

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Illusion of Performance Management

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ABSTRACT

Despite the wide adoption of performance management by organizations, there is little evidence that performance management works. In this paper, I critique both the methods and the goals of performance management. First, I note that performance management, through its reliance on top-down decision making, robs workers of autonomy and responsibility. Next, I note that two of the three major components of performance management (aligning job performance goals with the strategic goals of the organization and using frequent informal feedback to manage performance) are flawed, and that efforts to manage performance using these tools are likely to fail. Rather than relying on managing performance, organizations should follow decades of research on supportive leadership and focus on supporting and facilitating performance rather than managing it. I call for more empirical research to evaluate the effectiveness of performance management and the effects of the various tools used to manage performance.

1 | Introduction

Performance Management has been embraced by many corporations over the last 20 years. There are numerous books, reviews, and articles touting the benefits of performance management (e.g., Aguinis 2019, 2023; Buckingham and Goodall 2015; Capelli and Tavis 2016; Pulakos 2004, 2009; Pulakos et al. 2012, 2019; Rao and Rao 2016), but there is surprisingly little empirical evidence that performance management works, or indeed that it has any reliable effects on the performance of employees whose performance is (allegedly) being managed (DeNisi and Murphy 2017; DeNisi and Smith 2014; Pulakos et al. 2015; Pulakos and O'Leary 2011).¹ One reason for a lack of clarity about the effects of performance management is a failure to grapple with the criterion problem. The proposition that performance management “works” presupposes some agreement about what performance management is supposed to accomplish, about the criteria that might be used to evaluate performance management, and about the appropriate unit of analysis for evaluating performance management (e.g., employee-level

vs. organization-level); I believe the field is far from consensus on these issues.

In this paper, I will argue that the proposition that job performance *can* or even *should* be effectively managed in the way performance management systems promise is both incorrect and harmful. My concern with performance management systems is not that they have some of the specifics wrong, but rather that the whole enterprise rests on goals that are destructive, assumptions that are unlikely to be true, and procedures that do more harm than good. I will lay out alternatives to performance management and identify pressing research needs in this area.

In the sections that follow, I will question both the goals of performance management and the tools that are used to accomplish these goals. First, I will illustrate how the goals of performance management align more closely with long-discarded theories of management (e.g., Scientific Management) that emphasize top-down control than with current or empirically supported theories of leadership, coaching, and management. Second, I will

show how the tools that are used to manage employee performance are based on assumptions that are either questionable (e.g., that the goals of all units, work groups and individuals in an organization are determined by the broad strategic direction set by top management) or provably wrong (e.g., that frequent performance feedback is likely to do more good than harm). I will argue in this paper that rather than improving the performance of employees and organizations, performance management systems are likely to undermine leadership in organizations and to contribute to negative attitudes, stress, and disengagement on the part of employees, supervisors, and managers.

The intent of this paper is to provoke discussion and examination of the rationale and procedures that define performance management. I will purposefully take strong positions here, pushing the logic of performance as hard as possible to illustrate the implications of taking this logic seriously. This stance runs a risk of unfairly characterizing aspects of performance management or overestimating the logical and empirical weaknesses and flaws of this practice; after describing and critiquing the goals and methods of performance management, I will describe why the critiques raised here are not only fair, but necessary.

1.1 | What Is Performance Management?

The first difficulty in developing a critique of performance management is the lack of a clear definition of performance management, particularly what distinguishes performance management from traditional methods of performance appraisal. For example, many of the early papers that called for a performance management revolution (e.g., Buckingham and Goodall 2015; Capelli and Tavis 2016) noted that performance appraisal tended to be a complex, expensive, and often ineffective process and called for replacing formal annual appraisals with more flexible and informal evaluations. Indeed, replacing formal annual reviews with more frequent informal check-ins has represented one of the most distinctive features of performance management (Maley et al. 2020; Tseng and Levy 2019). However, other scholars (e.g., Doellgast and Marsden 2019; McDermott et al. 2019) use the label “performance management” to describe human resource management systems that are markedly similar to traditional performance appraisal systems. For example, (Posthuma et al. 2018) call for clear, detailed, and standardized performance rating procedures and scales, with careful calibration across employees and units, blurring the distinctions between traditional performance appraisal and performance management.

Reviews of performance management practices suggest that performance management is not a unitary phenomenon. For example, Varma et al. (2008) describe variations in practices across the globe and contexts (e.g., private vs. public sectors), and it is unlikely that any two organizations that claim to employ performance management will implement identical procedures. Some versions of performance management focus on simplifying performance evaluation (e.g., Buckingham and Goodall 2015), while others focus on evaluating, developing, and rewarding employees (e.g., Pulakos 2004, 2009). Still others describe performance management in terms of a suite of related human resource management activities (e.g., selection,

evaluation, compensation, employee development) all designed to improve the effectiveness of employees. For example, Schleicher et al. (2018) present a systems model of performance management that goes well beyond the process of performance evaluation, describing a systems model that illustrates how performance management fits in with and contributes to a range of other organizational processes.

While there is no universal definition of performance management, there are a handful of key components that are shared by most discussions of performance management that distinguish this approach from traditional performance appraisals (e.g., alignment of performance goals with organizational strategies, frequent feedback). This paper will focus on the goals of performance management and how key components and procedures that define performance management are used to accomplish these goals.

2 | The Goals of Performance Management

Performance Management systems can be succinctly described as systems for connecting “... employee behaviors and results with the organization’s strategic goals (Aguinis 2019, p.47).” Alignment is the first of two key concepts in performance management—that is, the idea that the activities of each unit in the organization (e.g., divisions, departments, work groups) and each member of these units should be aligned with decisions made at the top of the organization about the strategies that the organization will pursue to succeed in the market (Aguinis 2023; Murphy et al. 2018; Posthuma et al. 2018; Pulakos et al. 2019). Once individual work goals and performance plans are derived from these strategic goals, a key task for supervisors and managers is to ensure these plans are executed—that is, enforcement.

