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The Five Points of a

Performance Management Superstar

Overview Proper performance management goes way beyond employee reviews and starts before a new employee even walks into your office.

By Steve Moore

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Performance Management Superstar

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Introduction

When done right, performance management can be one of the most important and impactful things you'll ever do as a manager or HR professional.

Over the course of my career, there's no doubt that I've made some mistakes related to managing performance, both my own and others. But I've also learned a few things along the way.

In the following pages, we'll cover a lot of foundational principles related to the performance management process. I may put a different spin on a few things you've probably heard before, and hopefully I'll teach you a trick or two as well.

If you stop and think about it, your goal as a manager or HR professional is to improve and align your organization to be the very best it can be. The degree to which your business can excel in just a handful of areas can make all the difference when it comes to cultivating a high-performing organization.

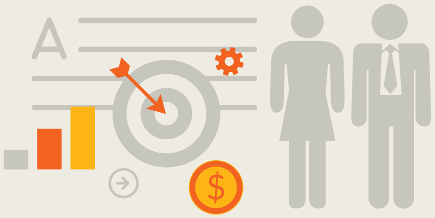
Having established that, we'll cover some tips on:

- How to hire the right person (because that's where it all begins)
- Goal development and tracking
- Performance appraisals
- Employee development plans
- And compensation as it relates to performance management

Let's get started.

Performance Management

What Is It?
The process of aligning a company's workforce with its overall business goals.



Why It's Important
Employees have a higher level of vested interest in the success of the business because they are more engaged.

The Goal
To establish and maintain a high level of employee engagement within the company.

What Is Performance Management?

When you talk to some managers and HR professionals about performance management, they're quick to reference the performance review. But that's just part of it.

Performance management is the process of aligning a company's workforce with its overall business objectives. And by having a formal performance management system in place, you increase the likelihood that your people are engaged in activities that produce the desired results.

A momentous cycle

Many people either don't know about or fail to put the time and effort into the full performance management cycle. Apart from the performance review itself, this cycle includes the development of goals, a formalized performance appraisal process, employee development plans and, in some cases, compensation.

As a business person, I recognize that each phase of this cycle is important. But it's all too easy to get caught up in the details of whatever fire is in front of me and lose sight of these overarching objectives.

Recently, I started taking 15-20 minutes every once in a while to ask myself questions that help me remember the big picture. **These are questions like:**

- Do I have the right people doing the right things?
- How can I increase the likelihood that they remain fully engaged in their work?
- Are the performance goals that we established still relevant and attainable? Have I had ongoing conversations with employees to see if they feel that the goals are relevant and attainable?
- What have I done to prepare for the year-end performance reviews, both mine and my team's? Setting up a file for each employee can help you stay organized throughout the year and make the end of the year a lot less painful.
- What have I done recently to help develop the people I work with? This could be sharing a book or an article that you've read recently. And if you know an individual's area of interest and/or development, allow him to attend events that help them stay current in his field.
- Have I recently reviewed my compensation strategy and policy, and are they still in line with our company's philosophy? Personally, I think it's a good idea to do this at least twice a year.

1: Making the Right Hire

The first part of the performance management cycle is hiring the right person for the position. A great way to achieve this is with a detailed **job description**.

To start, **job responsibilities** need to be clearly defined so companies attract the right candidates during the recruiting process.

Next, the job description must help set **expectations** for the role. These expectations play a big part later in the performance appraisal process.

Finally, the job description must identify the **competencies** necessary to carry out the job. Competencies are the skills, technical knowledge and personal attributes that enable a person to thrive in a particular position.

Establishing candidates’ ability to do the job is usually done early on by reviewing resumes and conducting pre-screening interviews. But you also need to determine if they are motivated to do the job and are a good fit for your company’s culture.

Success elements

Every job has success elements beyond skills and technical knowledge that will help determine a person’s potential to do well. These are the observable behaviors and work styles that make an employee successful within a specific culture.

