



BEYOND PERFORMANCE

Why leaders are so tired and what to do about it

My job brings me into regular contact with senior executives at growing technology companies and professional services firms. Recently, I met with a C-level client who has had a wildly successful career. He has helped to turn around several large organizations and owns a track record to be envied by most leaders. His staff admires him as a naturally gifted leader.

THE SHORT COURSE

- The world is run by tired people—Why is that?
- Fatigue can be tied to “performance abuse”
- Performance is necessary, but it is not enough to keep people going and energized
- Meaning is the best fuel for long-term motivation
- Most meaning is tied to serving others
- To tap into long-term energy, clarify the meaning of your work

We met at the end of his company’s fiscal year. Revenues and profits had grown significantly. The company’s stock was up 15% over the prior year. His executive team was working more effectively than it had for a long time. And my client stood to make nearly \$1 million in overall compensation for the year. We should have shared a time of unadulterated celebration in his office.

But his reaction to the time of year was typical of many of my successful clients. Before he had finished acknowledging my congratulations, he shook his head with a wry smile and said, “Yeah, I hate this time of year.” I looked at him quizzically. “Because in a couple of days, it all goes back to zero and we have to do it all over again.”

“Yes,” I said, commiserating. “And the mountain is higher next year, isn’t it?”

He nodded knowingly, eyes on the floor. “It just makes you tired to think about it.”

I understand that feeling completely. For much of my career, I was a revenue-generator for a training and consulting company. We had a cynical joke in the ranks of the rain-makers at that company. On the last day of every fiscal year, we would call each other and say, “Well, it’s the last day of the year. Run like crazy today to bring in whatever revenue you can. Then, enjoy your ten seconds of celebration tonight at midnight. Tomorrow morning, the score re-sets to zero and we have to do it all over again.” Perversely, if we had had a particularly good year, we were rewarded for our success by having the company set a significantly higher sales quota the next year!

One of my colleagues, who had successfully climbed the ever-growing mountain year after year, popped her head into my office during those days and sang her own verse of the familiar song. “I’m so tired. I can’t keep doing this – it’s just a burnout job.” Somehow, year after year, she found the energy. But you could see the toll it took on her. Her eyes began to lose their spark over the years.

I distinctly remember a conversation with another all-star performer at our company’s annual meeting early in my career. This colleague regularly won the top perform-

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ance award in the company. She was respected, even held in awe, by most of her colleagues. A special speaker at our meeting asked us to share with one another our ending to a simple sentence: “I wish I could...” Dumb luck put me next to this stellar performer, whom I greatly admired. To my utter amazement, she looked at me and offered this ending to the sentence: “I wish I could feel like I was good enough at this job.” I’m pretty sure I bruised my jaw when it hit the floor.

This has gotten me thinking about our culture’s obsession with “performance.” It is one of the most used and uncritically accepted words in the business lexicon. We sell performance, expect performance, inspect performance, and reward (or punish) performance. It is the ultimate bottom line in business management.

So if it’s so wonderful, why does performance lead to such emptiness, even (and maybe especially) in those who achieve so much? I think the answer lies in three realities about performance.

Reality #1 – Performance as substance abuse

Look at how most of us treat performance. We get hyped up about achieving a goal. The target then becomes an object of obsessive focus. We tell ourselves that we *must* achieve the goal or else. We focus all of our energy on pulling toward that goal. That kind of focus gives us a sort of euphoria. It simplifies our lives and makes us strangely aware.

When things go well, we actually reach our goal. We hit the mark, bring in the revenue, cut the costs, make the numbers. We receive tangible rewards – a bonus, a promotion, accolades from our peers. Those rewards give us a powerful hit of self-importance. We made it, beating the odds once again.

But if you are like me, the hangover is almost immediate. Like my C-level executive client, you come to the office the next day and realize that a new year and a new challenge awaits you. Only, after you pass the initial phases of your career, you have learned the Fear. Whereas the first few experiences of performance bring almost pure elation (“I did it! I can’t believe I did it!”), after a while you begin to realize that every achievement brings a deeper need to perform again. After all, you have a reputation to protect. People have begun to think of you as something special: high-potential, a dependable producer, the next big thing. Intangible privileges come with that reputation: access to powerful people, the best job assignments, strokes and special treatment. The last thing you want to do is to jeopardize the perks of your precious standing.

I remember my first couple of years as a key account manager. They were almost pure joy. I had a certain amount of natural ability and I loved working with clients. As a person new to my company and our industry, the expectations were low. My bosses greeted every good thing I did with smiles and appreciation. I slept well each night and enjoyed my work immensely.

Then a terrible thing happened to me. I won the Rookie of the Year award. Everything changed. I started to feel like my more seasoned colleagues, daunted by the task of not only achieving my goals but protecting my precious reputation. I went around with that haunted look in my eyes, worried about not living up to the publicity. For the first time in my career, I lost

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sleep and started to feel a pain in my stomach. I too had learned The Fear. Performance was no longer a joyful outcome of my work. It was the sole obsession of my work. I needed it like a fix.