2.1 | Alignment and Enforcement

Alignment sounds like an excellent idea in the abstract, but it is first and foremost a system of top-down control, in which decisions made by top leadership dictate the way the behavior and performance of each unit and each member serve these decisions about the strategies an organization will pursue to succeed in their niche or marketplace. One of the distinctive features of performance management is that the goals of each unit and individual should all be aligned with a set of strategic decisions that are made at the top of the organization, a concept that is often described as “cascading goals.” According to this logic, decisions at all levels of the organization about how to structure and carry out work are driven by strategic goals set at the highest levels of the organization. The ultimate implication of a strict alignment of goals at all levels of the organization with strategic decisions made at the top of the organization is that workers’ responsibility and autonomy (job characteristics that have long been known to be highly prized; Hackman and Lawler 1971; Hackman and Oldham 1976) will be reduced, leaving all important decisions ultimately to the small cadre of top executives that make decisions about strategy.

The second key concept in performance management is enforcement (Murphy et al. 2018). The success of performance

management depends on workers aligning their activities with the strategic direction of the organization. This ultimately requires enforcement of the choices of top management, using work goals, performance plans, and feedback as methods of controlling the behavior of organization members to bring that behavior in line with the strategic goals of the organization. Murphy et al. (2018) noted that a system that dictates the goals, plans, and behaviors of its members and that uses supervisors to enforce this control through a system of frequent feedback is, in many ways, a descendant of the system of Scientific Management developed by Frederick Taylor (1911).² Scholars applying the techniques of critical analysis (e.g., Marxist labor market analysis, Foucauldian theories) to human resource management have reached a similar conclusion: that performance management represents a system of coercive control that attempts to shape the behavior of employees to the dictates of experts or executives (Newton and Findley 1996; Tweedie et al. 2019).

2.2 | Performance Management Versus Scientific Management

Scientific Management achieved considerable success in improving the efficiency of production, but it was roundly criticized for its neglect of the human factor and its mechanical model of people at work (Braverman 1974; Casey 2002; Clawson 1980; Jones 2000). The most important critique of Scientific Management was that it treated individual employees as cogs in the organization's machine, by taking discretion, planning, and decision making out of the hands of individual workers, using efficiency experts to direct the methods and even the movements of workers. The quotes below show how Taylor (1911) himself described the application of Scientific Management in the production of steel.

Taylor described his interaction with a worker he referred to as Schmidt (based on an actual worker, Henry Noll) in the following way. "The task before us, then, narrowed itself down to getting Schmidt to handle 47 tons of pig iron per day and making him glad to do it." This was done as follows. Schmidt was called out from among the gang of pig-iron handlers and talked to somewhat in this way: "Schmidt, are you a high-priced man?" "Vell, I don't know vat you mean." "Oh yes, you do. What I want to know is whether you are a high-priced man or not." "Vell, I don't know vat you mean." "Oh, come now, you answer my questions. What I want to find out is whether you are a high-priced man or one of these cheap fellows here. What I want to find out is whether you want to earn \$1.85 a day or whether you are satisfied with \$1.15, just the same as all those cheap fellows are getting." ... "Now come over here. You see that pile of pig iron?" "Yes." "You see that car?" "Yes." "Well, if you are a high-priced man, you will load that pig iron on that car tomorrow for \$1.85. ...You know just as well as I do that a high-priced man has to do exactly as he's told from morning till night. ...Well, if you are a high-priced man, you will do exactly as this man tells you tomorrow, from morning till night. When he tells you to pick up a pig and walk, you pick it up and you walk, and when he tells you to sit down and rest, you sit down. You do that right straight through the day. And what's more, no back talk."

Performance Management does not take the condescending tone Taylor used in his description of the workman Schmidt, but it takes one of the key concepts of Scientific Management to heart—that is, treating the individual employee as something to be managed and controlled. The role of the supervisor is similar under both systems—that is, to enforce the directions that are handed down from above by top management (in performance management) or by an efficiency expert (in Scientific Management). The tools are different, direct instruction (Scientific Management) versus frequent feedback (performance management), but the goal in each case is to make sure that employees conform to the plans and procedures that are provided by the efficiency expert or dictated by the strategic goals of the organization.

Every type of supervision or management involves influencing the behavior of one's subordinates, and the notion of maintaining some level of control over the behaviors of employees, with the goal of improving the efficiency or performance of the organization, is hardly unique to Scientific Management or Performance Management. What is unique to both systems is the reliance on top-down control as opposed to methods of supervision, coaching, or management that devolve responsibility to lower levels of the organizations, supporting the autonomy of workers in making important decisions about how to perform their jobs.

3 | The Tools of Performance Management

Performance management systems vary in their specifics, but they share three key tools: (1) cascading goals—performance goals of individuals, work groups, departments, and divisions should all flow from the broad strategic goals of the organization, and there should be strong alignment between the goals of every person and every unit within an organization and the broad strategic goals chosen by top management; (2) the development of detailed performance plans to translate these goals into behaviors; and (3) the use of frequent, informal feedback to ensure that the work behaviors of each employee are consistent with these plans and goals (Aguinis 2019; Murphy et al. 2018; Pulakos et al. 2008). All of these, but especially the call for more frequent feedback, have the potential to create serious problems when they are applied to managing performance.

3.1 | From Strategy to Goals and Job Descriptions

It is useful to look in some detail at how individual job performance goals are brought into line with the strategic goals of organizations. Aguinis (2109) suggests that each unit in an organization should tailor its goals so that they support and advance the strategic goals of the organization. The process of bringing individual performance goals in line with the strategic goals of the organization starts with the job description. That is, alignment is achieved by tailoring jobs with each unit of the organization so that they contribute directly to the goals of that unit. Unit-level goals, in turn, are set with reference to the strategic goals of the organization. So, you might first make sure the goals of each division are aligned with the strategic goals of the organization; then make sure that department-level goals are aligned with division goals; then make sure that each unit within that

department pursues goals that are aligned with department-level goals; and finally modify job descriptions, if necessary, to assure that they are consistent with the goals of the workgroup or unit.

