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HUMAN PERFORMANCE

Performance management universals: Think globally and act locally

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Abstract Performance management systems are pervasive worldwide. Herein, we describe five performance management universals—principles that lead to effective performance management regardless of cultural contexts: (1) congruence between job descriptions and organizational goals; (2) measurement of performance based on behaviors and results at the individual and collective levels; (3) training regarding performance management; (4) delivering performance feedback using a strengths-based approach; and (5) allocating rewards that are meaningful. We also describe five cultural dimensions that are particularly relevant to performance management: (1) individualism-collectivism; (2) power distance; (3) uncertainty avoidance; (4) masculinity-femininity; and (5) fatalism. Considering universals and cultural dimensions simultaneously allows us to think globally but act locally in terms of how to implement performance management systems that promote organizational effectiveness, as well as ethical behaviors and employee well-being.

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1. Performance management around the globe

Performance management is a continuous process of “identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization” (Aguinis, 2013, p. 2). Because individual performance is the building block of organizational success, virtually all organizations globally have some type of performance management system (Aguinis, Joo, & Gottfredson, 2011).

Although performance management systems are pervasive worldwide, cultural differences affect how such systems are designed and implemented, as well as their relative effectiveness. For example, a recent study including 97 multinational corporations with subsidiaries in Eastern European countries suggested that interpersonal aspects such as who is the person delivering feedback on performance and the manner in which such feedback is delivered are customized to the local culture (Claus & Hand, 2009). In light of extant empirical evidence, the important role of culture should no longer be questioned (Aguinis, 2013). Consistent with this conclusion, Aguinis et al. (2011) issued the recommendation that performance management systems be ‘context congruent,’ meaning designed and

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implemented taking into account local cultural norms.

Given the important role of cultural differences, it may be tempting to conclude that we do not know much about how performance management systems should be implemented around the world. In other words, if cultural norms change, it seems that the way performance management systems are designed and implemented should also change, turning performance management systems into moving targets. More concretely, consider the discussion provided by Aguinis (2013, Chapter 1) regarding culture-related issues about performance management systems in India, China, Turkey, and South Korea.

India's economy has been in overdrive since the early 1990s, and there is intense international business activity, including a significant increase in foreign direct investment. However, traditional paternalistic values do not seem to be changing, and this poses a challenge in implementing performance management systems which stress supervisors serving as coaches rather than 'bosses.'

In China, from the founding of the socialist state in 1949 until the 1980s, performance management systems emphasized attendance and skills. Since then, however, the view of performance management has expanded to consider broader sets of behaviors, as well as the relationship between performance management and other organizational systems (e.g., compensation). Nevertheless, important issues to consider for successful implementation of performance management systems in China include respect for age and seniority and an emphasis on social harmony.

Performance management in Turkey is evolving rapidly given its official candidacy for European Union membership. Turkey's unique cultural context involves being a democratic and secular state, yet one ruled by a single-party government. Performance management is a fairly novel organizational issue in Turkey, but almost 80% of firms are currently using some type of system. Because personal relationships play an important role in Turkish culture, it is vital that systems implemented here ensure valid, reliable, and fair performance measurement.

Finally, work relationships in South Korea are hierarchical in nature and emphasize the importance of groups over individuals. However, the Asian financial crisis of 1997 affected organizational practices substantially and led many organizations to adopt what in South Korea is called *Yunbongje* (i.e., merit-based systems). Thus, effective performance management systems should reconcile a merit-based approach with more traditional cultural values.

Our discussion regarding how performance management is affected by cultural norms may lead to the conclusion that knowledge of performance management can only be local, narrow, and limited. The goal of this article is to challenge that notion. In fact, we provide an analysis and discussion of *performance management universals*: performance management principles that are culture-free. We emphasize that a discussion of performance management universals does not mean that culture does not matter. Rather, our approach follows Aguinis and Henle (2003), who discussed universals in the field of organizational behavior and concluded that there are underlying universal functions that are enacted by a variety of behavioral manifestations across cultures. For example, the universal principle of charismatic leadership was enacted in a highly aggressive manner in the cases of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Theodore Roosevelt in the United States, and Winston Churchill in the United Kingdom. The same universal charismatic leadership principle was enacted in a more quiet and nonaggressive manner in the cases of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa in India, and Nelson Mandela in South Africa. All of these individuals were highly charismatic and effective leaders in their respective cultural contexts. Similarly, as we discuss herein, performance management universals play out differently and have different manifestations across different cultural environments.

