Focusing on Results: Not Always the Best Strategy

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Managers, supervisors and executives often tell their employees they don’t want to hear reasons or excuses why some goal or objective was not achieved. Rather, they want to see the product, the bottom line, or comparable concrete results. If such managers are really shortsighted, they follow up with something to the effect of, “I don’t care how you get it — just get it!”

According to this system of management, as long as results are produced, little attention is paid to how they are attained. In many organizations if employees are getting results, management leaves them alone and focuses instead on those who are not. This is an ineffective and potentially risky practice (Daniels, 1994).

Admit it. At some time, you have probably done the same. Remember when an employee recited a litany of reasons why a project could not be completed by a certain date? Or how a student came to you and indicated that a presentation due in two days was going to be late because of an unexpected problem? Every job was created to produce particular results. Gilbert (1978) asserts that the value of what we do is not in our behavior but in what our behavior accomplishes, in what worthy achievements and desirable goals our behavior produces. Behavior in itself is important only insofar as it generates accomplishments. So why worry about the means (behaviors or effort) if the end (result) is justified and being accomplished? In the 1950s and 1960s, organizations seemed largely unconcerned with how results were achieved. Business was booming and getting results. Costs, beyond obvious financial ones, were not an issue; and rising financial costs were simply passed on to the consumer. Today, with increased competition — and heightened social awareness, organizations must be vigilant about how results are attained or risk serious economic and legal consequences.

Business in the 1990s and Beyond

Today it is not enough to know that something is working. We need to know why it works. If you do not know why something works, how will you know how to fix it when something goes wrong or circumstances change? A manager cannot manage by results alone (Daniels, 1989), although results are critical to an organization’s survival and success. However, short-term results can be achieved by taking totally inappropriate actions — actions that may drive up costs and damage quality later on. We must always be interested in and aware of how results are attained, not just when results turn sour. Consider the student who plagiarizes a term paper; an employee who fudges numbers to get a project in on time or under budget; or the soldier who redefines the mission to make it easier to accomplish something even though it is not the assigned goal.

Managers must know precisely which outcomes are required and what constitutes acceptable behaviors in producing them. But relevant behaviors, are not spelled out, one or more of the following problems may occur:

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• People may engage in illegal or morally reprehensible behavior.
• Behaviors necessary for the maintenance of long-term results may be neglected.
• Results may be falsified.
• Undesirable behaviors will become accepted practice within the organization.

Under the pressure to win, college coaches and overly enthusiastic alumni have been known to engage in illegal behaviors to attract and retain selected athletes. Olympians have used illegal performance-enhancing drugs to set world records. Organizations engage in unfair cost-cutting designed to eliminate competition so that prices can be raised once competitors are eliminated. The popularity of teams and team management strategies may lead to excessive attention on specific results. On a larger scale, industries in some nation’s are allowed to dump goods in foreign markets for lower prices than they command at home. The list seems endless. Systems that emphasize results to the exclusion of the behaviors that produce them may encourage otherwise honorable individuals or groups to perform illegal, immoral, or unethical acts.

Another problem that occurs when results are the sole concern is that behaviors necessary for long-term gains will be reinforced at the expense of long-term results. For example, preventive maintenance may be neglected to maximize short-term productivity and profits, or the company may pay stockholders large dividends while failing to channel adequate resources to research and development. The saying that “you can pay me now or pay me later” suggests that electing to pay later may involve substantially higher costs or losses. An organization is headed for trouble when managers say things like, “I don’t care how you do it, I want those staff reductions done by the end of the month,” or “Don’t talk to me about the labor pains (the problems in meeting an unrealistic sales goal) just show me the baby (just produce the sales numbers).”

Another reason why this approach is inappropriate is that it communicates an unwillingness on the part of supervisors to assist employees. Management style is seen as vindictive, and supervisors are considered enemies to be avoided unless the news is good.

Our recommendation is that managers should be specific about results they want and equally specific about the behaviors they require or expect to achieve those results. At times, either results or behaviors may need to receive the major emphasis.

**Emphasizing Results**

For the simple reason that results are easier to manage, they are typically overemphasized. In certain instances, it is more efficient to focus on results. This does not mean managers can forget about behaviors, but that they can get by with emphasizing results without constantly monitoring behaviors. Following are some examples when this approach is appropriate.

1. **When employees are skilled in the behavior.** With people who are skilled at their work or who have been doing the same job for a long time, managers can focus on results. These individuals know all the behaviors that go into obtaining the desired outcomes and, therefore, all they typically need to improve results is more frequent feedback and rewards.

2. **When behaviors and results are obviously related.** If a result can only be produced by engaging in some obvious behavior, then emphasizing the result can be efficient and effective. Nothing is gained by focusing on behaviors in situations where the two are so interrelated that focusing on the result will also highlight the relevant behaviors. Highly repetitive tasks usually fall into this category. An example is an assembly line job where the person does one or a few repeated tasks. If an employee has a job of loading cargo in a truck (a behavior), you might well track the number of trucks loaded in a day (a result) rather than watch the employee stack merchandise.

3. **When results are improving.** Improvement means the performers are doing the correct behaviors. However, managers will want to make sure that results are being obtained through correct methods or behaviors.