Other authors (e.g., Pulakos et al. 2008; Rao and Rao 2016) suggest directly determining performance goals that are maximally aligned with the broad strategic goals of organizations, without necessarily changing the descriptions or definitions of the job each employee holds. According to these authors, a crucial first step in performance management is the creation of concrete performance plans—that is, outlining the activities each employee is expected to undertake to maximize their contribution to the goals of the organization. Rao and Rao (2016) also suggest that a crucial part of performance management is identifying and developing the competencies needed to execute performance plans.

Aguinis (2023) provides the most detailed description of the processes involved in implementing performance management, incorporating key concepts from other important texts and articles that describe performance management (e.g., Buckingham and Goodall 2015; DeNisi and Murphy 2017; Latham et al. 2005; Murphy et al. 2018; Pulakos et al. 2019). I will use his text to describe some of the steps in performance management, but the intent here is not to rely on opinions unique to Aguinis (2023) or to critique his work. Rather, I use this text because it provides the most detailed and concrete descriptions of how performance management is implemented in organizations.

First, Aguinis defines performance as a combination of the behaviors and actions an employee should do together with the results of these behaviors. His text provides a thorough and timely discussion of the multidimensional nature and determinants of performance, focusing on the competencies required to perform jobs in an organization. In this description of performance management, the linkage between strategic goals and individual performance goals is established in large part through identifying and managing competencies (i.e., the cluster of abilities, knowledge, skills, experience, and other characteristics that determine how results are obtained in a job) architecture for each job. Aguinis (2023) notes that jobs often share core competencies (e.g., teamwork, client focus, achieving excellence), job family competencies (e.g., sales jobs may all call for competency in communicating with customers), technical or professional competencies that are specific to specific roles (e.g., accounting and reporting, business analysis) and leadership competencies and suggests that aligning the competency architecture of jobs with the strategic goals of the firm assures the best match between individual performance goals and the strategic goals of the organization.

The version of performance management presented by Aguinis (2023) is impressive in many ways. It implies a level of integration among HR systems not always featured in other treatments of performance management. For example, assuring that employees in a specific job have the appropriate knowledge, skills, experience, etc. to perform their job in a manner that drives the strategic goals of the organization requires a combination of appropriate personnel selection (recruiting and selecting job candidates with the appropriate abilities and core skills) and training and development (to develop job-related skills and

provide employees with appropriate experiences). It also implies that changes in the strategic goals of organizations might require wholesale personnel changes, especially if new strategies require new abilities and skills that are not easily developed on the job. Finally, job descriptions should align with the strategic goals of the organization, and changes in strategic goals might imply the need to continually re-examine job descriptions, the composition of work teams, and so forth.

Finally, Aguinis (2023) presents a thoughtful discussion of the process of linking strategic goals with personal performance goals in the performance management literature, but this text is still maddeningly vague on *how* these linkages are made. Beyond a few anecdotes, there is little detail about how variations in organizational strategies lead to meaningful differences in the competencies required in most jobs in an organization. For example, there is surprisingly little discussion of the extent to which strategies differ across organizations and virtually no discussion of meaningful taxonomies of organizational strategies. This problem is common to virtually all texts that describe performance management and should not be taken as a criticism of the Aguinis text per se, which is the clearest and most comprehensive description of processes described by competing performance management texts. He suggests that we can identify the strategic goals of an organization by reading mission and vision statements, but these statements are often little more than a collection of platitudes with only limited relevance to the way organizations operate. If you took these mission and vision statements seriously, you would conclude that almost every organization puts people #1 (even organizations that are notorious for their seemingly harsh treatment of workers), that quality is paramount (even for organizations that produce shoddy products year after year), that they aspire to be the best company in their sector, and so forth. These statements communicate what (Steensen 2014) refers to as the shared strategy—that is, a strategy that is formally communicated to the organization and its stakeholders. He notes that shared strategies might or might not reflect the actions the organization intends to take or the means it will use to accomplish its goals, and that shared strategies often exist as a tool to mollify important stakeholders, to convince them that there is a well-considered plan in place to manage the organization.

Most generally, strategy represents a set of plans for exploiting available resources to create and maintain a stable and favorable market position (Eisenhardt and Sull 2001). When market conditions are unstable, or when unforeseen opportunities arise, strategy can be described as a set of rules for deciding how and when to innovate, to enter and exit markets, and set priorities. There are, however, only a finite number of strategies organizations can follow that plausibly have implications for hiring, employee development, the development of job descriptions, and the like. For example, some organizations succeed by controlling costs, others succeed by providing consistent quality, and still others succeed by product differentiation—that is, offering something their competitors do not. Beyond these broad descriptions of strategies, it is far from clear that variations in the details of the shared strategies organizations announce or the strategies they realize when their plans meet the realities of the environments they operate in have meaningful implications for the competencies required by different jobs within the

organization or the types of selection, development, or evaluation systems that should be pursued. It is unlikely that each organization pursues a unique strategy or that differences in the strategies pursued by different organizations within the same sector of the economy are sufficiently large that each organization will develop a different way of tailoring jobs to align with their strategy.

