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## **Peak Performance Prism: A conceptual model of people enablers in organisations**

Flevy Lasrado

*University of Wollongong in Dubai*, flevy lasrado@uowdubai.ac.ae

Alison Thirlwall

*University of Wollongong*, alison.t@uow.edu.au

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1. Managing for Peak Performance  
Competitive Session

**Peak Performance Prism:**

**A conceptual model of people enablers in organisations**

Dr. Flevy Lasrado

Faculty of Business  
University of Wollongong in Dubai  
United Arab Emirates

Email:

[flevylasrado@uowdubai.ac.ae](mailto:flevylasrado@uowdubai.ac.ae)

Dr. Alison Thirlwall

Faculty of Business  
University of Wollongong in Dubai  
United Arab Emirates

Email:

[alisonthirlwall@uowdubai.ac.ae](mailto:alisonthirlwall@uowdubai.ac.ae)

*Note: the authors contributed equally to this paper*

## 1. Managing for Peak Performance Competitive Session

### **Peak Performance Prism:**

#### **A conceptual model of people enablers in organisations**

##### **ABSTRACT**

*Globalised economies have increased competition for organisations, so managers are under enormous pressure to improve performance and remain ahead of competitors. In this conceptual paper, we consider a range of factors that improve the likelihood of organisations attaining peak performance. We focus on factors associated with people employed in the organisation. The people enablers mainly stem from three perspectives, namely competency, motivation and opportunity, arranged as a People Performance Prism. There are other organisational enablers that have an impact on performance. These additional factors are named People Enablers and Organisational Enablers; these factors are arranged into a model to show how they contribute to peak performance in organisations.*

**Keywords:** Managing for peak performance, business models, managing in changing and complex environments, leadership, strategic HRM

##### **BACKGROUND**

It is commonly agreed that the business environment is changing. With modern globalised economies and increasing competition, corporate enterprises worldwide are under tremendous pressure to ameliorate their performance (Singh, 2013). As organisational systems become more global, their complexity and performance challenges become more daunting (Broad, 2006), resulting in organisations needing to continuously review their practices to maintain and improve their competitive positions. Broad (2006) provides a definition of performance, adapted from work of Gilbert (1978), that states performance is a combination of behaviours by performers--individuals, groups, and teams--and the results or accomplishments that they produce. Managing such performance therefore is indeed complex. Simply recruiting exceptional people is insufficient and such employees can create a host of problems if they are not properly managed (Coulson-Thomas,

2012). Therefore, the objective of this conceptual paper is to model the key people enablers and understand their impact on peak performance of organisations. The results of this study would be useful for managers to drive their organisations towards excellence by adopting strategies around these enablers.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Peak performance is hard to define (Kirby, 2005). However, the high performing firms have been associated with "quality" mission statements defined by the choice of components (Darbi, 2012). Several ingredients have been cited as contributing elements in high performing organisations (Singh 2013). For example the winning organisations are characterised around having good strategy and reviewing it periodically, and having good leadership and learning within their organisations (Cocks, 2012). Studies of high performing organisations also find that a good infrastructure is crucial for sustained high performance (Agin & Holden, 2007). Hillgren and Morse (1998) summarised these enablers into four main elements: Direction, Competency, Motivation and Opportunity. Direction implies the vision, values and customer value metrics. Competency relates to technical, interpersonal, work management, and economic literacy of its people. Opportunity points at the resources and the authority for its people and, finally, motivation signals the job function design, reward recognition and feedback for its people. So the right people are yet another important enabler for high performance (Cocks, 2012). Truly, as Sawa and Swift (2013) report, to create competitive advantages through people, an organisation should focus on promoting the following:

- A belief in individual responsibility and autonomy and a strong sense of team collaboration;
- A culture of continual training, education, and mentoring;
- A challenging work environment in which everyone is committed to excellence;
- Open communication and collaboration; and
- Strong leadership to challenge and support employees to reach higher levels of success.
- Resources, authority

Traditionally, organisations' performance measurement processes were consistent with a cost accounting approach, which emphasised selective financial indicators, such as profit and return on investment and this approach received considerable criticism due to it solely focusing on financial

indicators (Gomes, Yasin & Lisboa, 2006). Subsequently, several factors closely associated with people management have been noted as playing a role in the development and sustainability of peak performing organisations. As the people enablers have become crucial, trust, fairness, and respect in the context of both managerial behaviours and colleague interactions have been found to be defining features of peak performance. Moving forward we focus on these people factors.