Writing about it now, the absurdity of the situation seems obvious. Performance is substance abuse precisely because there is *so little substance* involved. Let's face it, growing your performance numbers by some percentage each year has almost no meaning in and of itself. I have never heard of a dying person being tortured by regret because she hadn't hit her revenue quota or cost reduction target during the sixth year of her thirty-year career. In the long run, there just isn't enough reality to it. But we chase it year after year, and it leaves us empty just as regularly. Sure, we get a few hits of adrenaline and self-esteem from performing, but they wear off and we're left with that burning hunger for more. If performance is so satisfying, why do so many "successful people" try to escape their lives through drugs, alcohol, extra-marital affairs, consumer binges, or in extreme cases, suicide?

Reality #2 – Performance is necessary, but not sufficient

OK, so if we agree that performance alone falls short if we make it our sole focus, what place does it have? Should we simply ignore performance? By no means! Our ability to hit our goals retains a very important place in our work. First, consistent performance allows us to keep pursuing our larger purpose. Results *are* important. They provide the resources and encouragement we need to press on when the going gets tough. Ask anyone who has been employed by a company struggling to make their performance targets and you will hear about the importance of performing. Without it, you are in a constant spiral of budget cuts, second-guessing, and discouragement. That sort of situation sucks the life out of any person or group.

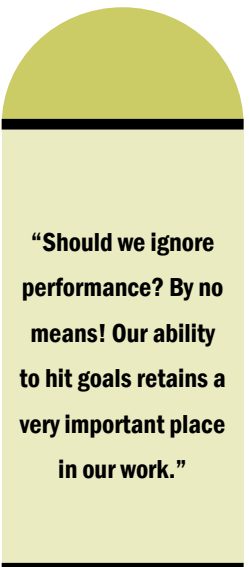
Retaining resources is just the first of the reasons for keeping an eye on performance. When we are thoughtful enough to reflect, performance trends also can help us learn. When we track results and take the time to reflect on what they mean to us, they can act as powerful feedback tools. Of course, most of us rarely take the time or energy for this kind of reflection. Instead, we do what I call "Caveman Analysis" of performance trends. We walk out the opening of the cave, hunt down performance, whack it over the head, and drag it back to the cave. We look at declining performance numbers and say, "Bad!" with a common-sensical grunt. We see improving performance numbers, scratch our heads, and say, "Good!" When I ask executives why they don't slow down and learn from their real lives and their real performance trends, their answer is simple: They are too busy chasing this year's performance!

So beyond funding our future outstanding work, performance can play an important learning role for us. To gain this benefit, we have to quiz the performance numbers diligently: Why are the trends as they are? What do they tell us? What should we absolutely stop doing because it's a waste of time or we're simply not that good at it? Where are the hidden successes that deserve more focus and investment?

However, in the end, even this analysis will not help us answer the biggest question that performance almost always asks. This leads us to the third reality.

Reality #3 – Our lives beg for something beyond performance

I love listening to Benjamin Zander talk about leadership. Zander conducts the Boston Philharmonic and teaches aspiring musicians, though the word "teach" fails to adequately capture his work – it looks more like he's squeezing brilliance out of his students' pores. Perform-



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ance in Zander’s world is constant and easy to measure: the quality of the music coming from the orchestra, the reviews of critics, the subscriptions of ticket holders, the placement of his students in the most prestigious ensembles. But Zander rarely talks about these things. I’m sure he knows that they are important. They simply are not *most* important.

He says, “I came to a realization quite late in life about something very simple: the conductor of an orchestra never makes a sound. My job is not to make the music. My job is to make the eyes of my orchestra members to shine. If their eyes are not shining, I have to ask myself why.” You only have to watch Zander in action for a few minutes (whether you love or loathe classical music) to realize that this goal, the drawing out of the heart, soul, and skill of his musicians, is his consuming passion. Watching it makes my eyes shine!

Zander has learned what happy, joyful high performers have known for a long time. Performance is important, but it is not *sufficient*. There absolutely must be something beyond it for the human being to really thrive and do consistent, great work. You can call it purpose, meaning, significance, mission, aspirations, a big idea, a calling. Whatever name you give it, you can tell when someone has it. Their eyes shine. They pay attention to performance, but always by asking an important question: *performance to what end?*

I have had the good fortune to work with extremely successful and smart people in a variety of industries and in non-profit settings. After working with happy and unhappy high performers, I now believe that the grand ventures that make our eyes shine have one thing in common: *They involve serving other people in some way.* Listen to how some of them talk about it:

“I am a conduit for God’s goodness to friends, family, and even those who don’t know me.”

“I help people fight for their extraordinary lives.”

“I enhance people’s lives – my employees, associates, and customers.”

“I enable the next generation of leaders to make their contribution to society.”

What is it about serving people that brings energy, joy, passion – and yes, performance into our lives? I believe people were just made to serve others. It is simply part of the human package, hard-wired into the way we were created. Deep down, we know that the boss, the shareholders, those who *demand* performance of us will never be totally satisfied. Each time we hit their targets, they will raise the bar again. But when we serve someone, gifting them with something special from deep within us – that kindles a spark in our souls that may threaten to make eyes shine, ours and theirs!

I hope for a “do-over” with my C-level client who was looking up the new year’s performance mountain. I would acknowledge that most of us need to enroll in a 12-step program for performance addiction and that I would be first in line. I would appropriately celebrate with him the continued work that his performance provided for him and his company. I would engage him in gleaning all of the learning possible from his own performance trends so that he was even more focused and intelligent in the future. And I would help him to clarify, articulate, and put into practice his deepest aspirations of service, always linked to but not engulfed by his external performance.

Maybe, just maybe, his eyes would start to shine.