**Emphasizing Behaviors**

While managers often have focused exclusively on results, there are times when targeting the actual behaviors is especially important. These might include the following:

1. **When employees are new or poorly performing.** When people do not know the behaviors necessary to produce results, or cannot perform them effectively, managers should emphasize behaviors. Take a new salesperson, for example. It would be most productive for a supervisor to focus on sales behaviors such as prospecting,
making appointments, product presentations, overcoming objections, asking for the order, and so on rather than on sales quotas.

2. When the relationship between behavior and the result it produces is not necessarily evident. This may be the case in situations where a result can be achieved even when all the prescribed behaviors are not completed. For example, people may not have an accident even when safety procedures are not followed, or a pilot may not complete a pre-flight checklist but still have a successful flight.

3. When the result is long delayed. Some results take considerable time to evolve. Engineers and architects have projects that take months or years to complete. Sales of “big ticket” items like large computer systems, airplanes, or heavy machinery usually require weeks or months. When results are delayed, an emphasis on behaviors may be appropriate.

4. When the relevant behaviors is socially sensitive. Problems involving inappropriate dress, poor grammar, messy eating habits, body odor, or bad breath are typically handled poorly by organizations. Often, an employee may be denied a promotion, not because of their performance (results), but because of some aspect of personal grooming, appearance, or personal habit (a behavior). If such socially sensitive behaviors are disrupting results, managers have the responsibility to tell the performer.

5. When poor results are due to causes beyond the employee’s control. Sometimes macro factors such as the weather, the economy, vendors, or legislation have a negative impact on an individual’s results. In such cases, it is proper to focus on behavior rather than results. For example, a recession may cause sales to decrease even though salespersons work harder than usual. During such a period, managers will find it beneficial to focus on specific activities such as prospecting, getting appointment, or making presentations, so that when the economy improves the sales staff will have adequate leads and preparations with which to proceed.

6. Changes in working conditions or procedures require different behaviors to meet performance expectations. Organizations today increasingly try to do more with less. As resources change, and frequently shrink, new approaches are required to complete familiar as well as new tasks and to solve problems. A focus on qualita-

tive changes in behavior is required instead of continued focus on results.

7. Able and willing employees are not meeting expectations. Performance discrepancies need to be examined closely to determine what obstacles are involved and how the difficulty may be resolved. One widely used technique for analyzing job problems is offered by Mager & Pipe (1984). For example, if a skilled and motivated employee does not produce because of lack of adequate tools, alternative behaviors or action plans should be considered that might overcome this obstacle.

While behaviors are important, they should not be confused with key organizational results (outcomes). Activities such as the number of times a staff gets report in on time, the number of days an employee arrives on time, or the number of hours of training received each year are important measures of behavior if the goal is to reduce or increase that behavior, but they are not results. Sometimes an overemphasis on behaviors, can have adverse consequences. For example, often salespersons are required to maintain copious amounts of paperwork documenting sales leads, contacts, and follow-ups. Though necessary to the actual desired outcome — closing sales — this behavioral focus may be counterproductive. A tremendous amount of time and effort may be spent generating behavior and paperwork but not actually selling much of anything. The behaviors become an end in themselves instead of a means to an end.

For the simple reason that results are easier to manage (supervisors can stay in their offices and monitor computer printouts of sales, safety, turnover, and profit), they often are stressed. However, undue attention to behaviors can result in lots of busy people accomplishing nothing.

A Caveat

Beware of activity traps. Some organizations find themselves going from one program to another with only a general idea of the results they want to achieve. This is particularly true in the human relations area, where certain behaviors are assumed to have great value. Teams, participative management, total quality, and employee involvement programs, for example, often are believed to have beneficial effects; their real value to the organization is seldom questioned. Frequently, these programs are initiated without any direct ties to specific
results but are introduced with, at least, general statements of intent, like: "improved morale," "better decisions," "personal pride," "empowered workforce," and a "sense of achievement." Many organizations have found themselves spending a lot of time and money with little or no return and with line managers wondering when "this too shall pass."

Another example of the ineffectiveness of focusing on activities involves schools that reward students for paying attention to their tasks and not disrupting the class. This seems a worthwhile endeavor. Nevertheless, research (Ayllon & Roberts, 1974; Harris, 1986) shows that increasing the students' attention spans and decreasing disruptions often had little or no effect on academic performance, such as accuracy in solving math problems.

**Choosing One Focus Does Not Mean Ignoring Others**

Table 1 summarizes when it may be more appropriate to focus on behavior and when on results. The critical word is focus, not ignore. When supervisors concentrate on either behavior or results, they must monitor the other. Completely ignoring either can mean trouble in the long run. Results may be achieved through undesirable behaviors or the organization may have many busy people accomplishing nothing.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on Behaviors When</th>
<th>Focus on Results When</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Current performance is a long way from goal — shaping new employees</td>
<td>1. Employees are skilled and know what behaviors to do</td>
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<td>2. The link between the result and behavior is vague</td>
<td>2. Behavior/result link is obvious and clear</td>
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<td>3. Result is long delayed — feedback inadequate</td>
<td>3. Results are improving</td>
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<td>4. Relative behaviors are socially sensitive</td>
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<td>5. Poor results are caused by factors beyond the control of the performer</td>
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<td>6. Changes in working conditions require different behaviors</td>
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<td>7. Able and willing employees do not meet expectations</td>
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**REFERENCES**


