The Thinking Performer concept

In the personnel and development arena, the Thinking Performer is the person who:

1. consciously seeks to contribute to underlying organisational purposes (and therefore understands what those strategic purposes are)
2. reinforces the compliance role of the HR/personnel function (both legally and ethically) when it is necessary, yet fully appreciates that to do so is not a sufficient condition of HR/personnel's genuine added-value effectiveness
3. challenges the way in which things are done, to find solutions that are better, cheaper or faster
4. keeps in touch with their 'customers' through networking in order to understand the business better, reacts to feedback and proactively develops (or contributes to the development of service innovations which yield 'customer' advantage.

The concept of the Thinking Performer: what it means and why it matters

Introduction
Imagine a standard 2 x 2 matrix. The vertical axis represents effectiveness, doing the right things, thinking. The horizontal axis represents efficiency, doing things right, performing. There are four quadrants in the matrix:

1. Lower left: the Lifetime Liability - the employee who neither performs nor thinks
2. Upper left: the Wish-List Dreamer - the thinking non-performer who, if he has ideas, keeps them to himself
3. Lower right: the Automated Bureaucrat - the non-thinking performer who does what he's told and no more
4. Upper right: the Thinking Performer - the 'strategic activist' employee who adds value through continuous challenge and self-imposed improvement goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness</th>
<th>Efficiency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wish-list dreamer</td>
<td>Thinking performer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lifetime liability</td>
<td>Automated bureaucrat</td>
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What it means
The Thinking Performer paradigm reflects a behavioural model of people at work which is characterised by the following patterns of action:

1. The efficient delivery of expected results and performance of required processes - the 'performance' element.
2. Periodic reflection on the way things are currently done in order to seek ways of doing them better (to higher standards of cost-effective quality), cheaper (at lower costs, measured financially or via other means of resource utilisation, including time) or faster (with improved response times and personal/team productivity).
3. Challenges about the things that are currently done, the procedures followed, the
systems already in place, in order to check whether these things/procedures/systems genuinely add value and make a positive difference to the desired outcomes.

4. Clear understanding of and commitment to the purposes behind tasks and activities, so that the 'means' never gets in the way of the 'ends'.

5. Assimilation of appropriate, defensible and consistent ethical attitudes, plus a preparedness to articulate concerns when the circumstances are justified.

The Automated Bureaucrat or non-Thinking Performer, by contrast, is the person who carries out instructions blindly, without necessarily knowing (or caring) about their purpose. This individual believes it to be acceptable to be told that a procedure is justified 'because it has always been done that way' (a statement which, incidentally, is scarcely ever true), and will take refuge in plausible arguments about, say, the legal justification for certain HR actions without bothering to check the evidence. The non-Thinking Performer considers that he or she 'adds value' through enforcing legal and ethical compliance, not recognising that compliance, though a necessary condition for corporate survival, is very far from being a sufficient one.

The Thinking non-Performer or Wish-List Dreamer will privately regard many of the things he or she is required to do as absurd, indefensible, inefficient, even immoral or corrupt, but will say nothing about these concerns even when invited to do so (at process improvement and team-briefing sessions, for example). The Thinking non-Performer often knows a better way yet does not share it with others (apart, perhaps, from those outside the organisation), and therefore cannot demonstrate any opportunity to 'add value' to the organisation.

The non-Thinking non-Performer is a Lifetime Liability to the organisation. This individual neither delivers task performance, nor results, nor improvements, yet devote a good deal of time and energy to the development of 'reasons' (or excuses) why agreed outputs are unattainable and tasks unfulfilled. The Lifetime Liability is a poisonous influence in the enterprise, subverting its goals and its values, always interpreting its vision cynically, seeking (deliberately or otherwise) to infect others with similar attitudes. Most organisations will have at least a few Lifetime Liability employees within their ranks: some have many and there are still a few which have made little attempt to weed them out.

