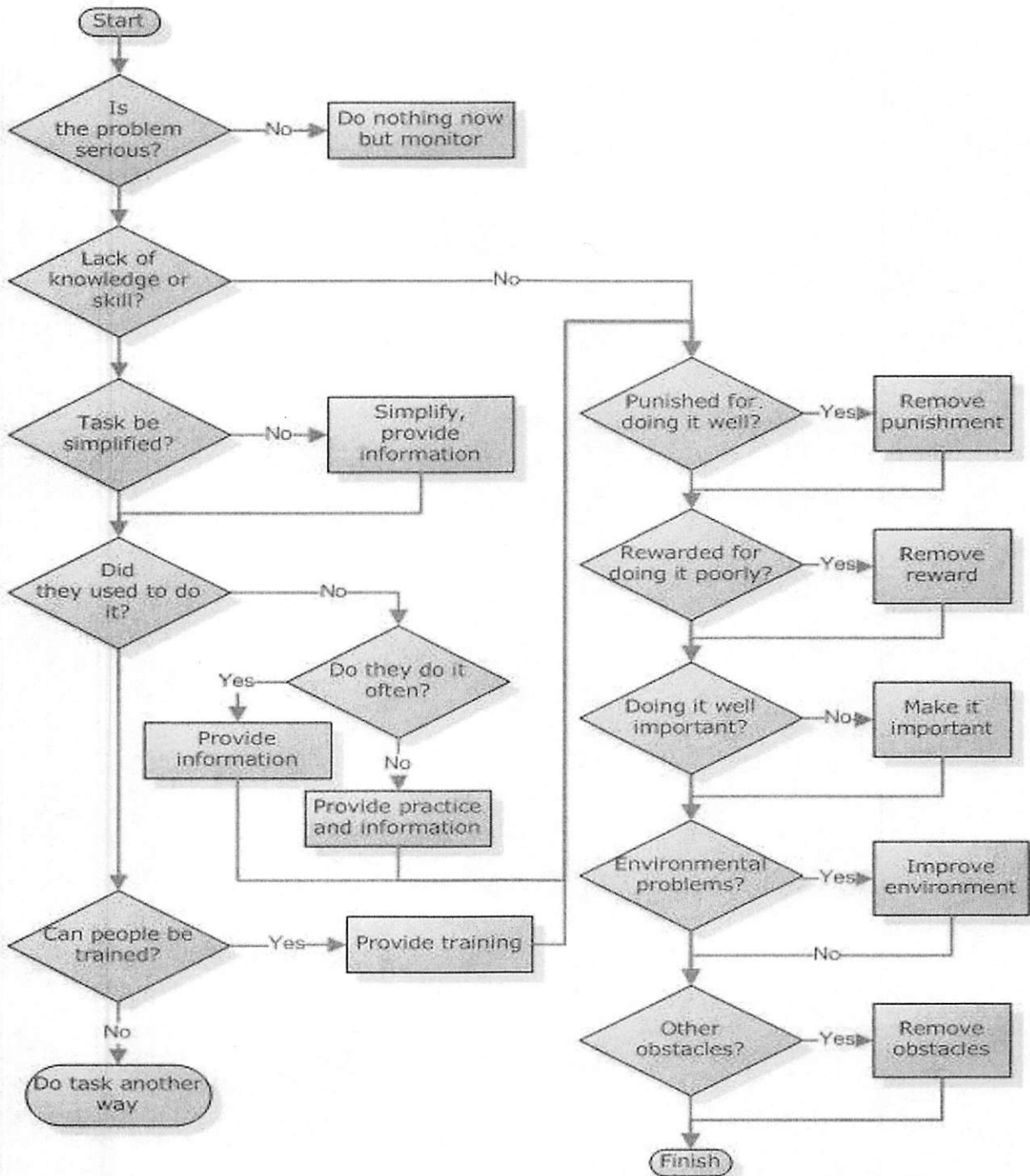


Analyzing Performance Problems

The information below is taken from *Analyzing Performance Problems: Or, You Really Oughta Wanna--How to Figure out Why People Aren't Doing What They Should Be, and What to do About It* (1997) by Robert F. Mager and Peter Pipe. I think that this information is important for training and development professionals who tend to think that performance problems always entail training as a remedy. Not so. The key part of the book involves the following diagram.