The broad strategic goals of an organization *can* have significant implications for the structure of organizations. For example, an organization that focuses on differentiating its product from rivals might invest more in product development and marketing than a competitor that focuses on providing competitive products at a lower cost. However, there are reasons to believe that variations in organizational strategy have decreasing relevance as you cascade from organizational to division to department to work group and individual workers. Once an organization hires a number of people to assemble products, the broad strategy of the organization might at most have some influence on the pace of work, the technology used in performing one's job, or the metrics that are used to evaluate; but in many jobs, the tasks themselves and the behaviors involved in executing those tasks are not likely to fundamentally change as a function of the broad strategy followed by the organization. As a result, the strategic goals of organizations may provide little meaningful guidance to individual workers about how to perform their jobs (Murphy et al. 2018; Pulakos et al. 2019).

The idea that the goals organizations pursue and their broad orientation (e.g., cost-control vs. quality vs. differentiation) should have implications for the way human resources are acquired, developed, and managed is hardly unique to performance management, but the idea that the strategic goals of the organization, each unit within the organization, and each individual performer should be aligned is distinctive. It is not clear, however, that it is plausible or meaningful, especially as you move from the top level of the organization to the level where individual workers perform their jobs. Translating organizational strategy into work plans or work goals at the individual level is hard, and different managers will not always follow a consistent strategy for accomplishing this (Pulakos et al. 2008). Overall, the idea of tailoring job descriptions to align with the strategy of the organization is unlikely to do much harm, but also unlikely to make much difference. The descriptions of many jobs should and will be similar across organizations, and to the extent that tailoring jobs to fit strategy has any meaningful effect, it is more likely to affect personnel selection and training than it is to affect the core competencies required to perform similar jobs across different organizations.

3.2 | From Goals to Performance Plans

A performance plan is a tool for translating goals into behaviors. It specifies what employees will do, and perhaps the schedule for accomplishing the tasks that are required to accomplish the goals that are derived from the organization's strategic vision. The idea of developing performance plans is hardly unique to performance management, but the descriptions of these plans in performance management texts (e.g., Aguinis 2023; Pulakos 2004, 2009; Pulakos et al. 2012; Varma et al. 2008) often

imply a level of specificity that reduces the ability of employees to make decisions about how they work to a minimum, much in the way (but perhaps not quite to the degree) advocated by proponents of Scientific Management.

Traditionally, job descriptions have been developed by examining jobs as they currently exist and developing comprehensive lists of the tasks, duties, responsibilities that comprise a job. Starting in the late 1980s, there was an increasing emphasis on strategic job analysis (Schneider and Konz 1989). The initial impetus for the integration of job analysis with organization strategy arose out of a need to forecast the impact of changes in technology (especially computerization) on the way jobs were developed and described, but subsequent developments in this area led to a broader emphasis on the likely changes in the environments organizations operate within and on the ways organizations might respond to these changes. Thus, a job analysis might consider likely developments in the political and legal environment, the technology used in carrying out jobs, or societal norms and values that might plausibly influence the way jobs are defined and performed.

Performance management takes the process of strategic job analysis further, to consider how the specific strategic choices made by an organization might influence the structure of and the relationships between jobs. As strategies drive the structure and content of some jobs, they will also influence the plans employees and supervisors create for performing jobs. The content of a performance plan is driven by the goals and objectives workers are attempting to accomplish, which are in turn driven by the goals that cascade down from the overall strategy of the organization (Aguinis 2023; Pulakos 2004, 2009). Performance plans that allow for flexibility in defining the goals to be achieved and the methods and schedules used to accomplish them also increase the probability that the behavior of the employee will diverge from the strategic goals of the organization, and there is therefore a strong incentive in performance management to create performance plans that are detailed and inflexible, maximizing the alignment of each employee's behavior with the broad strategic goals of the organization.

3.3 | Managing Performance via Feedback

The process of tailoring hiring, development, job descriptions, and individual performance goals to align them with the strategic focus of the organization is, in many ways, a prelude to performance management. Feedback is the tool by which performance is managed, and there are many reasons to believe that it is a poor tool for that purpose.

There are two key differences between traditional performance appraisal systems and performance management systems in terms of the way they use feedback. In a traditional performance appraisal system, formal performance feedback is usually given once a year, during the appraisal interview. Advocates of performance management argue, perhaps rightly, that giving feedback at the end of the year may be too late to do much good (Buckingham and Goodall 2015; Capelli and Tavis 2016). Performance management scholars argue that feedback should be frequent and informal, taking the form of conversations

between supervisors and subordinates about progress toward well-defined performance goals and barriers to achieving those goals (Aguinis 2023; Bader et al. 2021; Pulakos et al. 2008). These researchers understand that feedback can be difficult to give or receive but argue that frequent feedback can be timely and helpful, and that it represents a key tool for managing performance (Pulakos et al. 2008). Even in organizations with traditional performance appraisal systems, it is often recommended that feedback should be done more frequently (Anseel et al. 2015; Northcraft et al. 2011).

It is reasonable to ask whether frequent informal feedback might be preferable to formal feedback given at the end of an appraisal cycle; but this argument often starts with a questionable premise—that is, that performance feedback is likely to be beneficial—for example, that it is likely to lead to increases in performance. It is rare to find serious discussions about the potential weaknesses of feedback as a tool for performance improvement in the performance management literature; but there are several reasons to believe that feedback is a tool with well-documented costs and dubious benefits.

Evidence that feedback works, in the sense that providing people feedback about their performance will lead to performance improvements, is ambiguous at best. Several reviews have questioned the assumption that feedback is more likely than not to lead to improvements in performance (e.g., Seifert et al. 2003; Smither et al. 2005). In one of the most thorough reviews of this literature, Kluger and DeNisi (1996) reviewed over 3000 papers and technical reports dealing with feedback interventions. They concluded that, on average, feedback interventions have a small to moderate positive effect. However, the effects of feedback interventions are highly variable; over 1/3 of the feedback interventions studied had a *negative* effect on performance. Third, substantial positive effects from feedback are quite rare; over 90% of the effect sizes reported by Kluger and DeNisi (1996) are small (d of 0.20 or smaller). Even in cases where reactions to feedback and the feedback process are positive, the effects of feedback on subsequent behavior are often small (Lee and Son 1998).