There are instances of all four 'Thinking' and 'Performer' combinations at every level in organisations and within every function. Specifically in the HR/personnel arena, the Thinking Performer is the person who:

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Why it matters
Quite simply, the Thinking Performer concept matters because it is almost impossible to visualise employers that would consciously want their employees to be anything else.

The Daily Telegraph of 29 May 2001 contained an article about a massive culture change at Land Rover's Solihull plant, led by Marin Burela, the firm's new manufacturing director. Staff are being given the chance to drive the cars they make around Land Rover's jungle track for the first time: under the previous regimes at Solihull, the closest workers had got to driving a Land Rover was helping one to leave the final assembly line. In a key phrase, Burela was quoted as saying, 'We've gone from telling people, "Come in and build cars" to having a group of people that are thinking.'

Why has Land Rover gone down this route? Certainly not because they are full of the milk of human kindness. They have done it for reasons which are already familiar to those who write...
about organisations - and which should be equally familiar to those who manage organisations. The arguments have been brilliantly summarised in an article for People Management [Marked impact, 25 October 2001] by Robert Kaplan and David Norton, the 'inventors' of the Balanced Scorecard:

'A century ago, at the height of the scientific management revolution, companies broke complex manufacturing jobs into sequences of simpler tasks for which industrial engineers and managers set efficient work methods and performance standards. Companies could then hire uneducated, unskilled employees and train them to do a single task. Frederick Taylor, the leader of the scientific management movement, called this "simple jobs for simple people".'

Today, this mode of work is virtually obsolete. Whatever the organisation - manufacturer or service provider, private or public, for-profit or not-for-profit - all of its employees need to understand and be able to implement its strategy.

Much of the work done today is mental rather than physical. Automation has reduced the proportion of people in organisations who do manual work. Employees are involved in more discretionary tasks, such as product development, marketing and customer relations.

The challenge for organisations today is how to enlist the hearts and minds of all their employees. Even those employees involved in direct production and service delivery must strive for continuous improvements in quality, reducing costs and process times to meet customers' expectations and keep up with the competition... Doing the job as it was done before is unlikely to be enough.'

To write in these terms is to say nothing particularly new. Yet the evidence suggests that even today the majority of employees (at least in the UK) are systematically mismanaged against even the non-Thinking Performer model, let alone the Thinking Performer framework. Using its Q12 Index methodology, the Gallup Organisation recently reported on its interviews with a national sample of the working population, concluding that there are fundamentally three groups (see What a waste by Marcus Buckingham, People Management, 11 October 2001):

1. The engaged employees - loyal, productive, task-effective, more inclined to recommend their company to friends and family. These constituted a mere 17 per cent of the sample.
2. The non-engaged employees - productive (they do what is asked of them) yet not psychologically bonded to the organisation, capable of being tempted opportunistically by job vacancies elsewhere, instrumentally motivated. This group made up 63 per cent of the sample.
3. The actively disengaged employees - physically present but psychologically absent, characterised by negative, unco-operative attitudes, hostile behaviour (sometimes in front of customers), or a refusal to become involved. These employees formed the remaining 20 per cent.

When managers are asked to agree or disagree with statements such as 'This person is good at his/her job', and then required to define what they mean by 'good', they often describe 'good performance' in terms of what the person achieves (their output measures) and what they bring to their role (the enablers). In many jobs nowadays, a key factor is what has come to be known recently as Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB), namely, the willingness to be flexible and to contribute in ways that are not part of the individual's formal job description - helping colleagues, for example, and articulating ideas for process/system enhancement and improved customer relationships: behaving, in short, as a Thinking Performer.

