

Behavior versus Non-behavior and why it matters to know the difference

Introduction

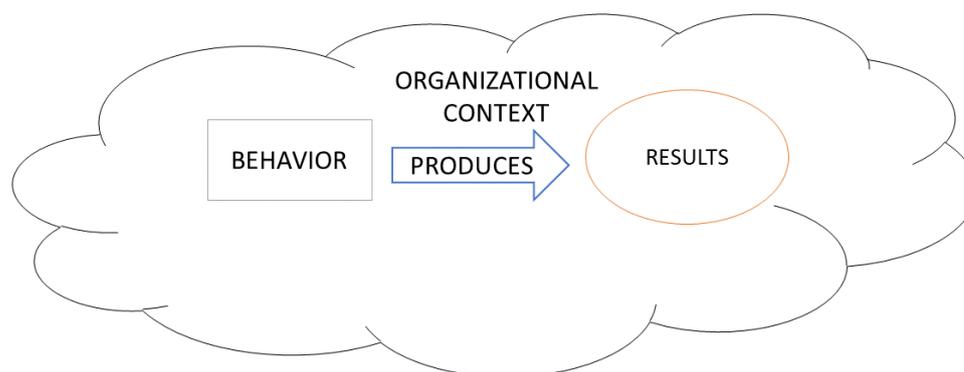
Organizations are constantly changing. Sooner or later, these changes affect how people do their work. This is true regardless of their role, function, or position in the organization. People emit observable behavior when they do their jobs, e.g., they aim to add value, deliver good service, or make other people happy. When things change, people can only emit this behavior when they understand how the change affects their jobs. More precisely: what different, alternate behaviors are required to adequately respond to the changed conditions?

Defining desired behavior has become a critical skill for leaders to deal with inevitable change effectively!

Defining Performance

Organizations hire people to add value to the organization and the organization's customers. People can only effectively and efficiently add value by delivering *desired Performance*.

We define Performance¹ as the sum of behavior and the results produced by that behavior in an organizational context.



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Figure 1 Performance.

Performance has three components:

- Results;
- Behavior;
- Organizational context.

This article focuses on the behavioral aspect of Performance.

To help organizations *improve Performance*, start by taking a close look at the performance issue(s) at hand. In most cases, a performance issue is an issue within a specific process or value stream.

A process or value stream is a chain of interlinked performances.

¹ den Broeder, Kerkhofs, *Organizational Behavior Management, an introduction*, (2020), p. 11.

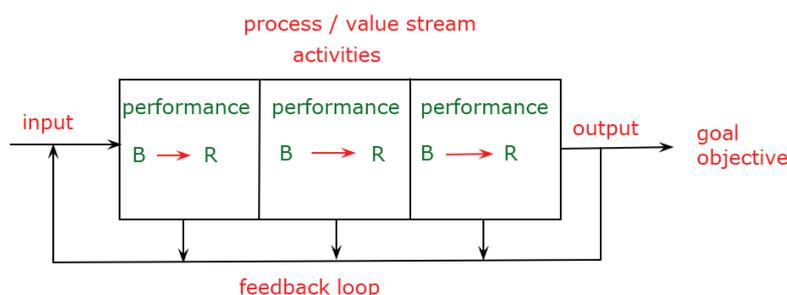


Figure 2 Processes and value streams are interlinked performances.

Performance issues, such as poor product quality or low production volume, will result in all kinds of problems downstream in that process or value stream, or in other processes and value streams. These issues need correction. Without correction, *additional, unplanned, non-value-add* activities will burden staff. Corrective actions are time-consuming, costly, and in many cases, preventable. The burden grows when the same – preventable – event is recurring.

The principal cause of performance issues is people emitting ‘*undesirable behavior.*’ To resolve the undesirable behavior it needs investigation.

Note that the term ‘*undesirable*’ is an attribute label that *an observer* attaches to a behavior of others. When people are in the role of leader/manager/co-worker, they observe what others are doing to determine whether the behavior is ‘*undesirable*’. It is possible that the person emitting a particular ‘*undesirable behavior*’ considered it to be the best, easiest, or fastest way to complete a task. It is essential to recognize the different perspectives (observer/emitter) on the same behavior.