### **Trust**

Trust may be seen as a person's willingness to be reliant on the behaviours of another person, resulting in a degree of vulnerability (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998), such as expecting the other person to do what they say they will do and to be reliable. The extent of trust that employees have in management is an important aspect of organisational climate because the values of the organisation tend to be transmitted through the senior team (McAllister, 1995; Macky & Boxall, 2007). Trust may be communicated in different ways, such as by providing instructions regarding end requirements but allowing autonomy around how to complete tasks (Balodi & Prabhu, 2014) or by viewing mistakes as an opportunity to learn (de Waal, Goedegebuure, & Akaraborworn, 2014). Although, employee trust in senior management may be interpreted through the company's policies and practices rather than personal attributes (Farndale, Hope-Hailey, & Kelliher, 2011), peak performing companies tend to have leaders that are excellent role models and who are trusted by all employees (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Similarly, individual managers' behaviour is important because negative feedback from a trusted manager is likely to be considered as accurate by an employee; whilst similar feedback from a manager who is not trusted results in employees not attempting to improve their performance (Dirks & Ferrin, 2001). Managers who are trustworthy and encourage the same behaviour in others are vital in high performing organisations (de Waal et al., 2014). Trust has also been shown to lead to higher levels of organisational commitment (Farndale et al., 2011; McAllister, 1995; Mone, Eisinger, Guggenheim, Price, & Stine, 2011), and when used consistently it is associated with better outcomes for organisations (Kondakci & Sivri, 2014).

## **Fairness**

Fairness is also necessary for organisations to function effectively. A sense of fairness is linked to employees' perception of organisational justice (Greenberg, 1990), while organisational justice is strongly related to levels of organisational commitment (Farndale et al., 2011), and high levels of performance. Three key areas of organisational justice are distributive justice, procedural justice, and interactional justice (Folger & Konovsky, 1989; Greenberg, 1990). Distributive justice refers to the way in which recipients view the outcomes of a process, for example, whether their pay rise results in what the individual views as a fair amount in the relevant circumstances. Procedural justice refers to the process itself and whether the recipient views it as fair, for example, whether they were treated in the same way as similarly performing colleagues. Finally, interactional justice focuses on the interpersonal treatment employees receive from their managers during procedures (Chang, 2005). When employees are involved in the creation and implementation of processes, such processes are more likely to be perceived as being fairer (Greenberg, 1990); for example, those who have input into the process of setting targets are more likely to see those targets as fair. Organisational justice and perceived fairness can help explain employee commitment in organisations (Folger & Konovsky, 1989; McFarlin & Sweeney, 1992; Organ, 1990; Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton, & Swart, 2003) leading to social exchange in the form of increased performance (Blau, 1964). Perceptions of fairness are strongly related to increase levels of organisational commitment (Farndale et al., 2011); therefore, high performing organisations encourage fair treatment (de Waal et al., 2014).

In addition to trust and fairness, high performing organisations engender a respectful work environment that features cooperation and consensus among staff (Kondakci & Sivri, 2014). The urge to earn and maintain the respect of one another is what governs the behaviour of senior executives in high-performing companies; similarly, respect for peers is also an essential feature throughout the organisation (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Values and strategies are communicated to all in the organisation, not just amongst the senior team, so everyone knows and embraces them, indicating that management values and respects the opinions of employees and involves them in important

organisational processes; therefore, managers show respect to employees and have an action-focused decision-making style (de Waal et al., 2014).

### **Setting high expectations**

High performing companies also have high expectations of their employees and are achievement orientated (Gomes et al., 2006; Kondakci & Sivri, 2014). Such companies assemble and recruit a diverse and complementary management team and workforce. The management team expects that employees will be accountable for their results and clear performance expectations are communicated (Black & Marshall-Lee, 2011; de Waal et al., 2014); however, high expectations pervade the entire organisation, as people expect the best of each other too (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). High expectations are reinforced by a system of internal promotion, where vacancies are filled by high-potential internal candidates first, and people are encouraged to become leaders (de Waal et al., 2014). However, employees maintain a sense of dissatisfaction with their own current performance, which motivates them to continuously improve, thus edgy ideas and attitudes are pervasive (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Furthermore, high expectations may enable employees to tackle seemingly impossible tasks within the organisations (Sathe & Smart, 1997). Ultimately, encouragement to improve performance leads the workforce to increase creativity and achieve better results for the company (de Waal et al., 2014).

