

NEXT GENERATION PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The Triumph
of Science
Over Myth and
Superstition



ALAN L. COLQUITT

Next Generation Performance Management

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*The Triumph of Science Over
Myth and Superstition*

Alan L. Colquitt



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Preface and Introduction

Do We Really Need Another Book About Performance Management?

A few years ago I attended a conference on performance management (PM). Everyone was there to learn about best practices being implemented by top companies. By this time, I was well into my own journey to discover what's wrong with PM and how to fix it, and I was knee deep in my own project to fix PM at my own company. I met a woman from a mid-sized hospital system. Like everyone else she was sent there to learn how the best companies do PM and to bring back what she learned to apply it to her company. Her company had no formal PM process to speak of, nor did they have individual merit pay or bonuses or a pay-for-performance (P4P) philosophy. During a break I asked her why she wanted to introduce these practices into her company. She looked at me, confused as to why I would ask this question. I asked her if they had trouble attracting top talent to her company and she said no. This hospital system has a very strong and deeply ingrained purpose and mission, and people were lined up to work there. I asked her if employees were unhappy there and she replied no, employees were generally happy and engaged. I asked her if their top performers were leaving for better opportunities elsewhere, and she replied no, their overall turnover rate was relatively low. I told her it was my turn to be confused. I told her I couldn't understand why she would want to implement practices everyone hated and that didn't seem to work, in a company that seemed to

be doing perfectly well without them. After that conversation, I was hooked and I decided the world needed another book about PM.

Companies that don't have PM processes are implementing them, and those that have them are trying to fix them. It is no secret that companies are unhappy with PM. The headlines from the business press say it all. *Businessweek* called PM a "worthless corporate ritual."¹ The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania ran an article in their business publication with the title "Should Performance Reviews Be Fired?" (The answer was yes, by the way).² Finally, you know your process is in trouble when *The Washington Post* calls it *kabuki*.³ I have been around PM my entire career, and I think the word *kabuki* describes it pretty well. This dissatisfaction has led to an explosion in writing on the topic from academics and consultants to HR thinktanks and business pundits.

At the time of this writing, an Amazon search yields nearly 74,000 results for "performance management" and nearly 21,000 results for "pay-for-performance." A Google search nets some 27 million results for the term performance management, and nearly 300 million results for the term pay-for-performance. There have been countless magazine and newspaper articles, blog posts, white papers, and research reports written on this topic in the past 5 years. It has been a very popular topic in the academic press as well.⁴ There have been entire issues of academic and practitioner journals devoted to this subject. In my own files I have well over 1,000 different articles and reports from nearly 100 different sources. Nearly every major HR consulting firm and think tank has conducted its own research on this subject surveying their clients or members. Some have even formed special subgroups to study this topic further.

All of these writers have their own ideas about what's wrong and how to fix it. Most of them suggest we blow it up or abandon the practice altogether, replacing it with something else. And companies have begun to follow their advice. Some have gotten rid of PM entirely or have gotten rid of key elements (e.g., performance ratings). While it is still early for many of these experiments, you would be hard pressed to call them successes. Companies abandoning ratings, for example, find they have a hard time filling the void. Companies that still want to differentiate pay (and nearly every one of them does) find it difficult to make these decisions without ratings. Other companies are radically simplifying their PM processes by getting rid of ratings and extensive documentation and focusing more on continuous feedback and coaching. These companies are finding the benefits of these changes don't materialize. Their supervisors and employees like the simple process because it takes less time and is less of a burden.

Who wouldn't? When someone sitting on your chest gets up, it feels better. However, supervisors typically end up spending less time on feedback, coaching, and development, not more. Recent research suggests companies are actually less productive after getting rid of performance ratings.⁵

Everyone in the room at that performance management conference that day was looking for answers. Seven out of 10 companies are making or planning to make changes to their process in the near future.⁶ We have been searching for solutions to the PM problem for decades. Douglas McGregor summed up the situation in 1957, and it still rings true today:⁷

I have sought to show that the conventional approach to performance appraisal stands condemned as a personnel method. It places the manager in the untenable position of judging the personal worth of his subordinates, and of acting on these judgments. No manager possesses, nor could he acquire, the skill necessary to carry out this responsibility effectively.