Several factors are likely to influence the effectiveness of feedback, most notably feedback sign (positive vs. negative; Goller and Späth 2024) and the quality and precision of feedback (Drouvelis and Paiardini 2022). On the whole, studies of feedback suggest that performance feedback *can* lead to improvements in performance, but that these effects are, at best, highly variable, and improvements cannot be counted upon.

3.4 | Why Feedback Does More Harm Than Good

Even if you believe that giving some performance feedback is good, it does not necessarily follow that giving more is better. First, Pierce and Aguinis (2013) have argued that virtually *all* relationships in the organizational sciences have an inflection point, in which more of X no longer leads to more of Y . They cite a number of compelling examples (e.g., high levels of Conscientiousness are often beneficial, but individuals who are at the extreme upper end of this distribution are inflexible and rule-bound to the point where they cannot perform effectively

in many organizations), and while their assertion that most relationships are nonlinear is hard to prove or disprove, their argument that more is not always better probably applies to performance feedback. However, while the assumed advantages of giving more feedback are uncertain at best, the costs of giving feedback are more firmly established. Giving more feedback *may* lead to some gains, but it will almost certainly lead to increased pain.

It is well-established that negative feedback can lead to resentment, harm to relationships between supervisors and subordinates, negative attitudes, and stress (Cleveland et al. 2007; Murphy et al. 2001). Negative feedback leads to lower levels of satisfaction with performance appraisal (Culbertson et al. 2013) and takes an emotional toll that can spill over to have negative effects on physical and mental health (Belschak and Den Hartog 2009). Negative performance feedback can harm employees' self-image (Jordan and Audia 2012); it can harm relationships between supervisors and subordinates (Murphy et al. 2018).

The argument that negative performance feedback can have negative effects on work attitudes, supervisor-subordinate relationships, and even physical and mental health is relatively straightforward, but even positive feedback can be troublesome. There is substantial evidence that individuals tend to overestimate their own levels of performance and effectiveness (Farh and Dobbins 1989; Mabe and West 1982; Thornton III 1980; Williams et al. 2013). There are many possible reasons for people's tendency to overestimate their performance and effectiveness, but the simplest explanation draws on decades of research on attributional biases. There is a strong tendency for people to explain their successes in terms of their talent and hard work and to explain their failures in terms of external factors like bad luck or unfair treatment (Fein 2001; Reeder 1982; See, however, Harvey et al. 1981). There is some evidence that training can help reduce this error (Wiswell and Lawrence 1994), but this training is usually given to raters, not rates, and as a result, training might not help to deal with inflated self-assessments.

Because self-assessments are often inflated, even positive feedback will often be received as disappointing and even unfair. That is, employees who are performing well and who might receive feedback to this effect are likely to believe that their performance is better than what the feedback they receive implies. Feedback that is perceived as inaccurate, even when this feedback is positive (but not as positive as employees think they deserve), leads to negative reactions and intentions to respond to feedback (e.g., Bouskila-Yam and Kluger 2011; Kinicki et al. 2004) and even to higher levels of turnover (Kwak and Choi 2015). Finally, managers can feel reluctant to give feedback when they are anticipating an uncomfortable conversation (Murphy et al. 2018; Wuang & Highhouse, Waung and Highhouse 1997). Even when feedback is relatively positive, supervisors and managers often experience discomfort giving feedback (Cleveland et al. 2007).

In addition, it is worth asking who needs, or at least who benefits from feedback. Feedback is probably valuable to people who are new to their job (Murphy et al. 2018) or new to the

organization (Li et al. 2011). For these employees, feedback might provide useful information. However, the whole theory of performance management is that the first step is to tailor jobs and job tasks to the strategic goals of the organization. If employees know what they are supposed to do and why (i.e., they understand how their job relates to the broader goals of the organization), and they know the metrics they are supposed to achieve, what is the point of feedback? As an employee, you should already know whether you are doing the things you should do and whether you are achieving the desired results. Supervisors and managers might be useful for making sure you have the information and resources needed to perform your job and for removing obstacles to good performance, but you should not need them to tell you whether you are doing the right things or achieving the agreed-upon metrics. If performance goals and metrics are clearly established, it is doubtful whether there is any real need for feedback, and feedback that consists of telling employees things they already know is unlikely to be helpful.

To be sure, there are employees who actively seek feedback, but these are rarely the employees who are most likely to benefit from feedback. The literature on feedback seeking suggests that employees who are confident and show stronger emotional intelligence are more likely to seek (and react positively to) feedback (Dahling et al. 2012). However, the likelihood of seeking feedback does seem to diminish as performance levels decline, suggesting that the people most likely to seek and accept feedback are already performing at a higher level (Sherf and Morrison 2020).

In sum, it is far from clear that feedback leads to performance improvements. On the contrary, increasing the frequency of feedback is likely to be self-defeating. Reviews of the effects of feedback on performance suggest that the effects of feedback are frequently small and sometimes negative (DeNisi and Smith 2014). While the effects of feedback on performance are at best ambiguous, the effects of requiring more frequent feedback on work attitudes (e.g., satisfaction, trust in organizations) and relationships between supervisors and subordinates are not. Supervisors do not like giving, and subordinates do not like receiving performance feedback (Cleveland et al. 2007; Moss, Valenzi & Taggart, Moss et al. 2003). Increasing the frequency of feedback might or might not increase performance, but it is almost certain to increase levels of stress, dissatisfaction, feelings of unfairness, and conflict between supervisors and subordinates.

4 | Is This Critique Fair to Performance Management?