The remainder of our article is organized as follows. First, we describe five performance management universals. Then, we discuss five selected cultural dimensions (individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and fatalism) that are particularly relevant to performance management. Finally, we offer research-based best-practice recommendations on how to think globally (i.e., consider universals) and act locally (i.e., consider how universals are manifested across cultures) regarding performance management.

2. Five performance management universals

Although we could have chosen more, the five universals highlighted next allow us to describe how commonalities permeate the entire performance management cycle beginning with the system pre-implementation phase (i.e., creation of job descriptions), followed by the system implementation phase (i.e., training regarding performance management, performance measurement, and performance

feedback), and ending with the system outcomes phase (i.e., reward allocation). The five universals apply to all organizations, regardless of a particular cultural context.

2.1. Performance management universal #1: Congruence between job descriptions and organizational goals

The first universal refers to the system pre-implementation phase. Specifically, it consists of creating job descriptions that summarize the job duties and needed knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) such that they are congruent with organizational goals. For example, if customer service is an important strategic priority in the organization, then job descriptions should include behaviors and expected results related to customer service. Such congruence better ensures that the behaviors and results directly produced by employees contribute toward achieving the goals of their organization, facilitate organizational change, and help the organization gain a competitive advantage. Thus, creating job descriptions that are congruent with an organization's goals is an important prerequisite for all performance management systems.

2.2. Performance management universal #2: Training regarding performance management

The second universal, also addressing the system implementation phase, refers to providing adequate training to all participants in the performance management system—both raters and ratees. Training, in general, produces a variety of benefits including increased levels of employee knowledge and skills which result in enhanced human capital and improved firm performance (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). In the particular case of performance management, goals of training programs include enhancing employee buy-in, as well as reducing distortions and biases in the process of measuring performance (Aguinis, 2013). Some training programs take place before the performance management system is launched (e.g., training of raters regarding how to minimize biases and inaccuracies in filling out performance appraisal forms) whereas other programs take place once the performance system is underway (e.g., training of employees based on needs identified after a performance feedback session has taken place). Due to their benefits, training programs are recommended for all performance management systems—regardless of particular cultural contexts.

2.3. Performance management universal #3: Measurement of performance based on behaviors and results at the individual and collective levels

The third universal is relevant to actual implementation and refers to a key component of all systems: the measurement of performance. Regardless of a particular cultural context, a good system includes measures of behaviors and results at the individual and collective (e.g., team, department, unit) levels of analysis. First, regarding the measurement of behaviors and results, when an employee mostly has control over the results of her work, it is more appropriate to measure results. Alternatively, when an employee is mostly not in control over the results, it is more appropriate to measure behaviors. For example, if a salesperson is assigned a particularly difficult region (e.g., low income, sparse population), then it would be more appropriate to emphasize behaviors over results (although both would be measured). Second, regarding individual and collective performance, it is necessary to consider the amount of time employees spend working in teams/units. If an employee spends a lot of time working by himself, it is more appropriate to measure the employee's performance at the individual level of analysis. Alternatively, if an employee spends much time working in teams, it is more appropriate to measure the employee's performance based also on team performance (Scott & Tiessen, 1999). However, given today's networked job environments, measures of both individual and team performance are needed. In short, good performance management systems include measures of behaviors and results—both regarding individual and team performance.

2.4. Performance management universal #4: Delivering performance feedback using a strengths-based approach

Providing feedback about performance is an important universal because it allows employees to improve performance in the future. In particular, as discussed in detail by Aguinis, Gottfredson, and Joo (2012), it is better to use a strengths-based approach to delivering feedback. The strengths-based approach involves identifying employees' strengths, delivering positive feedback on how employees are using their strengths to achieve successful performance, and asking them to maintain or further improve their performance by focusing on their strengths. Managers who adhere to a strengths-based approach, as opposed to a weaknesses-based approach, are more likely to benefit from greater

employee engagement, productivity, and retention, among many benefits—regardless of the cultural context in question.

2.5. Performance management universal #5: Allocating rewards that are meaningful

The fifth performance management universal refers to the allocation of rewards, which is usually seen as the last phase—or outcome—of the performance management process. Regardless of the specific cultural context in question, rewards should be meaningful for those receiving them. Note that rewards can be tangible (e.g., end-of-the-year bonus) or intangible (e.g., employee of the month award). Regardless of the nature of the rewards, they need to be significant in the eyes of the employees—receiving or not receiving such rewards must matter to them.