An example of a competency might read like this: *“display computer knowledge and skills.”* This is a little too vague and difficult to assess. A properly crafted success factor will take it a step further: *“create dynamic sales presentations using PowerPoint.”* Now the employee has a better understanding of how performance is measured within both the job role and your company’s culture.

For just about any position, you’ll have between five and ten success elements in addition to the job requirements. This helps create a profile of the ideal candidate, keeping you focused during the hiring process and also helping you write **effective interview questions**.

New York City Taxi Drivers

NYC Taxi Driver

Job
Drive people from one place to another.

Requirement
Valid New York state driver's license.

Culture
New York cabbies are paid by the mile. Streets are jammed with traffic and pedestrians, especially during rush hour. Customers are often in a hurry.

Success Element
Negotiate heavy, chaotic traffic to safely reach destinations as quickly as possible.

Long Island Taxi Driver

Job
Drive people from one place to another.

Requirement
Valid New York state driver's license.

Culture
Cabbies are paid a fixed amount by each passenger and are summoned to the customer's home, not hailed on the street. Roads ramble and change names; it's easy to get lost. Customers are often in a hurry

Success Element
Navigate back roads and manage time efficiently in a suburban setting without getting lost.

Cultural differences

Let's take a look at an example where the culture changes the success element:

If you own a taxi company in New York City and you're hiring, the job is pretty straightforward.

With a valid state driver's license, the employee drives people from one place to another. The cultural considerations include the ability to traverse packed streets and deal with rushed customers while racking up mileage.

So, the success element for this position is being able to negotiate heavy traffic to safely reach the desired destination as quickly as possible.

This time you're hiring a cab driver in Long Island. Notice that both the job and the requirement are the same, but the location and cultural considerations are much different. This, in turn, changes the elements necessary to be successful in the position.

Here's another example of culture's role in performance: I once spoke to an engineering manager of a company that had recently been acquired by a much larger company. He told me he wasn't sure how long he and his team could survive in the new culture, saying that they were used to having a lot more autonomy. With the merger, they felt everything they did had to be approved by two layers of management, which slowed them down and stifled their creativity. I'm sure the company was frustrated, too, because they were hoping for this team to come in and have an immediate impact. Instead, everyone was left wanting more.

Benefits of standardized competencies

As we've talked about, competencies are the skills, technical knowledge and personal attributes that enable a person to be successful in a particular position. The following cycle demonstrates how standardizing competencies makes them a versatile part of your human resources strategy:

When competencies are properly aligned with a job description, you can accurately post for the attributes a candidate should possess before they apply for the job.

After the job is posted, behavioral interview questions can be tailored based on the selected competencies. This creates uniform criteria for selecting the individual who best fits the position.

Then, when the new employee is reviewed after 90 days or at least annually, it should be no surprise that their performance rating is based on the same competencies.

The cycle is complete when the employee evaluation leads back to the job description. It's important to review job descriptions regularly to make sure they accurately reflect the position's responsibilities. If at all possible, review your job descriptions once a year. If that can't be done, review them each time you hire a new person for a particular role.

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Additional uses for job descriptions

Just in case you – or, more likely, someone you know – need convincing that updated job descriptions are important, here are a few more good examples why:

- **Compensation planning** – Internally, compare like positions to ensure internal equity and help pave the way for professional financial growth. Externally, benchmark salaries with other companies and industries since position titles are not always definitive.
- **Fair Labor Standards Act** – Job descriptions determine the duties and responsibilities of a position, which helps when determining exemption status in compliance with Department of Labor guidelines.
- **Training, development and succession planning** – Identify patterns that support decisions on how to invest in human capital for company growth. For example, if customer service skills show up in most of your job descriptions, the company would be best served by investing in programs geared toward strengthening this skill.
- **Return to work programs/Americans with Disabilities Act** – Job descriptions help evaluate the essential functions and physical demands of a position. These are important when considering accommodation requests and returning an employee to work.