High expectations alone are insufficient to create and sustain high performing companies. A range of supporting structures and processes, with skilled leaders and managers to implement them, are needed to enable the workforce to achieve and sustain optimum performance. High performing organisations create a safe and secure work environment for employees (de Waal et al., 2014). This environment contains the physical resources required for employees to perform (Kondakci & Sivri, 2014). However, physical resources and safety are insufficient to secure high performance if employees feel psychologically unsafe or insecure (de Waal et al., 2014). In addition to trust and organisational justice, participative decision making, where employees' views are encouraged and genuinely considered, helps to build a sense of security (Kondakci & Sivri, 2014), and may provide

unexpected benefits for organisations if previously overlooked perspectives are incorporated in decision making.

Furthermore, leaders in high performing organisations provide support by acting as coordinators and sponsors of projects (Kondakci & Sivri, 2014). They provide useful communication in both positive and negative situations. When good performance has occurred high performing organisations' managers praise employees by saying specifically what has been done well and why this is important for the organisation, rather than making generic comments (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Similarly, when problems or mistakes occur, managers give constructive counsel as soon after the event as possible. They focus on the specifics of what went wrong and the impact for the organisation then communicate how a better approach be undertaken, rather than blaming personal features of the individual (Leung, Su, & Morris, 2001). Supportive leaders help to reinforce the climate of safety and trust, providing lasting benefits to the organisation.

### **Performance Management**

Employees' performance is a critical element of the overall organisational performance in high performing companies (Gomes et al., 2006), so its management is vital. Performance management can deliver impressive results for return on equity, revenue growth, profitability and employee turnover (Black & Marshall-Lee, 2011) and may be implemented through such processes as regular (e.g., six-monthly or annual) appraisal meetings (Kondakci & Sivri, 2014; Mone et al., 2011). However, more regular feedback from managers has been found to be particularly beneficial for supporting employees to achieve their goals. Black and Marshall-Lee (2011) noted that fortnightly feedback produced the best results. High performing organisations include performance management elements that allow employee involvement (Gardner, Moynihan, Park, & Wright, 2001) but the approaches used need to be considered fair by employees (Farndale et al., 2011). It is especially important that talented employees be performance managed to capitalise on organisational investment, rather than left to find their own way (Coulson-Thomas, 2012). The focus is on having high quality conversations to ensure that the process is beneficial for all parties and not simply a box ticking exercise (Black & Marshall-Lee, 2011). The conversations include setting performance and development goals, providing ongoing



feedback and recognition of achievements (Mone et al., 2011). Finally, managers may use performance management to identify and share what talented and exceptional employees do differently, in order to maximise the benefit for the organisation (Coulson-Thomas, 2012).

Performance management and appraisal discussions may result development opportunities and new challenges being set for employees (Farndale et al., 2011). Development of employees is closely linked to performance management and can take several forms, including training and mentoring, with coaching being noted as especially effective (Black & Marshall-Lee, 2011). High performing companies recognise the importance of training and skill development (Osborne & Cowen, 2002) and their workforces are encouraged to develop their skills and trained to be resilient and flexible (de Waal et al., 2014). The provision of development opportunities may be linked with the reciprocal repayment of this investment in terms of commitment and a lower intention to leave. Such practices include appraisal discussions which result in training and development opportunities and new challenges being set for the employee to work towards (Farndale et al., 2011). Continuous skill development is a necessity at all levels and should include training for senior managers (Sathe & Smart, 1997).

### **Long term relationships**

High performing organisations seek long term relationships with stakeholders inside and outside the organisation to maintain their competitive advantage. Internally, high-performing organisations create a safe and secure workplace (both physically and psychologically) and employees are made to leave only as a last resort (de Waal et al., 2014). Similarly, high-performing employees also view long-term relationships as vital for personal success and they expect to work for their company, and with their colleagues, for a long time (Osborne & Cowen, 2002). Externally, high performing organisations grow through partnerships with suppliers and customers, so long-term commitment is extended to all stakeholders (de Waal et al., 2014). This extended perspective influences the behaviour of both the managers and the other employees, allowing them to develop new processes and products and see them through to completion, and also to take risks without being fearful of their losing their livelihoods.

