting performance expectations, then changes need to be made immediately to the individuals' performance or the direction that is received.

So to invest only in attracting and retaining the best people is suboptimal and possibly self-destructive. As important, the organization's top leadership also needs to be ensuring that the “organization” works;

that the required processes /systems /procedures /tools are in place (that the machine is properly designed and constructed) so that available employees can run it. Like a poorly designed or broken car, it still won't work properly no matter how skillful the driver is.

In addition, this strategy to recruit, train and develop better employees is often the wrong strategy to correct employee performance problems. This strategy just treats symptoms.

Many times, the real cause of poor performance is the lack of using, or the absence of, a performance management system -- a critical piece of the organization structure that is used to direct, support and ensure appropriate performance and behavior from organizational members. (Kent, 1986a, 1986b, 1997, 2004, 2009). Instead, symptomatic solutions are applied which never resolve the root problem.

For example, noted in the Introduction, ranking employees and firing the bottom level can destroy employee motivation and teamwork, lose perfectly good employees and it reflects an almost incomprehensible ignorance about management and statistics. Administering simplistic tests to weed out job applicants not only loses potentially good candidates but it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that the tests can actually predict complex future behavior and job performance. Mentoring and giving special treatment to the best performers may have little impact on the organization's performance, nor will sending employees away for training for every sort of performance deficiency, if the basic structure of the organization and its business plan are faulty. See Table 1 for examples of attempts to resolve performance problems by trying to fix people rather than fixing the system.

## Great Systems are More Important than Great People

For the general who thinks that the individual skills of the officers and the troops were the reason for their success -- that's rarely ever the case. It's the organization, resources and the discipline of the army that usually wins the war.

This idea is far from being new, although much of the popular management literature promoted through the media preaches the opposite. The Quality Movement has asked for years "Why do so many organizations still place so much emphasis on getting and keeping great people and so little on building and sustaining great systems?" (Pfeffer p.99). Publications on diagnosing employee performance problems emphasize that correcting the system (that generates performance problems) is the successful route to resolution and problem prevention; rather than blaming the individuals involved (Kent, 1986a, 1986b, 1991, 1994). Likewise "We give too much credit to individual heroes when organizations do things right and place too much blame on individual scapegoats when things go wrong." (Pfeffer p.99).

And the phenomenal success of the "franchise organization" concept/model is based on bottling an organization's proven formula for success (the system) and teaching it to average people who, if they adhere to the system, will perform extraordinarily. (Gerber, 1986)

## Conclusion

CEO's miss the opportunity to strengthen and improve their organizations when they focus too much on addressing day-to-day employee

performance problems. Instead, the 30,000 foot perspective of the senior executive requires him or her to develop and implement systems into the operations of the organization to prevent (and correct) these performance problems. Despite the fact that there would be no organization without people, and that the quality of the employees is obviously a key contributor to success, the Leader's priority is nevertheless developing and managing the *Organization*, and not developing and managing individual members other than the Leader's direct reports.



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Table 1: Common Attempts by CEO's to Fix the Person and Not the System

	<b>Performance Problem of Concern to the CEO</b>	<b>CEO's Solution</b>	<b>Implied Strategy to Resolve Performance Problem</b>	<b>Likely Consequence</b>	<b>Alternate Solution</b>
1	Employees are being rude, abusive and inconsiderate to others on the job.	Screen these people out in advance through the selection process.	The company works fine if employees do what they should and behave themselves. Get the right people and the problems will not happen.	Those behaviors are almost impossible to predict. The behavior will continue	Implement a process to diagnose these problems and resolve them – via job/company orientation, specific behavior direction and performance management.
2	A supervisor is too abrasive and ineffective demoralizing the staff; productivity is low	The supervisor is in the wrong job: get the right people in the job and everything will improve. Employees should be asked to try to cope until then.	Get the right people and the problems will not happen	The problem may or may not stop, depending on the reason the supervisor behaved that way.	Use performance management to support and coach the supervisor, and implement ways to prevent this in the future.
3	Employees don't perform properly because job direction is not written down are clarified by the CEO	CEO's opinion is "if they don't know what to do they shouldn't be in the job."	Select better people who should know what to do.	No improvements occur; employees underperform because direction and support from the CEO is missing	CEO implements a performance management system, and uses it to manage the CEO's direct reports.
4	A formerly very good employee is not performing well, has a bad attitude, and is a negative person.	Former good employee must be a good person, therefore valuable to the organization. This current problem is an anomaly, so ignore the issue and it will go away. Others asked to be patient and cope with the person's behavior..	Be flexible and compassionate. No-one is perfect, so cut your good employees some slack.	Problem gets worse and infects the performance of other employees. Eventually the good employee becomes perceived as a bad employee and is fired.	Use an objective performance management system to address and resolve a performance problem. Ignoring it is no favour to the employee.
5	A marginally performing employee is not performing well, has a bad attitude, and is a negative person.	The employee was obviously not a good choice. and is not the right person for the job. Performance needs to be closely scrutinized to confirm examples of poor work.	Get the right people and the problems will not happen	Interaction with this employee worsens, positive support declines, all job performance is suspect and problems continue. This self-fulfilling prophecy creates a problem performer who will get fired.	Use an objective performance management system to address and resolve the performance problems. Ensure employees aren't type-cast; assessment based on fact, not subjective perceptions.
6	Managers and supervisors are not handling employee performance problems well – not addressing problems; avoiding confronting poor work	Send managers and supervisors to training classes to learn problem solving skills, assertiveness, performance appraisals, etc.	Poor management of employees caused by unskilled managers and supervisors who need to be taught skills.	Skills learned are not practiced for very long and the issue remains.	Implement a system for managing people and make its use by management a condition of work. Managers and supervisors then learn and use this important part of their job.

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