Effective behavioral questions

Once you've attracted candidates with a well-written job description, you need to gather information from these hopefuls to assess whether they are a good fit with the position and your culture.

Research shows that a person's past performance is the best predictor of their future performance. That's why behavioral questions can be so powerful.

Behavioral questions are in the past or present tense, ask for examples of past or current performance, and begin with phrases such as "Tell me about ...," "Describe a time ...," and "Give me an example of ..."

Writing Behavioral Questions

Open-ended

What ...?
How ...?
Why ...?
Describe ...
Tell me about ...

Closed-ended

Did ...?
Do ...?
Is ...?
Have ...?
Will ...?
Would ...?

If I were to hire someone for a customer service management position, some of the behavioral questions I would ask include:

- Tell me about a time when you helped resolve a particularly difficult customer service issue.
- Describe a situation in which you have worked under pressure to meet deadlines.
- Give me an example of a time you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get something done.

Notice that all of these questions are open-ended and neutral. This helps ensure objectivity and consistency when conducting interviews. Open-ended questions encourage the applicant to talk freely and provide an in-depth answer, which is why I try to have 75 percent of my interview questions in this form.

Closed-ended questions usually limit a person's response to either "yes" or "no." But they're not useless. Closed-ended questions are great for following up with a candidate to confirm facts, clarify information or reel in a Chatty Cathy.

I once had to use a closed-ended question to help control an overly talkative candidate who went on and on about the courses he'd taken in college. All I wanted to know was whether he'd gotten his degree.

Impact of poor hiring

When companies don't hire right, it costs more than money. Let's take a look at some of the implications of a bad hire.

Lost productivity – Employees who don't have the necessary skills and know-how will struggle to pull their own weight. This can lead to costly errors and slow production.

Lost time to recruit and train another worker – It often takes four to six weeks or longer to fill an open position. The new employee will likely need to give notice at his old company, which is another two weeks. Tack on at least two weeks of training, and you're looking at two-plus months of zero productivity from that one position.

Cost of recruiting and training another worker – Includes posting on job boards, administering assessments, running background checks, traveling for interviews, job training and so on.

Damaged employee morale – Confrontational or difficult workers can be a major hindrance for the rest of your staff. And when bad employees drop the ball, your other employees are forced to pick up the slack. This can create resentment and bitterness among your workers, perhaps even causing some of them to leave.

Dissatisfied clients – Chances are your clients have certain expectations of your business. Ill-equipped employees can get overwhelmed by their duties and fall short, creating errors that lead to poor customer service. Clients won't stick around if the quality of your product or service takes a nosedive.

2: Setting Performance Goals

As part of the overall performance management process, the establishment of goals is a must. And although a company has its overall objectives, it's equally important for individual employees to establish goals specific to their role or duties. These goals, if accomplished, should help the business achieve its objectives and reinforce its mission.

There are a couple of ways to promote this. One is to bring a copy of the company's mission and values into a meeting and ask people to provide specific examples of how they or their peers have lived those out recently. Another is pointing out employee behavior that supports the company's mission and values when providing somebody with formal recognition such as kudos or an employee-of-the-month nomination.

Leadership's role in the process

To make this goal-oriented approach work, leadership has to be on the same page when it comes to the strategic objectives of the company. Moreover, employees need support and encouragement from all levels of management. This is rarely a one-person job, even in a small company, so it's vital to get buy-in from all the key players when it comes to organizational strategy.

Follow The Formula

It's actually pretty easy to write goals by using this simple formula:

Action verb
("conduct")
+
Key results
("employee SMART goal training")
+
Measurement
("as evidenced by 100 percent completion")
+
Deadline
("by Nov. 15")
=
Well-written performance goal
("Conduct employee SMART goal training as evidenced by 100 percent completion by Nov. 15.")

Setting goals is therefore a top-down initiative, as they cascade from executive leadership to management to employees. A good performance management process helps supervisors regularly monitor progress and ensure goals are met – effectively, efficiently and in alignment with company objectives.