3. Five cultural dimensions relevant to performance management

International business and cross-cultural psychology researchers have identified several cultural dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 2001; Javidan, House, Dorfman, Hanges, & Sully de Luque, 2006; Schwartz & Sagie, 2000). We focus on five that are particularly relevant to performance management: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and fatalism.

Individualism-collectivism refers to the relative importance given to individual achievements (i.e., success of individuals) compared to group identification (i.e., belongingness in a group) (Hofstede, 2001; Shao, Rupp, Skarlicki, & Jones, in press). In general, people in individualistic countries—such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands—tend to place great importance on individual achievements. Conversely, people from collectivistic countries—such as Guatemala, South Korea, Singapore, and China—generally put greater emphasis on group identification. Given these differences, individualists value self-autonomy highly and put their own individual interests above the interests of groups to which they belong (e.g., extended family). In contrast, collectivists value interdependence and place the interests of the groups they are affiliated with above their own. In short, people from individualistic cultures are more focused on 'I,' whereas people in collectivistic cultures are more focused on 'we.'

Power distance refers to the degree to which individuals accept unequal distribution of power (Hofstede, 2001; Peretz & Fried, 2012). Examples

of high power distance nations are Malaysia, Guatemala, Mexico, China, and Iraq. In these countries, differences in the distribution of power, as well as large gaps between the wealthy and poor, are more widely accepted—and even expected. Alternatively, examples of low power distance nations are Austria, Israel, and Denmark. In these countries, people are generally uncomfortable with an uneven distribution of power, such as large gaps between the wealthy and poor.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which people feel uncomfortable in unstructured situations (Hofstede, 2001; Newman & Nollen, 1996). Examples of countries that score high on uncertainty avoidance are Japan, Germany, France, Mexico, and South Korea. People in these countries have a tendency to minimize the possibility of uncertainty through laws, rules, and security measures. Examples of low uncertainty avoidance countries are the United States, Singapore, China, and the United Kingdom. Here, people are more open to and comfortable with lack of structure, and are more capable of tolerating ambiguity.

Masculinity-femininity is the extent to which gender roles are clearly distinguished (Hofstede, 2001; Shao et al., in press). Although Hofstede (2001) and many others have used the label masculinity-femininity, other terms—including 'assertive-nurturant,' 'quantity of life-quality of life,' and 'toughness-tenderness'—have also been used to refer to the same cultural dimension given potential negative connotations of the 'masculinity-femininity' term in some countries, such as the United States (Hofstede et al., 1998). In highly masculine countries such as Japan, Austria, Venezuela, and Italy, gender-based roles are clearly differentiated: Men are expected to be assertive, tough, and materially ambitious, whereas women are expected to be more modest, tender, and concerned with quality of life and relationships with others (Aguinis & Adams, 1998). In highly feminine societies such as Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Costa Rica, and Thailand, both men and women are expected to be modest, tender, and concerned with quality of life and relationships with others. As a result, on average, individuals from masculine countries tend to score higher on assertiveness, toughness, and material ambition, while individuals from more feminine countries tend to score higher on modesty, tenderness, and concern with quality of life and relationships with others.

Fatalism is the belief that one is not in much control of the outcomes of his actions (Ayca et al., 2000). Because of the feeling of not being in control, individuals in fatalistic cultures are less likely to try very hard to achieve something, make long-term

plans, and take preventative actions. The opposite of fatalism is 'self-determinism,' or the belief that one is in control of her outcomes. Members of self-deterministic cultures have a tendency to exhibit a harder work ethic, plan ahead, discipline themselves to a daily routine, and forego pleasurable experiences in the present to work toward a future goal. Examples of countries with high levels of fatalism are India, Russia, and Mexico, whereas some countries that score highly on self-determinism are the United States, Israel, Germany, China, and Pakistan.

4. Best practice recommendations on how to think globally and act locally regarding performance management

In this section, we describe how each of the performance management universals plays out in different cultural contexts. Similar to Aguinis and Henle's (2003) analysis of universals in the field of organizational behavior, we discuss how each of the performance management universals, although cross-cultural invariant, is enacted differently in various cultural environments. Table 1 includes a summary of our analysis and recommendations for practice.

4.1. Creating job descriptions

As noted earlier, job descriptions should be clearly linked to the goals of the organization—regardless of a consideration of cultural values. Although the link with organizational goals should be clear regardless of cultural context, in organizations located in high uncertainty avoidance countries (e.g., France), managers should devote extra care into creating and maintaining job descriptions that are highly specific and clear in terms of KSAs needed for the position, as well as duties and goals. Employees from such high uncertainty avoidance cultures feel uncomfortable with a lack of specific structures. Accordingly, employees from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are likely to feel uncomfortable with a job description that is not very specific and detailed.