PM is a miserable failure, and the investment organizations make in it isn't trivial. How much time in aggregate do employees and supervisors spend on this process every year? What value do organizations get for that investment? What impact do evaluations of performance have on other critical decisions like rewards, promotions, leadership succession, development, and terminations? How much money do organizations spend each year on base pay increases and bonuses that are tied to performance evaluations? It is not a stretch to say the impact could be in the hundreds of millions of dollars or more for a large company, and in the hundreds of billions of dollars for business globally.

What return do organizations get for that investment? There is also an important human dimension to the impact of PM. Evaluations of performance can make or break careers. I have witnessed this firsthand. Employees get one bad rating and their career never recovers.

Despite its miserable track record, PM is here to stay. Companies, business leaders, and HR professionals still believe in it. Ed Lawler and his colleagues surveyed 100 companies and every company had a PM system in some form.⁸ This was the same result he found 10 years prior. A survey by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) found only 6% of companies were considering eliminating appraisals for some or all of their employees.⁹ Everyone remains eternally optimistic; however, we believe success is just around the corner. Ultimate Software's report says:

Traditional once-a-year reviews are hectic, limited and stressful for both managers and employees. In 6 simple steps, you can completely revolution-

ize your company's performance management process—turning it into a powerful collaborative and strategic tool.¹⁰

PM isn't working. Our efforts to fix it don't seem to help, and we still believe it can be fixed. This is "the PM problem." What I have learned over the past 6 years suggests that "6 simple steps" will not solve it. My own PM journey began in 2010 when I assumed responsibility for PM in my organization. I had been around it my entire career, evaluating it and designing and redesigning it, but I had never owned it. It wasn't long before I was getting the phone calls and hate mail about our process. Employees had strong, visceral reactions to this process, much of which I can't share in writing here. They didn't like it and since I now owned it, it was my responsibility to fix it. So I set about starting to fixing it by doing my homework. I read everything there was to read, I went to every conference and session on PM I could find, and I talked to everyone I knew, both inside and outside of the company. I worked with our organization to redesign and implement a new PM process. This book is a report on what I learned, and no one was more surprised by what I learned than I was. What I learned surprised me, fascinated me, and intrigued me as a student of organizations and as a practitioner responsible for changing in organizations. Here is my summary after 6 years of studying the PM problem:

- We focus on the wrong purpose for PM
- Much of what we do is wrong
- We do what's popular, not what works
- Good solutions exist, but they aren't palatable for most companies
- We look in the wrong places and listen to the wrong people when looking for insight
- We *believe* our principles are right that it's our design and execution that is wrong. We just need to try harder. Trying harder won't help. Our principles are wrong; better design and execution won't solve the problem.
- Solving the PM problem is simple, but it won't be easy
- The previous point is an understatement

I make these statements with all humility, and I come by these views honestly after a lot of study and head scratching about the "eco-system" of the PM problem. Why do we continue to substitute one bad practice for another, over and over again? Why do we believe more tweaking will help when this has been our strategy for decades and we have little improvement to show for it? Why don't we take a more fundamental look at this problem? These questions confounded me and this book describes how I sorted out

the PM problem for myself. PM is fundamentally about motivation and control in organizations; how we motivate employees to achieve on behalf of the organization, and how we focus their efforts on the areas that really matter. The root of the PM problem isn't with our practices, it is with the values, beliefs, and assumptions behind our practices. The real problem with PM is in our heads, and solving it requires spending time "on the couch" confronting our assumptions and beliefs about motivation and control, replacing them with new ones grounded in science and sound research.

