

Leadership Revealed – Performance Rubic Cube

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Performance management is often treated as an HR process. In reality, it is one of the most important tests of leadership.

Few leadership conversations leave such a lasting impression on an employee. Done well, they inspire confidence, clarify expectations and encourage growth. Done poorly, they create disappointment, distrust and, in some cases, convince good people that it is time to leave.

I know that feeling personally.

One performance appraisal early in my career became the day I updated my CV and decided to leave an organisation I had loved. It wasn't the rating that disappointed me. It was the realisation that the process reflected very little understanding of what I had actually contributed. It lacked curiosity, appreciation and care. A year's worth of effort had been reduced to a handful of boxes.

Traditional performance management measures KPI's. The core critique of this form of measure is that they measure outcomes after the fact, don't explain *why* performance changed, and rarely align with strategy. High-performance leadership frameworks argue you need to measure the *drivers* of results, not just the results.

Increasingly we see the emergence of different measures, one of the most popular is the 9-Box Grid.

This has become one of the most widely used talent management tools. It evaluates people across two dimensions: current performance, how effectively they deliver in their present role, and future potential, their ability to take on greater responsibility. Each dimension is assessed using a simple three-level scale of low, medium and high, creating the familiar three-by-three, or nine-box.

It is a valuable framework because it recognises that performance and potential are not the same thing.

For me, however, the 9-Box Grid is still incomplete, while it answers two important questions exceptionally well.

How well is this person performing today?

What are they capable of becoming tomorrow?

I believe leadership requires us to ask a third question.

"What impact does this person have on the trust, health and effectiveness of the team around them?"

This third-dimension changes everything.

We have introduced the performance Rubic Cube. A three-sided cube that measures three core elements.

Performance remains one dimension.



Capability or Potential, remains the second.



The third measures a person's contribution to trust and team effectiveness using a simple three-level scale:

- ✓ High Trust
- ✓ Neutral Contribution
- ✓ Distrusted or Toxic



The result is not simply a better performance model. It is a richer leadership conversation.



To understand why, let's look more closely at the three dimensions that shape every meaningful performance discussion: performance, capability and trust.

Performance Needs Context, it sounds objective until we look more closely. Are we really comparing like with like? Imagine two people selling exactly the same product. One works in Sandton with modern systems, excellent stock availability and a premium customer base. The other works in a far more difficult market with ageing systems, inconsistent stock and constant operational challenges.

If the first person sells twice as much, are they twice as good? Perhaps, but perhaps not.

The numbers only tell part of the story.

Some people inherit mature teams, excellent technology and stable processes. Others spend their days holding together ageing systems, solving inherited problems and working with limited resources.

Great leaders understand the context behind performance before they judge performance itself.

Capability deserves a different conversation. The second dimension asks a very different question. Not everyone wants to become a director or CEO, some people are perfectly fulfilled in the role they already have. They become the dependable backbone of the organisation, the people who provide stability, mentor others and quietly hold the business together. They deserve recognition every bit as much as ambitious high-flyers.

Others have the capability to operate at much higher levels of responsibility. Identifying those individuals changes the leadership conversation from evaluation to investment. How do we coach them? How do we stretch them? How do we prepare them for greater responsibility?

That is leadership - not administration.

Trust Is the Missing Dimension

While reflecting on the 9-Box Grid, I came across a presentation by Simon Sinek describing how elite military teams think about performance. Using the example of the Navy SEALs, he explains that exceptional teams do not evaluate people on competence alone.

They also ask whether they are trusted.

His point is profound. A highly competent individual who damages trust weakens everyone around them. A trusted team member strengthens everyone around them.

The more I work with organisations, the more convinced I become that trust is the missing dimension in performance management.

A brilliant performer who consistently undermines colleagues should not automatically become Employee of the Year. Likewise, an experienced employee who quietly strengthens every team they join may be among the organisation's greatest assets, even if they have no ambition to climb the corporate ladder.

Leadership has to recognise both.

Leadership Revealed

Perhaps the greatest reason performance management has earned such a poor reputation is not because of the tools themselves, but because of the quality of leadership that surrounds them.

Performance management should never be an annual HR exercise.

It should be the culmination of hundreds of leadership conversations that have taken place throughout the year. The annual review should simply capture what both leader and employee already know because they have been talking honestly, consistently and constructively all year.

When that conversation ends, every leader should ask themselves three questions.

- ✓ Did my employee leave believing I genuinely understood the context within which they were expected to perform?
- ✓ Did they leave believing I recognised not only what they achieved, but what they are capable of becoming?
- ✓ Did they leave believing I understood the impact they have on the people around them?

If the answer to those questions is yes, the performance review has achieved far more than completing a form.

Perhaps the real purpose of performance management is not to measure people, but to reveal leaders.

Every performance conversation answers questions that no matrix can measure.

- ❖ *Does the person leave believing that their leader truly understands them?*
- ❖ *Do they leave feeling recognised for what they achieved?*
- ❖ *Do they leave believing someone saw what they could become?*
- ❖ *Do they leave convinced that their contribution to the team mattered?*

Or do they simply leave with a score?

The 9-Box Grid is a valuable tool, The Rubic Cube may be an even better one.

But when I walk out of my performance review, I won't remember the matrix my leader used. I'll remember whether my leader understood my year, I'll remember whether my contribution was genuinely recognised, I'll remember whether someone believed in my potential, I'll remember whether I walked out feeling more confident, more valued and more inspired than when I walked in.

Because people don't follow matrices - They follow leaders.