Go Below the Surface

The first issue the authors discuss is to determine what the actual real issue or issues are. The visible or apparent issue is not necessarily the real problem. In fact, it is often not. It's somewhat like going into a doctor with a severe pain and the doctor just prescribes pain medicine without ever examining you.

What is the pain caused by? This question that should be answered before offering a solution.

Mager & Pipe ask a series of questions that delve more deeply into the problem before developing a solution (see Quick-Reference Checklist at the end). For example, suppose a manager proposes that there is more comprehensive training needed. The authors would ask why the manager believes there is a training problem.

While this is a simple question, it demonstrates the reason why so many performance problems tend to go unresolved. You cannot solve a problem by working on the symptoms. You need to work on the source to heal it.

Systematizing the Approach

The book also lays out a very comprehensive flow chart (see above) on questions to ask as well as directions the answers should take you. Performance problems can be resolved systematically with such a road map. While understandably human and human relations issues tend to be somewhat complex, you can often find solid direction with such a management tool.

What is the Cost?

A second issue that the book addresses is whether the issue is important enough to even pursue a solution. This includes a cost-effective analysis of the potential procedures to correct the performance problem.

One person unhappy with the lighting in a work area may not be a sufficient reason to spend thousands of dollars to change the ambient environment.

However, thirty or fifty people could possibly justify such an undertaking. What would happen if nothing was done? This question should also be asked to ascertain the value proposition of addressing the problem.

Is there a Quick Fix?

If the problem is correctly discovered and is worth fixing, is there a quick fix? This is an important thought process. If a hammer will do, why not just use a hammer?

Some leaders need to have something to hang their hat on and say, "I did that." Others do not care who solves the problem, only that the problem is solved.

One employee out of fifty is cold all of the time in the work environment. Should an engineer be brought in to redesign the heating and cooling system, or should the company just buy a small

space heater for that employee? Sometimes simple is the best answer.

Rewarding the Wrong Activity

Make sure the problem is not based on a system that is inadvertently rewarding the wrong activities. The example the authors use is that of a maintenance group that should be completing periodic preventive maintenance (PM) of equipment.

The PMs are not being undertaken as often as prescribed primarily because the maintenance people are supposed to complete so many calls in a day.

The workers feel that the PMs do not need to be done as often, and repairs are easy and do not require much time.

In this situation, the lack of accomplishing the PMs was actually being rewarded by requiring so many maintenance calls be made in a day.

A good article that addresses rewarding the wrong activity and the concept of punishing good performance is Campbell, K., Von Bergen, C. W., Soper, B., & Gaster, B. (2003). *Mirror Management. Journal of Business and Entrepreneurship, 15*, 21-37. Many of you may believe that such things hardly happen but I'd suggest that you look at old episodes of Jo Frost and *Supernanny* and see how parents have corrupted their children. You might also find Cesar Milan's *Dog Whisperer* series interesting and view how dog owners have contributed to their animals' bad or problem behavior.

The Simplest Solution is Usually the Best Solution

Just because a process or system is in place or has been done for a long period of time, does not mean it should exist. Mager & Pipe do a good job of providing resources and tools that can help leaders accomplish their task more efficient and cost effectively.

Leaders are faced with cost issues, time issues, leadership skills issues, and a host of other problems vying for their time and consideration. Some of those problems and issues can be identified quickly and resolved simply.

To be an effective leader one needs to be able to determine the real issues and utilize the right tools to fix the performance problem. A reference tool such as this can generate good food for thought.

Quick-Reference Checklist

The following checklist provides more detail for analyzing performance problems by asking a number of questions that should be addressed.

REMEMBER, TRAINING IS NOT ALWAYS THE ANSWER!