Also, we advise against encouraging high levels of employee participation in the process of creating job descriptions in high power distance countries. In some organizations, managers expect their employees to voice their honest opinions regarding the responsibilities and goals of employees' jobs. However, doing so for employees in high power distance cultures runs contrary to their perceptions of authority because, overall, employees are supposed to be compliant with what superiors tell them to

do—even if they believe their supervisors are wrong. On the other hand, in low power distance cultures, employees desire equality in power (e.g., expecting that supervisors will seek the opinions of subordinates before making important decisions) and tend to demand explicit justifications for any perceived inequalities. Thus, organizations in low power distance cultures should encourage employees to participate in the process of creating job descriptions (Newman & Nollen, 1996).

4.2. Providing adequate training

Providing adequate training to all participants in the performance management process—including all managers and employees—is an important determinant of the system's effectiveness. As noted earlier, some training takes place even before the system is implemented (e.g., training supervisors on how to provide accurate performance ratings and training everyone in the organization regarding the goals and processes involved in performance management) and some after the system is in place (e.g., training opportunities for employees to address needs identified in their performance review). However, the way in which this universal is implemented should consider particular cultural contexts. For example, we recommend a focus on providing individual-based training programs for personal development in more individualistic cultures, highly standardized and structured on- and off-the-job training programs in high uncertainty avoidance cultures, training programs that contain many opportunities for interpersonal interactions in feminine cultures, and training programs that promote employee participation in low power distance cultures.

4.3. Measuring performance

As mentioned, performance should be measured by taking into account behaviors and results, as well as individual and collective levels—regardless of local cultural values. However, understanding culture allows us to implement this particular universal in a more effective way. For example, consider the role of fatalism. Employees from fatalistic cultures generally do not believe that outcomes are within their control and, consequently, they tend to reject feeling personally responsible for results. Thus, in a country that scores highly on fatalism, measures of performance should emphasize behaviors (i.e., how the work is done as opposed to what are the results of one's work). In a low fatalism country (i.e., high self-determinism country), measurement should emphasize results (Aguinis, 2013).

Table 1. Summary of best-practice recommendations on how to consider performance management universals and cultural dimensions in implementing performance management systems

Performance Management Universal	Illustrative Cultural Context	Illustrative Countries	Recommendations for Practice
#1: Congruence between job descriptions and organizational goals	• High uncertainty avoidance	• Japan, Germany, France, Mexico, South Korea	• Create and maintain job descriptions that are highly specific and clear
	• Low power distance	• Austria, Israel, Denmark	• Encourage employees to be active participants in the process of creating job descriptions
#2: Training regarding performance management	• High individualism (i.e., low collectivism)	• Denmark, New Zealand, Ireland, Italy, France	• Provide individual-based training
	• High uncertainty avoidance	• Greece, Belgium, Poland, Peru, Hungary	• Provide highly standardized and structured on- and off-the-job training
	• High femininity (i.e., low masculinity)	• Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Costa Rica, Thailand	• Provide training programs that contain opportunities for interpersonal interactions among training participants
	• Low power distance	• Finland, Norway, Germany, Sweden	• Provide training programs that promote active trainee participation
#3: Measurement of performance based on results and behaviors at the individual and collective levels	• High fatalism (i.e., low self-determinism)	• India, Russia, and Mexico	• Emphasize behaviors over results (but measure both)
	• High individualism (i.e., low collectivism)	• United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Netherlands	• Emphasize individual over collective (i.e., team, unit, department, organization) performance (but measure both)
#4: Delivering performance feedback using a strengths-based approach	• High power distance	• Malaysia, Guatemala, Mexico, China, Iraq	• Encourage supervisors to deliver performance feedback (rather than peers or subordinates)
	• High collectivism (i.e., low individualism)	• Guatemala, South Korea, Singapore, China	• Use non-confrontational and indirect language, preferably in informal settings
#5: Allocating rewards that are meaningful	• High collectivism (i.e., low individualism)	• Ecuador, Taiwan, Sierra Leone, Nigeria	• Avoid large levels of inequity in rewards across individual performers holding a similar position in the organizational hierarchy
	• High uncertainty avoidance	• Argentina, Portugal, Turkey, Uruguay	• Provide a very clear and detailed description of what types of behaviors and results at the individual and collective levels will lead to what specific types of intangible and tangible rewards

Note: For more comprehensive lists of countries conforming to each cultural context, please see [Aycan et al. \(2000\)](#) and [Hofstede \(2001\)](#).