In conclusion it can be said that, broadly, the performance in the organisation is a subset of many people related enablers stemming from motivation, opportunity, and competency. These are summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: People Related Enablers**

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Insert Table 1 about here

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## METHODOLOGY

We used the university library to search for the relevant material. As the university had a subscription to main databases, including ScienceDirect, Emerald, Google Scholar and Wiley Online Journals, a search was performed on these databases using some key terms. In order to develop the key terms, a mind map was created, as shown in the Figure 1. The mind map used *Key performance* as a starting point. We used brainstorming to analyse the synonyms associated with key performance resulted in identification of two strings: *High performance* and *Effective organisations*. High performance is the result of people and organisational settings. Along with leadership, there are various people related and organisation-led enablers. This mapping led to the generation of key terms, including *Effective organisation*, *Effective performance*, *Key performance* and *Leadership role* that were used for database searches.

**Figure 1: Mind Map**

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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The journal articles that had at least one of the key terms in the journal article title and those that indicated any relevancy to high performance were selected for further analysis. The reference list of resulting journal articles was also scrutinised to identify whether there were any additional related journal articles that did not show up in the search. From these searches, 34 journal articles that indicated relevance to high performance were selected. The other irrelevant journal articles were

discarded at this stage. The initial screening of journal articles indicated the nature of research that has been undertaken on peak performance in organisations and guided the development of criteria for further analysis. These journal articles were further scrutinised and selected for detailed review based on the following criteria:

1. Discusses the history, features, uses, benefits or scope of high performance
2. Discusses the role of managers or functions of the high performing organisations
3. Discusses the key practices for implementation of the high performing culture
4. Discusses the impact of high performing organisations
5. Demonstrates the cases of high performing organisations

The second screening selected the journal articles that highlighted enablers of high performing organisations. These enablers are considered in the next section.

## **DISCUSSION**

In recent years it has been widely noted that human resources may provide a key competitive advantage for organisations. Employees not only produce goods and services but also find ways to do this that add value for the organisation, for example by working in effective teams or helping to reengineer processes. Replicating the output a peak performing employee, or group of employees, is not an easy task, so managers are responsible for facilitating an appropriate work environment that is conducive to peak performance. Thus organisations need to focus not only financial results but also on employee morale and development, plus organisational climate, to achieve peak performance. Trust, fairness, and respect, recognition, reward have been found to be vital underpinning enablers. These enablers have been organised into two models of enablers of peak performance. We have labelled these models the People Peak Performance Prism and the Expanded People Peak Performance Prism. The metaphor of a prism was chosen partly because of the prism's peaked shape but mainly owing to the prism's ability to refract white light in the colours of a rainbow, which may be seen to represent the ability of an organisation to achieve an impressive range of outcomes if employees are suitably enabled. Illustrations of the People Peak Performance Prism and the Expanded People Peak Performance Prism are shown in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

**Figure 2: People Peak Performance Prism**

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Insert Figure 2 about here

**Figure 3: Expanded People Peak Performance Prism**

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Insert Figure 3 about here

The motivation, opportunity and competency factors shown in Figure 2 have a direct relationship with organisational peak performance. However this relationship will be motivated through many mediating factors, such as leadership, direction, infrastructure, organisation learning (Cocks, 2012; Hirsh, 2014). The leadership team has a strong responsibility to play a role in the success of the organisation. High-performing executives create an environment that helps people feel motivated to do a good job, as shown in Figure 3. They help people understand what day-to-day activities are needed to get the job done; they provide frequent and honest feedback on how well the organisation, team, and individuals are doing; and they make sure people know they are appreciated (Hillgren, & Morse, 1998).

Conceptually these enablers and relationships thus can be modelled to influence peak performance as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Model for Peak Performance**

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Insert Figure 4 about here

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the people enablers of peak performance in organisations. The initial study has revealed that the peak performance enablers are related to motivation, competency and opportunity. People are the focus in the prism models because their motivation, opportunity, and competence influences peak performance. Motivation stems from many interdependent attributes

related to job design, reward, recognition, respect, fairness, and trust; whilst opportunity links to resources, authority, coaching, mentoring, and long term orientation. Competency signals the performance required, setting high expectations, right skills, self-development, and training, which may include financial literacy to understand how organisations earn their money. In addition, organisational enablers are needed to enhance the people enablers. These organisational enablers are internal settings of the organisations. Among organisations' internal enablers are leadership, learning, infrastructure, direction in terms of vision, mission, strategy further influence the various people enablers. So overall, the way these elements interact may influence peak performance of the organisation, from both the perspectives of financial results and also employee morale, leading to increased customer satisfaction.

Moving forward, it is anticipated the prisms of peak performance will be modelled by thoroughly investigating the underlying direct and moderating relationships. The models will be validated empirically in a number of cultural settings. The study has been limited to the databases noted in the Methodology section. Expanding the review to include wider literature may yield more sub factors or organisational enablers that may either directly influence, or moderate, the relationships among the various enablers that result in organisations peak performance. It would also be interesting to investigate the trends in the people enabling factors that have been consistently cited in recent years and appear to be key contributors for peak performance.