Personally, I have monthly meetings with my team members to review how their actions contribute to the company's bottom line. My focus centers on the outputs, not necessarily the behaviors, I wish for the employee to produce. I do my best to leave the "how" up to them. I have a peer who likes to say "outputs liberate behavior," and I couldn't agree more.

A SMART approach

Specifying individual goals for the employee should be a collaborative effort between the employee and his or her supervisor. This is important because people tend to support what they help create, increasing the likelihood of buy-in, engagement and success. Additionally, it gives the supervisor an opportunity to make sure the employee's goals are tied to the team, division and company objectives.

When **establishing performance goals**, it's important for them to be:

- **Specific** – include the who, what, when, where and how
- **Measurable** – a numeric or descriptive measure defining quantity, quality, cost, etc.
- **Achievable** – within the employee's control and influence; challenging, but not impossible
- **Relevant** – tied to the mission of the department and company
- **Time-bound** – target date for completion or frequency of specific action steps that are important for achieving the goal

There are variations of the SMART method – i.e., realistic vs. relevant or time-based vs. time-bound – but there's no right or wrong usage. Just make sure you're training each manager consistently.

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Tracking performance goals

A lot of things can get in the way of a smooth review period, from a change in management or personnel reorganization to outside forces such as competition, the economy or increased government regulations. That's why performance goals must be closely monitored and adjusted accordingly.

Review goals regularly. As mentioned earlier, I have monthly one-on-ones with my team and talk to them as often as possible about their goals.

Record employee progress in a coaching/communication log or within an automated performance management system. This is an important step that can be missed if you're not careful.

Get regular status updates from your employees. Staying in the loop helps you uncover any problems that might require the revision of a goal. And any time that happens, be sure to discuss with the employee the reasons a change was necessary.

3: Conducting Performance Reviews

A performance review is a formalized measurement and feedback tool used by companies to ensure employees are aligned with their job requirements and the company objectives.

There's plenty of debate regarding the value of performance reviews, but I believe them to be extremely valuable. When done correctly, performance appraisals give businesses the opportunity to effectively:

- Set/track/measure meaningful goals
- Clarify job responsibilities
- Discuss career development options
- Motivate and engage employees in their professional growth
- Identify employees in need of help (and those the company might do better without)
- Plan for staffing needs unforeseen during the normal course of business
- Provide recognition for high performers

Trusted Advisor Tip

A foundational rule of performance reviews:

There should be no surprises during the appraisal meeting. As a supervisor, part of your job is acting quickly and appropriately when feedback is given regarding your employees.

Preparing for the review

When it comes time for performance appraisals, a lot of people are overwhelmed and don't know where to start. Here are some things to line up before writing a review.

First, go over the employee's job description to remind you of the responsibilities, expectations and competencies tied to that role.

Next, be sure to look at previous performance evaluations, if one or more are available. Also review your coaching/communication log for what was discussed throughout the review period.

Then, account for any commendations or accolades the employee garnered over the course of the month, quarter or year. Whenever possible, I like to use quotes from documented kudos to help support my rating in a specific area.

Finally, consider the feedback that others have provided over the course of the review period. This may have come from other managers, co-workers or clients, but it's nothing the employee isn't already aware of.

Writing the review

When penning the performance review, identify what happened, what should've happened, and what should happen moving forward. You'll need to take into consideration all of the information collected during the preparation phase to help you get detailed answers to the following questions:

- Where did performance fail to meet expectations?
- Where did performance meet expectations?
- Where did performance exceed expectations?