In the sections above, I have characterized performance management as a slightly more considerate (or perhaps woke) version of Scientific Management, which not only robs employees of responsibility and autonomy but also depends on a fatally flawed tool (i.e., frequent informal feedback). It is reasonable to ask whether this critique is fair; or whether I am simply taking potshots at a straw man. Obviously, I believe I am being fair, but why should you believe this?

First, it is reasonable to ask whether performance management really treats employees as cogs in a machine who need to be managed? I would argue that if the answer is no, performance management has no clear meaning. The whole logic of cascading goals is that performance management works by orienting each unit in an organization toward the same set of strategic goals. If this is not to be taken literally, it is hard to see how performance management is in any way different from what organizations that do not embrace performance management do. Do the proponents of performance management wish to assert that without cascading goals, the various units in the organization will normally act against the goals of the organization, or that without cascading goals, organizational strategies have no influence on how jobs are developed and described or on how job performance is evaluated? I would argue that one of the only things that makes performance management different from other things that we would not label as performance management is the concept of alignment, and that it is hard to make alignment mean anything unless supervisors and managers are tasked with making sure that employee behavior conforms to the goals and plans that are derived from the organization's overall strategy.

My critique of the use of feedback as a key tool for managing performance is grounded more firmly on empirical than on theoretical/philosophical bases. There is a tremendous body of empirical literature examining the effects of and the effectiveness of performance feedback, and I believe this literature leads to three firm conclusions. First, you cannot assume that giving feedback will reliably lead to improvements in performance. On the contrary, the effects of performance feedback are very difficult to predict, and the possibility that feedback will lead to decreases in performance rather than increases must be taken very seriously (Kluger and DeNisi 1996; Cleveland et al. 2007). Second, negative feedback, even when it is entirely fair, leads to a range of negative consequences, including conflict between supervisors and subordinates, negative work attitudes, and stress. Third, even positive feedback can be problematic because employees routinely overestimate their own performance and effectiveness. As a result, their self-evaluations are often so positive that your positive feedback feels more like criticism than praise to them. The idea that giving more feedback should be expected to benefit employees or organizations strikes me as naïve at best. If you know that feedback makes supervisors uncomfortable, that it makes subordinates resentful and demotivated, and that its effects on performance are typically small and often negative, the idea that you should give *more* feedback should not look all that appealing.

5 | Alternatives to Performance Management

I believe that performance management systems, at least as currently defined, are likely to fail. What, then, should they do in place of performance management? I believe there are three clear alternatives: (1) going back to traditional performance appraisal systems, (2) embracing supportive leadership as an alternative to top-down control, and (3) placing more emphasis on coaching than on monitoring performance.

5.1 | Performance Appraisal, Bad as It Is, Better Than Performance Management

I have been studying performance appraisal for over 40 years, and I spent much of my career trying to develop ways to better understand and improve performance appraisal. The research literature that has accumulated over this period gives little basis for optimism (DeNisi and Murphy 2017); I have argued that organizations should seriously consider doing away with performance evaluation, whether this takes the form of traditional performance appraisal or performance management (Murphy 2020). A large part of my critique has focused on the conclusion that organizations rarely take the results of performance appraisal seriously. For example, merit raises are often constrained to such a narrow range that the best performers receive salary increases that are barely larger than those achieved by marginal performers. In addition, performance appraisal systems are often complex and expensive to operate (Buckingham and Goodall 2015), and it is not clear that there is much return on this investment. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to give the devil its due. Compared to performance management systems, traditional performance appraisal systems have several advantages.

First, performance appraisal systems provide a formal evaluation of performance that typically includes evaluations on several dimensions or performance, an overall or summary evaluation, formal performance feedback and an opportunity for rates to have formal input into their appraisals and to object to appraisals they believe are inaccurate or unfair. In a performance management system, employees might never find out how well their supervisors believe they are doing or why and might not have any formal venue for providing input into their evaluations. Consider, for example, the performance management system championed by Buckingham and Goodall (2015). They suggest that rather than evaluating employees formally on multiple dimensions of performance, supervisors should answer a few global questions like “Given what I know of this person’s performance, would I want him/her on my team?” or “Is this person ready for promotion today?”. This simplified evaluation scheme says little about *what* the person has done or *why* his or her performance is satisfactory. It also has the potential to place the organization in legal jeopardy. The legal systems of several countries require that the methods used to make important decisions in organizations should be demonstrably job-related (Bernardin and Tyler 2001; Landy and Salas 2005; Martin et al. 2000). Rating scales of the sort described by Buckingham and Goodall (2015) are unlikely to meet legal standards for job-relatedness.

Second, traditional performance appraisal systems attempt (sometimes feebly) to link performance with rewards. Performance Management systems encourage frequent and informal discussions/feedback in place of annual evaluations, and descriptions of these systems are notably vague in describing how the performance of employees is linked with rewards. For example, salary decisions are still made on an annual schedule in most organizations. If performance feedback is informal, how does the employee or the organization know if performance is good enough to justify a raise or so poor as to rule one out? As bad as traditional performance appraisal systems may be,

they absolutely shine in comparison to performance management systems in terms of giving employees and organizations actionable information about performance when it comes time to make decisions about the distribution of formal rewards or sanctions.

5.2 | Leadership

Instead of trying to manage the performance of their employees, organizations should replace management with leadership. Consider the theories of leadership that emerged out of the Ohio State studies in the 1940s (Bass and Stogdill 1990; Judge et al. 2004; Tracy 1987). The Ohio State studies suggested that good leadership consisted of the judicious combination of two core dimensions, Initiating Structure and Consideration. Initiating Structure involves making clear to employees what is expected of them, articulating clear performance standards, and providing the information and support needed for employees to coordinate their work. This emphasis on clarifying and articulating work roles is very consistent with the first major dimension of performance management—that is, developing clear performance goals and plans. It is the second dimension of leadership articulated in the Ohio State studies (i.e., Consideration) that distinguishes performance management from leadership. Consideration involves the demonstration of trust and concern for the welfare of employees. Leaders who demonstrate high levels of Consideration treat employees as equals, value their input, and provide employees with practical and emotional support.

