Beyond the Job Description: Managing for Performance

Barbara A. Boyt Schell
Mary Lou Kieshauer

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Translation of individual effort into performance that effectively meets organizational goals is challenging. This article demonstrates a systematic approach that addresses baseline performance and staff development by using personnel management concepts and relating them to existing resources available from the American Occupational Therapy Association. The systems approach described uses performance standards as a basis for staff recruitment, orientation, development, and appraisal. Also discussed are the applications to student clinical education.

Personnel management translates individual efforts into results that meet organizational goals. Through job design, staff recruitment and selection, orientation and induction, staff development, and performance appraisal the individual is interfaced with the organization (McConnell, 1982).

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) has a variety of resources that can be used in personnel management to define entry level roles (AOTA, 1983a, 1983b) and provide descriptions of generic occupational therapy functions. These criteria are useful for the manager who is conceptualizing the scope of duties appropriate for occupational therapy personnel. When writing job descriptions, the examples in the "Guide to Classification of Occupational Therapy Personnel" (AOTA, 1985) can serve as models for various levels of staff and supervisory personnel. Many more topics related to managing occupational therapists are addressed in the recently published book entitled The Occupational Therapy Manager (Bair & Gray, 1986). All of these resources were consulted in the development of the system described in this article.

The Job Description

The job description is a central component in the organization of individuals within a work unit. It serves to identify the scope of the duties to be performed and should address the key relationships between the job holder and others in related jobs. Although an important tool, the job description can have serious limitations when used as the primary basis for performance management. Job descriptions tend to be a list of activities and are not necessarily results-oriented. They are general descriptions and, as such, not tailored to specific situations or individuals. Thus job descriptions provide insufficient information on job requirements to employees. Most employees will be happy to do a good job if they understand what is expected of them and how they can meet those expectations.

Results-Oriented Performance

Individuals know what is expected of them when performance is described in results-oriented terms. Through the use of performance standards, the specific activities necessary to perform the job are stated in clear, measurable terms and are outcome oriented. For example, a performance standard might require the therapist to complete a progress note for each patient weekly and submit it at the staffing conference. When fully developed in conjunction with results-oriented job descriptions, these standards become the basis for performing all aspects of personnel management.
Developing and Using Job Descriptions and Performance Standards

The following performance system was developed for use at Harmarville Rehabilitation Center, a 200-bed, free-standing rehabilitation facility. With over 40 employees in the occupational therapy department, we needed a performance system to address several job categories and accommodate varying experience and skills within each level. The existing job descriptions were reviewed and revised to make them more results oriented, with the “Guide to Classification” (AOTA, 1985) serving as a primary resource. Each duty identified within the job description was called a Key Result Area (KRA).

The staff occupational therapist position was chosen for initial consideration because it involved the largest group of employees who are central to departmental operations. Two senior supervisors were asked to identify the major tasks and criteria necessary to satisfactorily achieve the job results or KRAs identified in the staff occupational therapist job description. Initially, all patient-related activities, both direct and indirect, within the scope of the job were identified. This covered a wide spectrum of responsibilities, including patient scheduling and evaluation, utilization of occupational therapy assistants, calling in coverage plans when absent due to illness, enhancing professional skills, quality assurance, and more. When grouped into major headings, 19 KRAs were identified for the staff occupational therapist. Each consisted of a one-sentence description for each important job aspect. The critical components of each KRA were identified as the performance standards. An example of a KRA and its related performance standards is shown in Table 1.

The eight performance standards outlined in Table 1 are the building blocks for achieving high-quality patient treatment. Although job areas such as high-quality patient care are admitted hard to define fully, there are implicit expectations of what high quality entails. By making these performance standards explicit, employees have a clearer understanding of what they are expected to do. Customized standards and objectives can further delimit expectations, as will be discussed later in the section on orientation.

Once KRAs and performance standards were developed for therapists, a number of other applications became apparent. Five of these applications will be discussed in greater detail: staff recruitment and selection, orientation and induction, staff development, performance appraisal, and student training. These applications were developed for the therapist job category while work began on developing KRAs and performance standards for other job classifications, such as the occupational therapy supervisor and the occupational therapy assistant.

