



## PMS - Managing those monthly moods

**By Stuart White**  
**Printed in the Sunday Standard**  
**Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2010**

No, this hasn't turned into the problem page in a women's magazine. This PMS stands for Performance Management System and is a curse of a completely different kind but it still seems to induce a similar effect to those monthly hormonal blues. Like the road to hell, it was initially paved with good intentions – eliminate those time-consuming, terror-inducing, annual appraisals and replace them with on-going monthly assessments but what's actually happened is that the nerves and anxiety we felt at the annual appraisals have been transferred to the aptly-named PMS and the net result seems in many cases to have just multiplied the stress and strain by 12. So though there are few critics who question its place in the modern business, there are however few supporters of how it is implemented.

It's so much in vogue it has assumed the mantle of corporate Holy Grail, the untouchable system with all the answers but is it really all it's made out to be? Has anyone put it under the microscope and examined it for cracks? Performance management is supposed to eliminate the trauma of the periodic performance appraisal or annual review in favour of on-going monitoring of the entire spectrum of performance management and development issues - all coming together in an effective, holistic performance management system.

The problem is that we still fall short in communicating what we need and expect from employees. Instead of setting out the performance requirements in words of one syllable with a clear and unmistakable message, insisting on results and demanding management accountability, there is still too much waffle and small print. The clear waters of the message are muddied by much textual meandering around the objectives with references to higher profits, shareholder value, customer satisfaction – all admirable and relevant, but they don't tell managers what to do or how to do it.

The purpose of measuring within the PMS context is not to determine *how* your business is performing but those factors which will *enable* it to perform better. The ultimate aim of implementing a performance measurement system is to improve the performance of your organisation. If you can get this measurement right, the data you generate will tell you where you are, how you are doing, and where you are going.

There can also be too much emphasis on individual accountability, rather than collective results and that makes those who believe that they are paid for what they know, rather than what they do, rather uncomfortable. For instance, when I polled some government officers on the pros and cons they were quick to tell me that despite the myriad training courses, seminars and soul-searching retreats, staff are still in the dark. Pre-PMS, it was simple. You could quite happily come to work without being ever having to account for how much output you would generate. "It was", according to one fellow, "not unusual for people in government to report for work, spend the entire day reading newspapers and then get up and go home "Now", he says "with PMS-prompted reforms you have to account for your actions for the day, week, year and this causes stress because we don't know how."

I'm not defending those pieces of dead wood but it is most important to be up front and very specific about what gets measured and rewarded and why. Not knowing what to do and how to do it is sometimes more stressful than trying to perform. You see you can't perform individually or collectively if you are too stressed. And stress comes from uncertainty. Every day, as society seems to change ever more rapidly, we face uncertainty about our work, our relationships, our health, our income, our age our status, our independence and the roof over our heads. Stress may create a heightened sense of awareness and ignite some short-term action but over the long-term they have the opposite effect, acting as performance and production inhibitors. It's also hard to get something right when someone is looking over your shoulder all the time, literally or figuratively.

We need to ensure that our assessing, measuring, testing or whatever euphemism you want to call it in our PMS is done in such a way that it is more about checking progress as opposed to checking people. PMS needs to move into the realm of how we are doing as opposed to how he or she on their own is doing, examining the collective effort and effect as opposed to the individual contribution and capability. Constant anxiety about your own performance and worry about how your boss thinks you are doing can have catastrophic effects that so inhibit the ability to function effectively they quite simply push you into a non-performing domain. It's amazing how the words testing, appraisals and performance management can send bright, capable managers into a tailspin, and many of them become so stressed they perform well below their abilities.

So make sure that your PMS isn't counter-productive. Use it as a vehicle for the team to record its efforts and achievements as well as to highlight its shortfalls in a sympathetic, constructive environment. Put the pressure and stress on the poor performers and newspaper readers, not your talent, or you'll be heading for a quite different PMS-induced hell that lasts a whole lot longer than a mere few days a month.

Agree or disagree with this? Don't twitter amongst yourselves – tweet your chirps to [http://twitter.com/Stuart\\_Botswana](http://twitter.com/Stuart_Botswana)

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