QUICK-REFERENCE CHECKLIST

KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	PROBE QUESTIONS
<p>I. They're not doing what they should be doing. <i>I think I've got a training problem.</i></p> <p>1. What is the performance discrepancy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do I think there is a training problem? • What is the difference between what is being done and what is supposed to be done? • What is the event that causes me to say that things aren't right? • Why am I dissatisfied?
<p>2. Is it important?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why is the discrepancy important? (What is its cost?) • What would happen if I left the discrepancy alone? • Could doing something to resolve the discrepancy have any worthwhile result?
<p>3. Is it a skill deficiency?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could the person do it if really required to do it? • Could the person do it if his or her life depended on it? • Are the person's present skills adequate for the desired performance?

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KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	PROBE QUESTIONS
II. Yes. It is a skill deficiency. <i>They couldn't do it if their lives depended on it.</i>	
4. Could they do it in the past?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did the person once know how to perform as desired?• Has the person forgotten how to do what I want done?
5. Is the skill used often?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How often is the skill or performance used?• Is there regular feedback on performance?• Exactly how does the person find out how well he or she is doing?
6. Is there a simpler solution?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can I change the job by providing some kind of job aid?• Can I store the needed information some way (in written instructions, checklists) other than in someone's head?• Can I show rather than train?• Would informal (such as on-the-job) training be sufficient?
7. Do they have what it takes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Could the person learn the job (is the individual trainable)?• Does this person have the physical and mental potential to perform as desired?• Is this person overqualified for the job?

KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	PROBE QUESTIONS
<p>III. It is not a skill deficiency. <i>They could do it if they wanted to.</i></p>	
<p>8. Is desired performance punishing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the consequence of performing as desired? • Is it punishing to perform as expected? • Does the person perceive desired performance as being geared to penalties? • Would the person's world become a little dimmer if the desired performance were attained?
<p>9. Is nonperformance rewarding?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the result of doing it the present way instead of my way? • What does the person get out of the present performance in the way of reward, prestige, status, jollies? • Does the person get more attention for misbehaving than for behaving? • What event in the world supports (rewards) the present way of doing things? (Am I inadvertently rewarding irrelevant behavior while overlooking the crucial behaviors?) • Is this person "mentally inadequate," doing less so that there is less to worry about?

KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	PROBE QUESTIONS
10. Does performing really matter to them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is this person physically inadequate, doing less because it is less tiring? • Does performing as desired matter to the performer? • Is there a favorable outcome for performing? • Is there an undesirable outcome for not performing? • Is there a source of satisfaction for performing? • Can the person take pride in this performance as an individual or as a member of a group? • Is there satisfaction of personal needs from the job?
11. Are there obstacles to performing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What prevents this person from performing? • Does the person know what is expected? • Does the person know when to do what is expected? • Are there conflicting demands on this person's time? • Does the person lack <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . . . the authority? . . . the time? . . . the tools? • Are there restrictive policies, or a "right way of doing it," or a "way we've always done it" that ought to be changed?

KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	PROBE QUESTIONS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can I reduce interference by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ... improving lighting? ... changing colors? ... increasing comfort? ... modifying the work position? ... reducing visual or auditory distractions? • Can I reduce “competition from the job”—phone calls, “brush fires,” demands of less important but more immediate problems?

IV. What should I do now?

12. Which solution is best?

- Have all the potential solutions been identified?
- Does each solution address itself to one or more problems identified during the analysis (such as skill deficiency, absence of potential, incorrect rewards, punishing consequences, distracting obstacles)?
- What is the cost of each potential solution?
- Have the intangible (unmeasurable) costs been assessed?
- Which solution is most practical, feasible, and economical?
- Which solution will add most value (solve the largest part of the problem for the least effort)?

KEY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER	PROBE QUESTIONS
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Which remedy is likely to give us the most result for the least effort?• Which solution are we best equipped to try?• Which remedy interests us most? (Or, on the other side of the coin, which remedy is most visible to those who must be pleased?)
