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**From
Comfort Zone
to Performance
Management**

**Understanding
development
& performance**



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From Comfort Zone to Performance Management

Understanding development and performance

Introduction

This paper seeks to take the established behavioural models relating to comfort zones, group and individual development, and managing change, and use them to create a methodology for understanding and managing performance. It seeks to provide a reliable approach to getting the best out of people that is firmly based on sound behavioural and psychological principles backed up by observational data and practical field research. It is not, however, a 'scientific' paper full of detailed research data, complex theories and high-flown rhetoric, but rather it is a practical guide based on twenty years of consultancy in the field and eight years of teaching university students in a business school.

In understanding and managing performance, the key is the management of the stress. Both motivation and anxiety are, behaviourally, sub-sets of stress and, consequently, they are tools to assist in performance management – there will be times when motivation will be the most useful tool, while at others the introduction of anxiety will be more appropriate. However, too much motivation or anxiety will result in too much stress and this will result in performance being disabled.

The correct management style needs to be applied in each phase if performance is to be maximized. Applying the incorrect style has a negative impact on performance. In situations in which a series of performance-enhancing steps need to be taken, it is imperative to start the new performance cycle at the point at which the old performance cycle develops a slowing performance trend.

In Section I, the author reviews the principle working models. This is followed in Section II by the development of the Transforming-Performing-Reforming (TPR) Life-cycle Model – a composite working model that can be used to understand and manage performance, development and change.

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Section I – the working models

The Comfort Zone

The origin of the phrase ‘comfort zone’ is very hard to track down and everyone has a personal definition and understanding of the term. The earliest usage in relation to performance is in the title of Judith Bardwick’s 1991 work *‘Danger in the Comfort Zone: From Boardroom to Mailroom – How to Break the Entitlement Habit that’s Killing American Business’*¹ but, although the book explores performance and behaviour, the author does not even use the term ‘comfort zone’, let alone define it.

Expressions such as ‘being in one’s comfort zone’ or ‘I’m comfortable with that’ exemplify the extent to which the concept has become accepted in the English language. Psychologists and behaviourists have their own meaning of the term but when it comes to performance, it is relatively straightforward to construct a definition that encapsulates the principle elements:

The comfort zone is a behavioural state within which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral condition, using a limited set of behaviours to deliver a steady level of performance, usually without a sense of risk.

This implies that, providing there is no change in the ‘anxiety’ or the skills applied, the level of performance will remain constant. Equally, if there is a change in the ‘anxiety’ or the skills applied then a change in the level of performance will result – either upwards or downwards.

Yerkes and Dodson² were the first to investigate the impact of ‘anxiety’ on performance in their groundbreaking 1907 experiment with mice in which, as quoted in Bardwick (op. cit.), they found that “Anxiety improves performance until a certain optimum level of arousal has been reached. Beyond that point, performance deteriorates as higher levels of anxiety are attained.” This result points directly to the conclusion that increasing the anxiety will boost performance and that too much anxiety will decrease performance but that either case will cause the subject to move out of their comfort zone. McClelland, Atkinson and others³, when researching into motivation in 1953, found a similar correlation between performance and motivation and their findings, as quoted in Bardwick (op. cit.), were that “...motivation to achieve and level of effort keep rising until expectancy of success (or level of uncertainty of success) reaches 50%.

¹ Bardwick, J. *Danger in the Comfort Zone: From Boardroom to Mailroom – How to Break the Entitlement Habit that’s Killing American Business*, 1991, American Management Association.

² Yerkes, R., and Dodson, J. ‘The Dancing Mouse, A Study in Animal Behavior’, 1907, *Journal of Comparative Neurology & Psychology*, Number 18, pp. 459-482.

³ McClelland, D.C. et al. (1953) – *The achievement motive*, 1953, Princeton: Van Nostrand.