Approach to This Book

Behind the Practices

This book goes beyond PM practices. We all have our own mental models and lay theories about how to motivate and control the behavior of people in organizations. We cannot (and will not) fundamentally change PM practices until we change our beliefs and mental models. This book will challenge your thinking and beliefs, and will force you to confront your programming.

Evidence-Based

This book is evidence-based. It places a premium on rigorous academic and applied research studies from top sources where results have been peer reviewed. Other books about PM claim to be evidence-based, but they are light on actual evidence and the evidence they rely on isn't always high quality. Other books and articles highlight the practices of top companies or even a single company, with little discussion of whether or not the success of these companies can reasonably be attributed to their PM practices. I am not indicting this work, only saying that it may not provide hard evidence as to the effectiveness of their practices. For example, would you change your PM process because a *Vanity Fair* article said it caused 10 years of famine at Microsoft? Maybe not. This is journalism, not rigorous research. This article reflects one person's perspective after discussions with insiders. Would you change your PM process if I told you that decades of rigorous research studies have found that traditional PM and reward practices negatively affect teamwork, collaboration and innovation? *There is a difference.* Rigorous research tells you our practices don't work. The *Vanity Fair* article puts a face on this research, and it illustrates how these practices can affect real businesses and real people.

This book looks at evidence from multiple disciplines. Much of the research that makes its way into the business press comes from psychology

and management. One of the strongest influences on thinking and practice in this area today comes from economics. Very few writers and consultants are paying attention to the influence of economic models, frameworks, and research in this area. There is also much to be learned from other areas struggling with similar issues such as healthcare, education, and public personnel management.

Systemic

This book puts the PM problem in context. It is clear from benchmarking research that organizations, leaders, and HR professionals expect a lot from PM. This is one reason it frequently comes up short in meeting the expectations of stakeholders. I will place PM firmly in the context of organization strategy, design, and culture, and will make concrete recommendations about what PM should and should not do for a company. I will then describe why you don't need to do the things PM did in the past or I will help you find a better way to do them.

What This Book Is Not

This book is not about a specific solution or silver bullet. I do not have a new, integrated program or solution to replace PM. I don't think PM is a bankrupt practice that needs to be replaced. Instead, I think it simply needs to be focused on a core purpose and designed well to achieve that purpose.

This book is also not about benchmarking. While I will discuss what other companies do, I will use science and rigorous research to identify practices you should emulate and practices you should abandon. I will highlight companies engaging in these practices.

This book is not a how-to book. I will not lay out a buffet of all of the choices and options available to you at each stage of a PM design effort. I will not describe every detail of what you should do. In some cases, I won't talk about a particular practice simply because I don't think you should do it in the first place. I won't tell you to "crowdsource feedback" for example. However, I *will* tell you feedback is important, but that supervisors should focus their feedback on the work and not make it personal. If you want to implement work-related feedback using a social media platform, that's fine.

Just make sure it is based on sound principles. While there is no grand solution or program, I will steer you toward principles and general recommendations that have merit based on research. You can implement these ideas in ways that work best for your company.

Finally this book is not an academic research review. While this book is strongly research-based, it does not provide a detailed review of all the research studies. You don't need to be dragged through all the details of the research. You need to know what this research *says*. Much of the research reviewed is listed in the endnotes. Where it is meaningful, I highlight specific, important studies and I provide my own commentary on the state of the research. This book is not full of studies and findings; it is full of research implications for practice.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for anyone who drew the “short straw” and is working on a PM design project or is involved with this process inside organizations. This may be HR professionals, HR generalists, line managers, or other HR experts. This book is also for HR experts who are guiding leaders or other HR professionals in carrying out PM projects or responsibilities. Business and HR leaders who are involved in the architecture of the organization's people and management systems and processes will also find value in this book. Finally, while this book is not designed specifically for academic researchers, they may find it useful for three reasons: First, it may expose them to research areas they are not aware of; Second, it may help stimulate ideas for new research; and last, it can help better frame the debate and discourse.