Now, consider the role of individualism-collectivism when deciding the relative emphasis to be placed on measuring performance at the individual and collective levels. Managers in individualistic cultures should more heavily measure individual performance, whereas performance management systems in collectivist cultures should more heavily assess team performance. Note that although we refer to 'team,' our recommendation applies to all types of collective entities: teams, departments, units, branches, and the entire organization.

4.4. Delivering performance feedback

Providing performance feedback based on the strengths-based approach is an essential component of all effective performance management systems regardless of cultural context. However, in terms of implementing this universal, two questions arise: (1) Who should assess and provide feedback? and (2) How should the performance information be delivered? Consider how understanding culture allows us to answer these questions.

First, regarding who delivers feedback, systems in high power distance contexts should focus mainly on the supervisor rather than multiple sources of feedback including peers, subordinates, and customers. Individuals in high power cultural contexts value their status in hierarchies, and being evaluated (i.e., being subject to power and influence) from peers and subordinates who are not above themselves violates such hierarchical orders. In contrast, various sources of feedback should be used by organizations in low power distance countries where employees do not feel uncomfortable receiving performance information from nonsupervisory sources, allowing them to better focus on the content of the feedback as a useful source for improving performance (Peretz & Fried, 2012).

Second, regarding the delivery of performance feedback, we suggest the use of non-confrontational and indirect communication in collectivistic contexts. We also recommend that such communication take place in informal settings, possibly outside the workplace. We make this recommendation because collectivistic cultures strongly value their face, or the self-image that a person wants other people to associate with the person. Face, in turn, is easily damaged by direct, confrontational language, especially if communicated within formalized settings. Given such, non-confrontational, indirect communication of performance information in informal settings (e.g., during a casual meal at a restaurant outside the workplace) tends to minimize any loss of face (Hwang, Francesco, & Kessler, 2003).

4.5. Allocating rewards

Rewards must be meaningful and important to employees—regardless of cultural context. However, cultural dimensions play an important role regarding the implementation of this performance management universal. Consider the case of individualism and collectivism. In organizations operating in highly collectivistic cultures, managers must minimize the perception that an individual is receiving less compensation than a peer who does the same amount and quality of work (i.e., perceived pay inequity). The reason is that employees in collectivistic cultures primarily think that unfair treatment (via perceived pay inequity) undermines their standing and status within their affiliated groups (e.g., the work unit, department, and organization), which they strongly identify with and make emotional ties to (Johnson & Droege, 2004). Stated differently, given the same level of perceived pay inequity, the level of injustice felt by collectivists is higher compared to individualists. Consequently, collectivists are likely to engage in higher levels of unethical work behaviors such as stealing and damaging property to compensate for the perceived injustice (Shao et al., *in press*). Note that such negative effects are less likely to take place if rewards are primarily allocated based on the performance of collectives (e.g., teams, units, departments, organization as a whole) rather than individual performers.

Now, consider the case of uncertainty avoidance. In high uncertainty avoidance contexts, the link between performance and compensation should be defined very clearly and unambiguously. For example, the implementation of contingent pay systems should include a very clear and detailed description of what types of behaviors and results at the individual and collective level will lead to what specific types of intangible and tangible rewards. If such information is not provided, employees in high uncertainty avoidance cultures are likely to experience contingent pay systems as a source of distress and anxiety (Johnson & Droege, 2004). In turn, such anxiety is likely to lead to unethical work behaviors (Rodell & Judge, 2009).

5. Concluding remarks

Many different scholarly fields—including organizational behavior, human resource management, strategy, and psychology, among others—have contributed to the development of an important body of knowledge regarding performance management; for a review, see Aguinis (2013). As a consequence of

this extensive scholarly literature, we now know that there are clear research-based recommendations regarding universal principles that should guide performance management practices. At the same time, we also know that cultural values matter and affect attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Thus, this article identified five performance management universals that allow us to think globally about performance management. It also discussed five cultural dimensions that are particularly relevant to performance management. Combining our knowledge of universals with cultural dimensions allows us to think globally and act locally in terms of how to implement each of the five performance management universals with the goals of creating systems that will enhance organizational effectiveness, as well as promote ethical behaviors and employee well-being.

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