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**Table 1: People Related Enablers**

Enabling factor	Including (sub factors)	Authors
Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• voluntary vulnerability</li> <li>• role modelling by senior team</li> <li>• autonomy</li> <li>• mistakes = opportunity to learn</li> </ul>	Rousseau et al., (1998) Farndale, et al., (2011) McAllister (1995) Macky and Boxall (2007) Osborne and Cowen (2002) Balodi and Prabhu (2014) de Waal et al., (2014)
Fairness and justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distributive justice</li> <li>• procedural justice</li> <li>• interactional justice</li> </ul>	Farndale et al., (2011) Greenberg (1990) Folger and Konovsky (1989) Chang (2005)
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cooperation and consensus</li> <li>• pervasive</li> <li>• transmitted through actions</li> </ul>	Kondakci and Sivri (2014) Osborne and Cowen (2002) de Waal et al., (2014)
High expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• achievement orientated</li> <li>• accountable</li> <li>• clear performance expectations</li> <li>• internal promotion</li> <li>• encouragement</li> </ul>	Gomes et al., (2006) Kondakci and Sivri (2014) Black and Marshall-Lee (2011) de Waal et al., (2014) Sathe and Smart (1997)
Support/Leadership skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• safe environment</li> <li>• physical resources</li> <li>• psychological security</li> <li>• participative decision making</li> <li>• specific praise/feedback</li> <li>• constructive counsel</li> </ul>	de Waal et al., (2014) Kondakci and Sivri (2014) Fredrickson and Losada (2005) Leung et al. (2001)
Performance Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• link to company performance</li> <li>• regular appraisal meetings</li> <li>• manage talented employees</li> <li>• define talented behaviour</li> <li>• share exceptional practices</li> </ul>	Gomes et al., (2006) Kondakci and Sivri (2014) Mone et al., (2011) Black and Marshall-Lee (2011) Coulson-Thomas (2012)



Figure 2: Mind Map

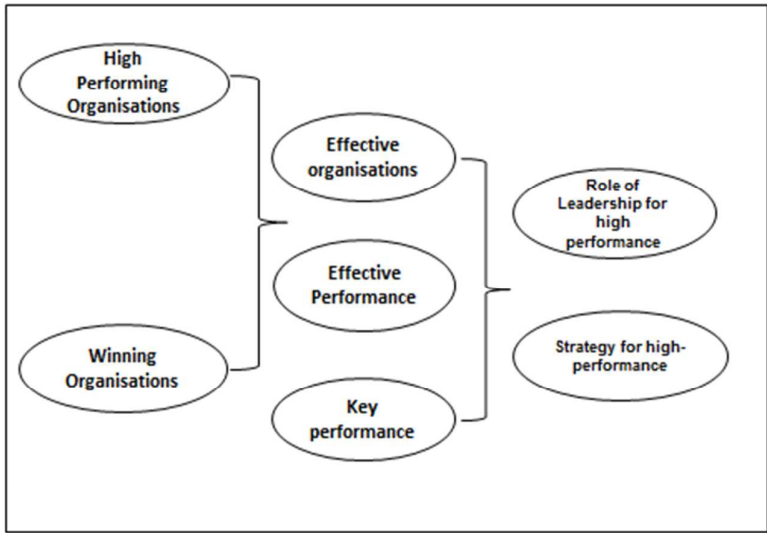


Figure 2: People Peak Performance Prism

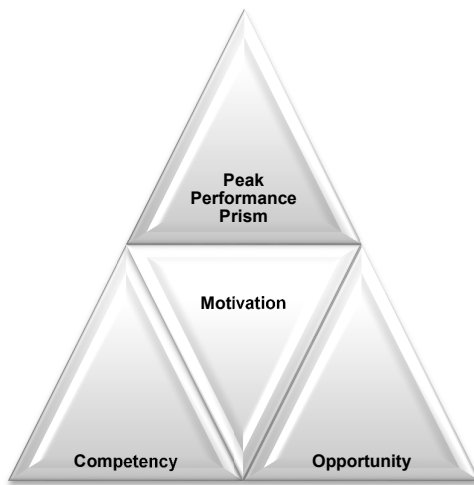


Figure 3: Expanded People Peak Performance Prism



Figure 4: Model for Peak Performance