Academic researchers need to play a prominent role in this debate, and their voices have been too quiet to this point.

Overview of the Book

Section I (Chapters 1–3) is about context. You can't change something without understanding it and understanding why it is the way it is. This is the central flaw in the efforts to fix PM today; they aren't addressing the root cause of the problem. Chapter 1 begins by describing the typical PM system in most organizations today—“Last Generation Performance Management: PM 1.0.” This chapter also discusses what we know about how well it works (not very well) and it proposes a new, refined purpose for PM, grounding it in organization design thinking. Chapter 2 puts PM 1.0 on the couch, explaining why it is designed the way it is, and then identifying and discussing the theories and principles behind the practices. You can't change PM practices unless you understand the principles on which they are based. Chapter 3 highlights why nothing has changed despite decades of effort and study. The forces against change are numerous and powerful.

We can't hope to make progress with PM until we understand how these forces act to maintain the status quo.

Section II (Chapters 4–6) discusses what we should stop doing. It makes a case to tear down the primary structure that is PM 1.0, abandoning our old paradigms. Chapter 4 makes a case to abandon formal, quantitative evaluations of performance. Chapter 5 makes a case to stop overrelying on money to motivate. Chapter 6 makes a case to abandon pay-for-performance and differentiation of rewards.

In each of these chapters I make my case using rigorous scientific research, and I provide suggestions on how you can fill the void left by abandoning these practices.

Section III (Chapters 7–9) is about what we should start doing. This section rebuilds PM using new principles and paradigms that are supported by rigorous research. Chapter 7 focuses on goals, direction, meaning, and purpose, the centerpiece of PM 2.0. Chapter 8 focuses on feedback, coaching, and progress, key enablers of individual and organizational performance. Chapter 9 argues we need to change our frame, from seeing PM as a way of optimizing individual performance to one where we focus on the performance of the teams, leveraging the power of collaboration instead of competition. Like Section II, these chapters take a hard scientific look at the research identifying new paradigms and practices for PM 2.0 that are better supported by scientific evidence.

Finally, Chapter 10 integrates the findings from the book and provides a more detailed description of “Next Generation Performance Management”—PM 2.0.

At the end, I hope you will have a better understanding of why you do PM the way you do, why it works so poorly, and what you can do instead. My experience so far indicates this journey will be painful, but it seems nothing worth doing in organizations is ever easy.

Acknowledgments

This book represents the culmination of a 5-year journey for me. I have been wrestling with this topic for the last 5 years and I'm grateful for the opportunity to share what I've learned. While I enjoyed writing this book I'm glad to be done with it. I have always referred to this as my "manifesto," mostly because when I talk about this topic I almost always end up ranting about it. You can imagine my pleasure at reading Sam Culbert's book on PM and talking with him personally about this topic. I realized you could write and rant at the same time. The writing of this book was truly a defensive act for me. I did not want to write a book about PM; I did not have the time to write a book. I had all I could handle with my career and my personal and family life, both of which were plenty demanding and challenging during this period. I did everything I could not to write this book. However this topic would not leave me alone. Every conference I attended, every article, report, and blog post I read outraged me. I felt we were paying attention to the wrong things and as a result our efforts to fix PM would continue to fail. I wrote this book so I could quit thinking about PM.

This book probably would not have happened had I not "drawn the short straw" and assumed responsibility for this process in 2010. At the time I didn't have a lot of preconceived notions about PM, despite being around it for the better part of my career. I was quite surprised when the hate mail started coming in and when my neighbors started interrupting my weekend

yard work to yell at me about it. And although this book isn't about PM at my company, it certainly benefited from my experiences trying to change PM at my company.

Writing this book has been an eye-opening process. I had a simple goal after a few months of owning PM: Improve this process using science. I didn't know where else to turn. I needed something to anchor my thinking and the science seemed like the most sensible place to start, which it turns out made me an anomaly. Most start with benchmarking. As a result, and I say this often, every position I take in this book I come by honestly (he says so humbly).