The major difference between performance management and leadership is that rather than constantly monitoring employee performance and giving employees feedback, leaders are encouraged to listen to and provide support to employees. Murphy et al. (2018) criticized performance management for its emphasis on coercive top-down control. The Ohio State studies helped to initiate nearly a century of research on supportive leadership, and their suggestion that performance can be improved by providing employees with consideration and support rather than with constant monitoring and feedback represents a clear way of improving the process of performance management.

The Ohio State theories of leadership are more than 75 years old, and leadership theories have evolved over time; but most contemporary theories incorporate key concepts first articulated in the 1940s (e.g., that providing consideration and support to subordinates is a key to leadership success). The key ideas in six leadership theories that have been developed since the 1960s are summarized in Table 1. These theories differ in important ways, but they all incorporate the idea that subordinates should be given consideration, respect, and responsibility. Some propose conditions under which this approach is best (e.g., contingency and situational leadership theories). However, none accept Taylor’s advice to the fictional worker Schmidt to do what they are told with no back talk. On the contrary, the clearest trend in the study of leadership in the last 50–70 years is that leaders should not control workers, but rather should create conditions where they can perform well and thrive, often by devolving power and responsibility to the lowest possible level of the organization.

TABLE 1 | Key Concepts in Six Theories of Leadership.

Theory	Key concepts
Contingency leadership	Leadership styles should be adapted to fit the (e.g., Fielder 1964) demands of different situations
Transformational leadership	Leaders should inspire and motivate their (e.g., Bass and Stogdill 1990) subordinates
Situational leadership	Effective leadership depends on contingent on the (e.g., Hersey and Blanchard 1969) readiness or maturity of followers
Servant leadership	Prioritizes the well-being and development of (e.g., Greenleaf 1997) team members, fostering a collaborative and supportive environment.
Authentic leadership	Authentic leaders build trust and credibility (e.g., Gardner et al. 2011) by acting with integrity
Distributional leadership	Leadership should be distributed across individuals (e.g., Spillane 2006) within an organization.

5.3 | Coaching

Reforming performance management requires a simple but important shift in thinking. The job of a supervisor or manager should not involve monitoring performance and giving feedback about the extent to which it follows or fails to follow the requirements of the job, as determined through the process of aligning job-level goals with organization-level goals. Rather, the job of a supervisor or manager should be to facilitate performance by removing obstacles and providing employees with the resources, information, and support needed to perform well. We have known for decades that employee beliefs about the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being are a major factor in satisfaction with, commitment to, and performance in organizations (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). There are many ways of demonstrating support to your employees, but burdening them with frequent feedback, knowing that it is more likely to lead to stress, negative attitudes, and interpersonal conflict than to performance improvements, is not one of them.

Coaching represents one of the most popular recent innovations in management. Empirical research on coaching has been slower to develop; Cannon-Bowers et al.'s (2023)

meta-analysis suggests that coaching has a moderate positive effect on a range of work outcomes. There is not yet a sufficient body of research to convincingly test hypotheses about the moderators or the boundary conditions under which different types of coaching are more effective. We still know too little about how to select or train effective coaches, but there is enough research to support the proposition that managers who focus on providing effective support (as opposed to top-down direction) are likely to be at least moderately successful. This research suggests that supporting employees is better than trying to manage their performance.

It is important to note that coaching is discussed as an important component of performance management by many performance management scholars (e.g., Latham et al. 2005; Schleicher et al. 2018). The recommendation to shift from evaluation to coaching offered here is based in part on the likelihood that performance feedback and coaching may come into conflict. For example, performance feedback that leads to conflict or defensive reactions is likely to make effective coaching more difficult. Even positive feedback, if it is less positive than the employee believes is deserved, may lead to negative work attitudes that undermine efforts to coach employees. In the section that follows, I consider the type of research that might be needed to more fully understand potential conflicts between the supervisor's role as an evaluator versus a coach.

6 | Directions for Future Research

At the beginning of this paper, I noted that there was little high-quality research on the effectiveness of performance management. This statement should be amended. There is too little empirical research on *any* aspect of performance management to allow researchers to make confident statements about how performance management is implemented in organizations, how it is perceived by employees, or the short-and long-term effects of performance management on dependent variables ranging from individual and firm performance to work attitudes. The literature describing performance management is largely confined to books and chapters that often use anecdotes to illustrate but seldom use data to describe or evaluate performance management.

The current state of empirical research on performance management stands in sharp contrast to research on performance appraisal. We know a great deal about how performance appraisal systems are developed and implemented in organizations. For example, Morley et al. (2021) examined performance appraisal processes in 22 countries and linked them to variations in national culture, legal and economic systems, and other contextual factors. We also know a great deal about perceptions of and attitudes toward performance appraisal (this literature is reviewed in Murphy et al. 2018, Chapter 10). The same cannot be said about performance management. There is very little empirical evidence describing the ways performance management is operationalized in organizations, or how these systems differ across industries or nations, or how the users of performance management systems react to those systems.

TABLE 2 | Future research needs.

General needs—describing and evaluating performance management
1. Descriptive Research—reliable empirical research on the ways performance management is operationalized in organizations and on organization members' perceptions of performance management is essential to move discussions of performance management.
2. The Criterion Problem—it is difficult to determine whether performance management works without a clear specification of what performance management programs in organizations are designed to accomplish. The criterion space is likely to be multidimensional and to include performance and attitudinal variables
Specific needs related to components of performance management
1. Content and Frequency of Performance Feedback—what feedback do supervisors give to subordinate and how often is it given? What factors influence the frequency and content of informal feedback?
2. Reactions to Informal Feedback- do employees react differently to formal vs. informal performance feedback? Are informal check-ins with supervisors perceived as performance feedback?
3. How do Supervisors and Subordinates Evaluate Performance?—in the absence of formal performance feedback, do employees understand whether their performance is evaluated positively or negatively? Does informal feedback provide enough information for employees to understand how they are doing?
4. Perceptions of Performance-Reward Links—in the absence of formal evaluations, how do employees come to understand links between their performance and the rewards they receive?