Recruitment and Selection

A detailed review of job expectations quickly leads to evaluating current and past methods of staff recruitment. A heightened awareness of what the job requires leads to more focused advertising, a clearer explanation of the job to applicants, and a better understanding of what characteristics appear to be common among successful employees. This all enhances the likelihood that both employers and prospective employees will be making better informed choices when they agree to enter a work relationship.

Orientation and Induction

Once a new employee begins working, the critical phase of orientation and induction occurs. Orientation usually refers to the first few days and weeks when the therapist begins to learn the ropes. Induction refers to the learning and experience required to perform all aspects of the job comfortably and satisfactorily. Performance standards are used as the basis of the orientation and induction process. Checklists, planned observations and experiences, and notebooks all can be easily developed once performance expectations are clearly defined. The job description and performance standards become a guide and reference for both staff members and supervisor. During the performance appraisal, these standards serve as criteria for measuring the degree to which the new employee’s efforts have resulted in the desired outcomes. The evaluation process becomes an educational experience in which both supervisor and staff members collaborate to identify activities that need to be completed for the employee to meet all the performance standards. New employees are reassured that it takes some time to learn all aspects of the job but that the path is well-marked with the standards.
serving as guideposts. Supervisors become more comfortable in doing appraisals because the standards provided reassurance that their evaluations were fair.

Once an individual has completed the induction phase, the performance standards become baseline expectations. Because these standards relate to key responsibilities and results, all persons under that job title are expected to routinely do those activities necessary to meet the standards. The appraisal process then retargets efforts to any baseline expectations that are not being satisfactorily met.

An important part of the appraisal process is the development of customized performance expectations or objectives to focus an employee’s attention on particular aspects of the job performance needing improvement. Objectives are frequently structured learning experiences that include specific outcomes, the methods of measuring those outcomes, and the expected time frames for completion. Objectives are treated as additional performance standards and reviewed in conjunction with the standards as a routine part of performance appraisals.

**Staff Development**

As any experienced supervisor knows, staff development is an important part of the personnel management process. Channeling the growth of the employee to meet both personal and departmental goals requires sensitivity and clear lines of communication. Once again, performance standards, along with specially designed growth objectives, can be effective tools to accomplish this. As with the remedial objectives, growth objectives are treated as customized performance expectations. Both the individual staff member and the supervisor may generate these objectives, but they must be mutually agreed upon.

Growth objectives can often be used to channel staff efforts into improving aspects of departmental functioning. For example, staff members may identify areas in which they would like to develop new programming, explore evaluation methods, or reduce inefficiency by developing new systems. Additionally, staff members may wish to develop certain clinical skills that meet both individual needs for growth and departmental needs for program expansion.

Growth objectives may also focus on work habits or interpersonal skills that are relevant to the job and that the employee wishes to refine or develop. Since employees know that they will be held accountable for these objectives, they become progressively more skilled at identifying realistic as well as interesting areas for themselves.

**Performance Appraisal**

The performance appraisal adds the component of accountability to the personnel management system. In order for performance-oriented management to work, employees must know that they are held accountable. The elaborate orientation and induction process is designed to ensure that the employee has the necessary knowledge to perform and the growth objectives to maintain motivation. Several strategies can be used in performance appraisal to enhance accountability and facilitate communications.

The formal performance appraisal session should hold no surprises if the supervisor has been routinely providing timely feedback. It should be a time to review status, re-group if necessary, identify issues and concerns, and make a plan for the future. A performance appraisal instrument that is customized to the particular job category can be a tremendous help. Many institutions have general performance instruments designed to serve as a central tool for multiple job categories. Personnel departments may not be willing to have custom appraisals substitute for their form but are often open to the use of adjunct forms. Three forms that we have found helpful to assist communication and improve accountability are an adjunct form for use with the standard personnel forms, a customized performance appraisal form that is keyed to the job description, and a staff personal appraisal form.

The *adjunct form* can be used to begin developing a more performance-oriented system. On this form, the following categories are summarized by the supervisor for discussion with the employee: (a) strengths, (b) areas needing improvement, (c) areas showing improvement, (d) attainment of previous objectives, and (e) new objectives and time lines.