Needless to say I was very surprised by what I learned from the science and from sharing the science with others. Despite 30 years of trying to change people and organizations, I was still naïve. What the science says and what people do are frequently two different things, and those two are sometimes in violent opposition. People do not simply kneel down at the altar of science, especially HR-related science. Quite the contrary.

I owe a debt of gratitude to a lot of people in creating this book. In the very early days of this work I assembled a small group of people to think with me about this topic. David Futrell, Bill Cowley, and Kim Melnick, and I had many early conversations about what was wrong with PM. These discussions, along with a lot of research David Futrell and I conducted, led me to realize fairly quickly how badly off course this process had gotten in organizations.

This book also benefited from the experiences of countless others who tried to change PM at their companies. I owe much to the loyal members of the Mayflower Group's PM support group that met diligently over a couple of years. My thinking was greatly sharpened as a result of these monthly calls. I owe big thanks to Hank Jonas, Gail Baity, Michael Harris, Scott Smith, Allen Kamin, and several others for allowing me to learn from their experiences and for helping shape my own thinking. I hope I have given them half as much as they have given me.

This book would not have been possible without research—real research. I owe much to the scientists and practitioners who put PM practices under the microscope. I was surprised to find a robust scientific literature to draw on that far exceeded my expectations. There is very good research being done by first-rate scientists, much of it outside the friendly confines of psychology. I hope this book provides an additional voice to their research and I hope I have done justice to their findings. I am especially thankful for my early association with Paul Levy and Deirdre Schleicher. It was through my early professional discussions with them that I began to gain an appreciation for the science behind PM.

I also owe a lot to the other people who are calling bulls*@t on traditional PM practices. Many of them played a large role in this book. I am especially grateful for a couple of conversations and email exchanges with Dan Pink, who ultimately asked me why I wasn't writing about this. I am also grateful for early conversations with Jean Louis Manzoni and Sam Culbert. Discussions with these two people helped me realize that I wasn't crazy, that the science and the practice in many instances were in direct opposition. They helped reassure me that it was possible that almost everyone else was wrong.

This book benefited greatly from early reviews by Chip Heath, Marty Benson, and three other writers and editors. They all gave me very helpful, candid, if not painful feedback on parts of this manuscript (one generously read the whole thing). Any "life" and "color" you see in these pages is a direct result of their feedback. My brother Jason (the most accomplished Colquitt) was also a big help in the very early stages of this project. One early discussion at a bar during a professional conference (somewhere I can't remember) was particularly helpful. I can only hope that in the future he will have people coming up to him at conferences asking him if he wrote that book on PM. That would be sweet indeed.

This book has also benefited greatly from early partnerships and collaborations with people who allowed me to start road testing many of the ideas in this book. I'm glad people like John Boudreau, Seymour Adler, Steve Ash, and Deb Blackman felt I had something useful to say and were willing to allow me to write about it and talk about it. I have certainly benefited from writing and presenting with (and associating with) such great people, and I believe this book is better because of these experiences.

I also need to thank my parents Ron and Joyce, both of whom passed away before this work was finished. I am sad that I never got the chance to lay the finished product on the shelf in their living room. I think they would have been proud. Lastly, I want to thank my family, my kids Kylie, Jack and Corey, and my wife Dianne. I gave up countless evenings, weekends, and holidays to work on this project. It was a long march indeed. I'm especially fortunate that my wife is a night owl, sleeping in the morning while I wrote in the morning. She also endured years with a massive debris pile that was my office. This project involved working with hundreds of articles and reports and dozens of books that I simply couldn't put away until the work was done. I don't write neatly and she graciously tolerated a big mess for a long time.

And lastly, a disclaimer. The views expressed in this book are my own; they do not necessarily reflect the views of any particular company with whom I am or have been associated. If you have a beef with it, take it up with me.