Table 2 outlines six directions for future research in performance management, two general suggestions pertaining to developing an overall understanding of performance management and its effectiveness, and four more specific suggestions that relate to important components of performance management. First, as noted above, there is a pressing need for good descriptive research on performance management. At present, it is difficult to say how many organizations implement any form of performance management, what performance management practices are or are not included in different types of organizations, how employees respond to performance management, or how these programs are evaluated (if they are evaluated at all) by organizations.

Second, the evaluation of performance management has been hampered by the lack of consensus about what performance management programs are supposed to accomplish or about the criteria that should be used to answer the question of whether (and how well) performance management works. The criterion domain is likely to include measures of individual performance as well as unit/firm performance but is also likely to include reactions to the various components of performance management. Better specification of what criterion variables should be considered and how they might be weighted or combined would contribute substantially to assessments of the effectiveness of performance management.

These first two research needs described above are aimed at performance management generally. In addition to these two general needs, four research needs related to specific components of performance management emerge from the critiques of performance management offered in this paper. First, too little is known about the frequency or contents of feedback in performance management programs. I have sketched the likely outcomes (mostly negative) of providing frequent feedback, but little is known about actual feedback practices. It is probable that the frequency of feedback is not constant over time, but rather that it

is triggered by events. It is also likely that the frequency of feedback is not constant across subordinates and that some employees receive substantially more feedback than others. It would be valuable to collect and publish the sorts of data that could move these statements from speculation to empirical support.

Second, much of what we know about the way people react to feedback comes from contexts where feedback is formal and potentially consequential, such as the feedback received in annual performance reviews. Perhaps informal feedback feels different and provokes different reactions than formal performance feedback, in part because informal feedback may not be perceived as being linked to rewards and sanctions. It is important to know how people react to informal feedback and how those reactions develop or change as employees receive more feedback. It is plausible that there is some optimal level of feedback and that this optimal level varies from person to person. The review of feedback effects presented earlier suggests that the optimal level of performance feedback for many, if not most employees, is none; but things might change if feedback is done in the way performance management texts suggest. It is important to know whether informal feedback that indicates a need to improve, and perhaps suggests ways of improving, provokes the same negative reactions that negative formal feedback is known to provoke. If the answer is yes, it is likely that the jobs of providing evaluating feedback versus coaching employees will come into conflict.

Third, performance management texts tell us little about how employers or employees evaluate performance in the absence of the sort of formal and structured feedback that is provided by traditional performance appraisal systems. Traditional performance appraisal systems have numerous faults, but they do provide employees and organizations with feedback in a form that can be linked to systems for determining rewards or for evaluating the reliability and fairness of appraisal systems. These links are often weak (Murphy 2020); but there is little in current descriptions of performance management systems that

suggests that they are any better when performance management is adopted. Some advocates of performance management suggest evaluation systems that are vague and subjective (e.g., Buckingham and Goodall 2015) while others have little to say about what will replace the traditional methods for communicating to employers and employees how well each employee performs his or her job or what they do well or poorly. It is entirely plausible that employees in traditional performance appraisal systems do not get much useful information from these systems (e.g., high levels of leniency often guarantee that virtually all employees are rated as above average), and things might not be as different when organizations move to performance management; but in the absence of solid empirical analysis, we can do little more than speculate.

Finally, it is worth asking whether the form of the system used to evaluate and encourage performance has a meaningful impact on employees' perceptions of the links between their performance and the rewards they receive. One critique of traditional performance appraisal systems is that these links may not seem very strong (Murphy 2020; Murphy et al. 2018). It is hard to see how the performance management systems described in current texts will strengthen these links. If performance management systems eliminate traditional performance appraisals and formal feedback, how do employees evaluate the linkage between their performance and the rewards they receive? Like much else about performance management, in the absence of solid empirical work, we can do little more than speculate.

7 | Conclusions

There is little credible evidence that performance management works, or even clear agreement about the criteria that should be used to evaluate performance management systems. In this paper, I argue that the goals of performance management are rarely clear, and that when the logic of these systems is examined in detail, the picture that emerges is far from positive. Performance management appears to take us back to many of the less savory elements of Scientific Management, particularly an emphasis on top-down decision making and the use of supervisors as enforcers rather than as coaches. The key empirical weakness of performance management is its reliance on a severely compromised tool—that is, feedback. We know a good deal about the effects of feedback on performance, work attitudes, and supervisor-subordinate relationships, and there is little reason to believe that increasing the frequency of feedback will lead to positive outcomes.

It is time to re-examine the idea that performance is a problem that can and should be managed. I believe that performance management is a doomed enterprise and that instead of managing performance, supervisors and managers should be doing all they can to support and encourage performance. There are good reasons to question traditional approaches to performance appraisal (Murphy 2020), but the methods of performance management described and critiqued here are not the answer. The idea that performance can and should be managed with systems that depend on top-down decision making and on doing more of what makes performance evaluation so fraught (i.e., giving more performance feedback) does not hold

up to scrutiny; it is time to abandon the illusion of performance management.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

¹Gerrish (2016) reviewed 49 studies that purport to examine the effects of performance management in public-sector organizations, but the content of performance management interventions varied widely across studies, and the overall average effect of performance management interventions was precisely nil (i.e., $R^2 = 0.00$).

²Taylor (1911), Chapter 2, originally published in 1910 as a series of articles. //efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/<https://americainc.lass.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Taylor-Scientific-Management-1910-excerpt.pdf>.

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