A reliable (though somewhat crude) measure of genuine employee commitment to an enterprise is to ask its managers whether they would be prepared to allow any of their employees to be interviewed (by, say, a Channel 4 production company) about the organisation and its people management practices, its customer relationships and its procedures. Many would refuse point-blank; most would want to pre-select the employees to be interviewed; some would want to be there when it happens. The only businesses that would be prepared to accept the risks are those which already know that their people are Thinking Performers - and there aren't many of them.
In their relatively new book, The Strategy-Focused Organisation: How Balanced Scorecard Companies Thrive in the New Business Environment (Harvard Business School Press, 2000), Kaplan and Norton show how even a well-formulated corporate strategy is of little use if employees do not ‘buy in’ to it, yet most research on the subject (in the UK and the USA) suggests that as few as five per cent of employees in a typical organisation know what their employer’s strategy is and what it is trying to do.

Equally, John Seddon has argued that ‘People need to think. Why do I do this or How could we do this different or better? People need to be unreasonable. They need to question the assumptions that govern today’s practice. It is not just the leader’s job to think unreasonably.’

A few years ago, in my book Perfect Time Management (Arrow, 1994), I pointed out that people are employed in organisations to do four things, whatever their precise roles may be:

1. Maintenance – that is, keeping the show on the road. Maintenance is an activity which, though necessary, does not add value.
2. Crisis prevention - making sure that things don't go wrong, or that if they do the damage is contained. This doesn't add value either, though again it can be essential in order to ensure that liabilities are minimised.
3. Continuous improvement - doing things better, faster or cheaper in ways that are customer-relevant. This is where the jobholder begins to add value.
4. Managing change - proposing, contributing, energising, persuading or implementing (whichever is appropriate). Making change happen is a key added-value performance indicator.

A final requirement, though already mentioned above, deserves special emphasis. Recent high-profile instances of corporate wrongdoing and managerial misbehaviour have emphasised once again the importance of ethical conduct - for organisations, for directors, for executives, for managers, and for employees in general. The Thinking Performer reflects on such matters and, in those organisations where the core values are taken seriously, will be expected to do so, setting a positive example and expressing constructive concerns about relevant issues. Not surprisingly, the vision of the Thinking Performer is widely misunderstood and frequently imagined to be undesirable. Here are some contributions by putative HR professionals (their responses to a question about the Thinking Performer concept in a recent CIPD examination):

‘This vision [of the Thinking Performer] would not be achievable in my organisation: the senior management are authoritarian and like it that way’
‘What the senior managers say is not challenged. There is little or no employee participation or involvement. People are expected to do as they are told. Anyone who has their thoughts on how to do anything keeps these thoughts to themselves. It is very sad and demotivating’
‘The idea of the Thinking Performer could only be applied to managers, executives or directors’
‘It would cost a vast amount of money and waste valuable time’
‘All the thinking is done at Board level’
‘If applied in my organisation, there would have to be clear guidelines about what was allowed and what was not’
‘In a production environment, Thinking Performers would be counter-productive because of the insistence on strict routines, tight procedural controls and close supervision’.

As an alternative case in point, Mobil over the past five years has become a market leader in its field by clearly articulating a strategy and focusing efforts on key customer segments. This strategy has been communicated throughout the company to such an extent that oil tanker delivery drivers now call in from the field to report problems if they believe that petrol stations are not of a standard to delight the firm’s customers. This is exactly what we mean when we write of the Thinking Performer: these tanker drivers are Thinking Performers personified.

How to make it happen
Good question. Many Japanese companies and firms like Land Rover already know the
answer, because of their experiences with similar culture change programmes like Total Quality Management. In essence, it requires consistent, constant top-down leadership, clear commitment and ownership among managers, people practices that are fully integrated to the Thinking Performer vision, and HR/personnel systems (resourcing, reward, relations) built around the 'select for attitude, train for skill' formula. There is a wealth of experience about 'making it happen', much of it so far unsystematic, intuitive, and experimental. Constructing the framework is a work-in-progress priority. One thing is already certain: it isn't to do with any supposed scarcity of 'resources'. As Gary Hamel put it in 1998 [when he spoke at the IPD National Conference]:

‘Get people to believe that resources aren't the problem. Challenge them every time they say otherwise. I don't come across many companies that are resource-constrained. I find lots that are imagination-constrained.’