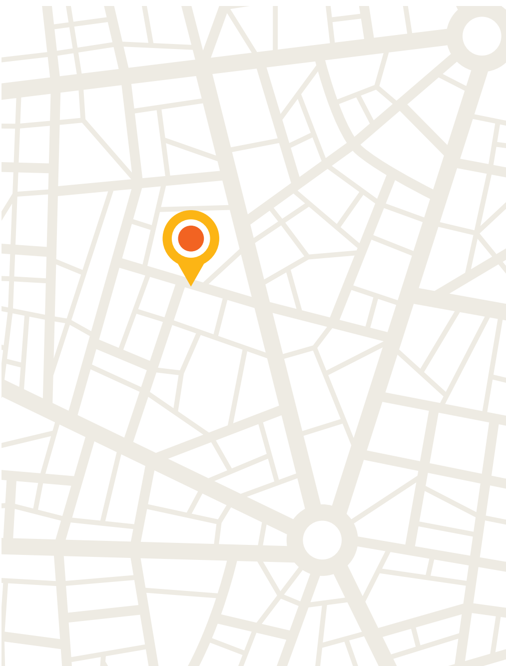
With this information, you'll be able to set new expectations – and help set new goals – for the next review period. You'll also identify development opportunities for that individual.

Remember: The review should reflect any performance deficiencies as well as highlight the areas where the employee performed well. An "inflated" review doesn't help the employee understand any shortcomings or growth opportunities. It can also potentially hurt the employer when he wants to take disciplinary action against an employee who's not performing well.

Your company's performance appraisal system may include an employee self-assessment. This gives the employee the opportunity to identify his accomplishments, evaluate his own performance and share his goals and interests with managers.

You can go over the employee self-review before or after you write your review. Examining it beforehand, however, gives you a good idea of the employee's frame of mind regarding his performance.

Once the appraisal is written, have your human resources department take a look before it's presented to the employee. This helps limit organizational liability regarding **performance review feedback**.



Face-to-facing the facts

Now it's time to sit down with the employee and go over the appraisal. I like to give the review to the employee at least an hour beforehand to give him a chance to go over it. This way, he's not trying to read while we discuss the content.

Here's a general road map for the appraisal meeting:

1. Start by telling the employee exactly what you want to accomplish

2. Present the results of the evaluation
    - Lead with positive feedback, if possible
    - Be specific and give examples; this will make the review more meaningful
    - Balance positive and negative feedback to make the discussion helpful, not overwhelming
    - Don't make excuses for having to provide negative feedback; if you've been effectively coaching the employee, there won't be any surprises

3. Ask for general comments throughout the discussion
    - Allow the employee to express his or her feelings
    - Truly listen to what the employee is saying
    - Restate the employee's position to make sure you understand and the employee knows you understand
    - This can help decrease any resistance to the performance outcomes agreed upon

4. Work together to establish new performance goals
    - Many automated performance management systems have a section to input new goals
    - Include what you can do to help the employee achieve them
    - Set a follow-up meeting to discuss the employee's progress

Be sure to end the discussion on a positive note. Sincerely thank the employee for his efforts in helping the team, the department and the company achieve their goals.

Handling push-back

Managers should always be prepared for resistance regarding the end results of a performance review. An employee might think she deserves a higher rating in a couple areas or have an issue with some of the negative feedback she received.

When this happens, suggest that employees document their disagreements in the employee comments section of the appraisal form. You should also respond to the employees' concerns in the reviewer comments section.

Depending on the seriousness and nature of the disagreement, you may want to contact your HR department. Do so in a timely fashion to give HR a chance to prepare in case that employee shows up at his door. If you have a formal resolution process, remind the employee of that procedure.

> The goal is to get the employee into a problem-solving mode. Help such employees analyze the problem at hand, learn from it, identify solutions and develop a plan for improvement.

Ideally, managers are taking the time necessary to have ongoing conversations with their employees throughout the review period. That makes the appraisal meetings less emotionally charged, even with low-performing employees.

Document diligently

Performance reviews are a crucial part of employee personnel files. If managers take the time to create well-written appraisals, they can greatly strengthen a company's defense related to employment decisions.

Once the appraisal meeting is over, an employee, a manager and, at some organizations, a final reviewer will sign a form indicating all parties have reviewed the evaluation and approved its conclusions. This document should then be added to the employee's personnel file.