Desired results are those outputs and outcomes the organization needs, to deliver value to customers and consumers. *Attaining performance improvement requires that people emit desired behavior more often to create desired results.*

It is necessary to define desired behavior. There are usually several ways to produce the desired result. Ideally, people should perform well within the margins set for the organization’s vision, mission, goals, objectives, policies, governance, and values. Behaviors that conflict with these margins are ‘*undesirable*’. Every organization is different and unique. Behaviors considered to be ‘*desirable*’ in one organization could very well be ‘*undesirable*’ in another.

Defining desired behavior is more complicated than you might expect

Defining desired behavior **does not** mean that a leader must impose, or tell *individuals what and how to do a task*. Defined desired behavior is often the result of a team effort where the team members demonstrate and agree on the best ways to get a job done. After all: team members are the experts in their field! The group is then assessed against the organizational rules, policies, and governance to discern whether behaviors are ‘*desirable*’ or ‘*undesirable.*’

Managers/leaders often mention the following *descriptions* as desirable *behaviors*:

- Ownership;
- Proactive;
- Collaboration & cooperation;
- Transparent;
- Reliable;
- Having a certain mindset.



While these words may describe something desirable, they are *not behaviors*; on the contrary, they are so called '*non-behaviors*.' Non-behaviors are generic terms that describe corporate values, static conditions and attitudes, which in itself are *not behaviors*. Non-behaviors are contentious and a source of friction.

How to distinguish behaviors from non-behaviors?

1. Behavior is about *observable actions*. Behavior is what we see other people do or say. The technical term for this is: '*operant behavior*,' as individuals *operate on* and interact with their external environment through these behaviors. Delivering value to customers and consumers and producing business results can *only* be done through operant behavior.
2. Well-defined behavior is captured as a single action. Can 'ownership,' 'transparency' or 'proactivity' be captured in a single action? Suppose an action was filmed, and someone watches the resulting movie. Could they label the recorded action as 'ownership,' 'transparency,' or 'proactive'? The risk of subjective interpretation is huge. The conclusion is that to assist people in demonstrating ownership and proactivity, they need to understand what it requires. What does 'ownership' mean in context, in a team, in a department, in a business unit, in a company? Individual definitions of such terms are often unique and neither right nor wrong. Adequate definitions require consensus.
3. A final aspect to consider is the relationship between desirable behavior and the desired business outcomes. Which business outcomes are the result of 'transparency' or 'ownership'? Is there a demonstrable cause-effect relationship? Will more ownership *cause* an increase in the production of quality software, cars, insurance policies, or television sets? If the answer is yes, what exactly is that cause-effect relationship?

In conclusion, using generic non-behaviors to describe desirable behaviors is ineffective to achieve desired Performance. On the other hand, they can be a valuable *starting point* to discuss and define behaviors you are actually looking for.

Why do leaders need to be precise about behaviors (and results)?

People are employed to contribute, create, and deliver value for the customers/consumers the organization serves.

To perform to the best of their abilities, individuals need to understand what is expected of them. A leader must ensure that individuals and teams of individuals have an unambiguous definition of the desired Performance(s).

1. The first step in defining Performance is to describe the desired results with pinpoint accuracy;
2. Discuss and agree the best way to achieve those results. In other words: define desired behavior that will produce the desired results.

All business results, good and bad, are the result of human behaviors. The behavior has consequences for outputs and outcomes. Behavior produces results. The ability to accurately describe which behaviors are desirable - is a critical management skill and a precondition for demonstrable and sustainable performance improvement.



Defining Performance, discerning behaviors from non-behaviors is just a first step in a journey to increased Performance. It is by far the most challenging step. Once Performance is accurately defined, it can be measured and analyzed. Only then can performance delivery be managed to set performance goals aimed at sustainable growth and development. Last but not least, positively reinforcing desired behaviors that produce desired results accelerates Performance.

By being very specific about desired results and desired behaviors, and by linking positive reinforcement to the desired behaviors, growth, quality improvements, and an increase in safe behaviors are all within reach.

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Special thanks go to Alan Nance, Co-Founder and President of XLA Collab, for his contributions to this text.