Through the use of this format, the employee receives specific information on which areas are assets and which need to be improved. The employee is given credit for growth and is held accountable for previous objectives. In the case of new employees, their compliance with the orientation expectations is noted under objective attainment. Thus the employee is given an early message that he or she will be held accountable. Additionally, it is helpful to explain that accountability does not always mean doing everything but entails alerting the supervisor when expectations may have to be altered and identifying when expectations have been achieved. Finally, new objectives for the coming time frame are discussed and agreed upon. These objectives may be remedial or growth oriented, or both. Special efforts are made to be certain that every objective is written to include both the goal and the measure that will be used to test goal attainment. Objectives will often include the employee’s responsibility to inform the supervisor upon completion.

The *customized performance appraisal form* parallels the job description and uses the KRA topics for
Prior to the appraisal, the employee is asked to complete the personal review form and to share it with the supervisor at the appraisal discussion. The form asked the employee to first identify his or her major strengths, areas needing improvement, and areas of growth and accomplishment during the review period. Potential objectives are also noted. Next, the employee responds to questions designed to provide open communications with the supervisor. Employees identify the supervisor’s strengths and areas needing improvement, while noting ways the supervisor has improved and contributed to the unit. Finally, employees are asked to consider departmental functioning. They are asked what they like best about the department, how departmental functioning and patient care could be improved, and in which ways they would be willing to contribute towards solving identified problems.

Completion of this form accomplishes several things. The employee is required to do some personal review but avoids having to second-guess the supervisor’s ranking. The employee is also reminded of performance objectives previously established, which reinforces accountability. Constructive employee feedback is elicited as well, and concerns are aired in an acceptable manner. Finally, supervisors get information on what they are doing right, and departmental concerns and resources are identified.

These approaches in structuring the performance appraisal, used in conjunction with the results-oriented job descriptions and related performance standards, are the heart of a system designed to manage personnel performance. By clearly stating what is expected, managers help employees to focus their efforts productively. By using open, collaborative feedback systems that encourage accountability, management ensures employees will know their efforts do not go unnoticed.

Table 2

Adapted Performance Standards for Use as Student Objective (Professional Level Fieldwork II)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Result Area</th>
<th>Student provides high-quality patient treatment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Student demonstrates proficiency with a variety of treatment media. By the end of 12 weeks, the student will demonstrate entry level skills with the use of the following treatment media and activities:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. at least 5 craft activities, including leather, wood, and macramé</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. self-care training, including feeding, grooming, dressing, and bathing with related adaptive equipment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. home management activities, including meal preparation, cleaning, and laundry</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. at least 5 leisure activities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. therapeutic adaptations, including wheelchair positioning devices and static splinting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
Customized Objective Developed to Structure Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Increase sensitivity to patient’s psychosocial status during morning self-care training as evidenced by</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. recognizing differences in personal care habits and planning program accordingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. respecting modesty and providing appropriate privacy during training sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. using age-appropriate language during training sessions</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Student Training

In addition to staff applications, performance standards can be useful in some aspects of the students’ clinical education. The selection of appropriate staff members for supervising students is, in part, determined by those staff members’ own performance according to the standards. Once performance standards are identified, staff members can use them as a guideline for setting realistic expectations for the student. By the end of the Level II fieldwork experience the student should be functioning at entry level; thus, the student supervisor should structure the fieldwork to be synchronized with both the AOTA criteria and the university curricula. It is also critical to recognize that the student’s knowledge base is smaller than the staff’s, and that the student only has 3 months with which to meet the goal of entry level clinical skills. Given these restrictions, and the understanding that the student does not have the actual responsibility of a staff member, performance standards can be modified to meet clinical training needs.

Adapted performance standards can be very effective with students. Since students parallel the real job of the therapist, they can more easily use the student supervisor as a role model. Greater detail is often required, along with specified time frames, to most productively use the student’s time. An example of a performance standard adapted for student use can be found in Table 2. Depending on the student’s ability and experience, it may be necessary to further delineate the specific details of the performance expectation. In these instances, the use of customized objectives for structured learning is effective (see Table 3).

Performance standards can be useful in the selection of student supervisors, and adapted performance standards can contribute to setting objectives for students, structuring clinical learning, and relating appraisals of students to real expectations of entry level staff.

Summary

Resources exist within both occupational therapy and management literature that can be adapted to improve the performance of staff and students. The performance-oriented personnel management system using customized standards is one example of how to apply these resources. Managers are encouraged to introduce similar methods of accountability that promote staff performance and department cohesiveness.

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References