If you use an electronic performance review system, be sure to download and store a hard copy following your company and state guidelines.

Cases in point

Let's review a pair of examples where performance reviews were called into question during a wrongful termination lawsuit.

Example 1

In the first case, an employee was informed of company performance standards and later received a review of "needs improvement." The employee was then placed on a 90-day action plan in an effort to improve performance.

During that time, the employee made a substantial error that cost the company $7,000. His supervisor suggested he take a demotion and work on improving his performance. The employee refused and was subsequently terminated.

The employee alleged age and national origin discrimination, as well as retaliation for filing discrimination charges. The court, however, found that the employee's performance problems were well-documented and ruled in favor of the employer.

Example 2
In the second case, an employee claimed he was terminated for taking an extended leave of absence. The employee had exhausted his allotted leave time, as defined by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and continued on non-FMLA leave for another 14 weeks. He was terminated the day he returned to work, and the company cited poor performance as the cause.

The employee was able to show lack of documentation to support the claim of poor performance. He produced several performance reviews from previous years that reflected above average performance. This was sufficient to allow the employee's wrongful termination claim to proceed to trial, where he defeated the employer's motion to dismiss the case.

As you can see, performance reviews can either help or hurt a company's defense. It's critical to make sure managers understand the importance of effective communication and proper documentation throughout the performance evaluation process.

Advantages of automation

There are many ways to process performance reviews. By having an automated review system, a business is able to maintain consistency across the entire organization.

This aligns every employee with the overall goals of the company. As a result, staffers are more accountable for their performance and, hopefully, more engaged in their professional careers.

Additional benefits include the ability to track goal progress and provide on-demand feedback, which is difficult to do with a manual system. And system administrators can track the overall review cycle to ensure that it's progressing along the predetermined timeline. **Milestones might include:**

- Review kickoff
- Employee self-review
- Supervisor review
- Endorser signoff

Administrators and managers can also run reports on exceptions, history, trends, goal achievement statistics, etc. This helps ensure consistency and fairness within the review process.

4: Crafting Employee Development Plans

Employee development plans are designed to help an already effective team member get to the next level regarding workplace performance. Please note that these are not to be confused with employee improvement plans, which are aimed at low-performing individuals.

Win-win situation

A customized **development plan** maps out opportunities for employees to increase their skills and advance their careers. And with a more expanded skill set, they can help your business even more. Everybody wins.

Follow these steps to ensure effective employee development plans:

1. **Consider your business goals**
   Before you set objectives for employees, try to align their development plan with your company's needs.
2. **Talk to your employees**
   If possible, have a face-to-face discussion with each of your team members to get a better understanding of their career goals, how they think they can accomplish them, and their current challenges. Employee self-assessments are another great way to obtain this information.
3. **Decide what skills your employees need**
   Be sure that your employees' goals are specific and timely. It's much more difficult to measure employees' progress when the objectives are vague or broad.
4. **Create an action plan**
   Developmental programs can include a combination of activities such as formal training, reading, one-on-one coaching and mentoring, and attending conferences or association meetings.
5. **Apply the new skills in the workplace**
   Set up some opportunities where your employees can quickly apply the new skills to the job and get feedback. This will help them reinforce and refine their new skills. If they don't use the new knowledge when it's fresh, they're likely to lose it. If that happens, your investment of time and/or money is also lost.

5: Tying Compensation to Performance

Some companies keep compensation and performance separate, making salary adjustments based solely on job market data. That's fine, but I believe merit increases should be tied to employee performance.

Other bonus programs – profit sharing, stock incentives and the like – are great, but for our purposes we'll stick to compensation strategy as it relates to performance management.

Giving a fair shake

When companies determine what they should pay their employees, they should start by establishing a compensation philosophy or policy. The goal is to make sure you have consistent and fair practices.

Fair compensation is an objective, balanced assessment of performance, market, competencies and other job-related factors. It's nondiscriminatory, nonbiased and, at bare minimum, in compliance with all laws and regulatory requirements.

This policy can be established in a number of ways, depending on the company. For example, you might want to make sure your employees are paid at, above or below market value for that position or role. Another way is to provide a value or range for the specific position based on the skill set required for that job.

Raising the stakes

The compensation policy pertains to the recruiting process, which should be aligned with the job description and the business's needs regarding a specific position. But what happens after the hire? Some companies provide annual merit increases based on the outcome of an employee's performance review. Determining how these merit increases are calculated is a crucial cog in an organization's compensation strategy.

There are many ways that companies tie performance to compensation, but maintaining consistency is a must. Standardized performance reviews are a great way to link merit increases to individual performance rating. This helps demonstrate that your company is awarding raises fairly and equally.

Additionally, annual budgeting can now be done with more predictability. By knowing the average merit increase across the company, you should be able to accurately forecast future salary costs and plan in accordance with business objectives.

Without a consistent strategy regarding merit increases, companies can be blindsided by budget blowups and missed financial targets. And in my experience, ad hoc merit increases can cause big problems year after year and have a negative impact on employee morale, performance, engagement, and turnover.

Hand in hand

Here's a look at how linking performance management and compensation can help your business:

Merit increases

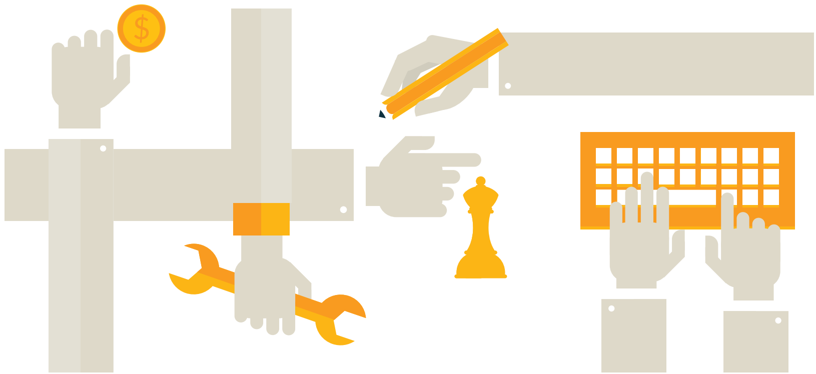
- Align compensation with performance
- Ensure consistency across the organization

Business planning

- Provide budgetary guidance, gap analysis

Risk aversion

- Reduce financial exposure
- Improve employee engagement



Here we go again …

A performance management superstar knows that the cycle never ends. Hopefully, you won't need to hire the right person again, but you may be looking to hire others.

For this reason, it's always a good idea to look at job descriptions at least once a year. Ask yourself if the duties and competencies are still relevant. Does anything need to be updated?

And with that, the cycle begins again.

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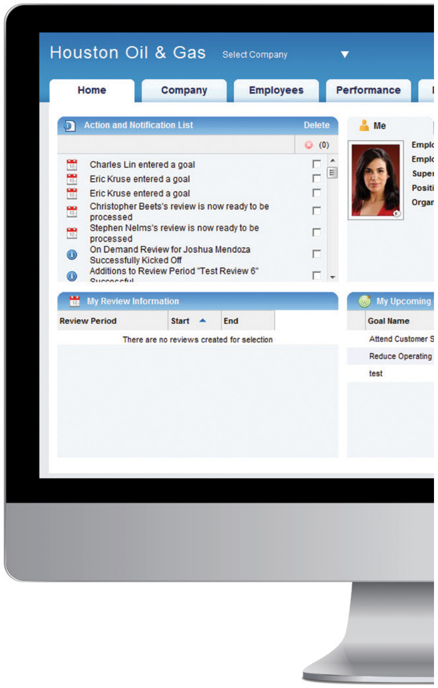

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