

MOST PEOPLE AT WORK

# UNDER-PERFORM!

HOW COME? AND, WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT.

*We at The London Perret Roche Group have the point of view that almost everyone at work underperforms – almost everyone!*

**H**ow come so many committed, intelligent and able people are underperforming? People who are unquestionably hard at work and doing their very best.

CEO Magazine reports that 87 percent of CEO's say that they face a more challenging growth environment than they have personally ever experienced before (Chief Executive January/February 2004). While it is accurate that market conditions impact an organization's ability to perform, focusing on these conditions hides the impact of a more fundamental cause of underperformance – the organizational culture. Here are some of the reasons why executives and organizations routinely underperform:

1. **They are not effective in dealing with the daily frustrations, the stops, blocks and setbacks that are inevitable when trying to produce results.** So they "settle for", "make do with", compromise, "put up with" – and in the process lose their capacity to produce the results they have promised.
2. **They are not good at getting others to do what they want** – especially when they don't have influence or authority to fall back on. Yet, very little can be accomplished in most organizations without being skilful in enrolling others to collaborate in your vision and plans.

3. **They are easily stopped when they don't know what to do** – they are not good at inventing and discovering ways to do "the impossible". Instead, they lower their sights or engage in endless rounds of discussions in which people talk about "the problem" without getting to a solution they will act on. Paradoxically, when presented with a "burning platform", mostly by accident of circumstance, people usually do produce miracles – a sharp contrast with "business as usual" results. Evidence that while they mostly do produce "impossible" results when circumstances demand a solution, they don't know how to replicate that kind of performance as part of business-as-usual.

4. **They don't measure what is important** – they don't shape their actions against the one or two key performance indicators that would be evidence of the future-unfolding-as-they-intend. Yet, every executive and organization tracks a slew of measures. In most cases actions are not sufficiently correlated to the measures that are really important to great performance.

5. **They do not express their goals in terms of outcomes in time.** More often than not, goals are expressed as a series of activities. As in, prepare a plan, improve margins, increase market share, carry out customer satisfaction survey, etc. Goals are not expressed as outcomes to be produced in time, as in, "improve margins from 22% to better than 26% by end of Q3 '04"; "improve customer satisfaction from 86% to better than 95% by year end '04".

**And last, but not least – in fact this may be the most under-appreciated and yet the most important point:**

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6. **They are not working from a vision for the future.** They are not shaped by an aspiration or a clear intention that is really important to them and their organizations. Sure they have goals, targets, budgets to meet and so on, but they have long since forgotten – if they ever knew – why these goals and targets are important. Most organizational goals are: "responsibilities to discharge"; the "must meet conditions" to stay in work; the "prelude to even larger goals and targets for the future", if successful with the current ones. Over time, working in this context of "must do, should do, need to do" stifles people's imagination, creativity, and aliveness. Producing results gets reduced to an endless round of doing more of the same with less, and faster.

It may seem reasonable to give in to circumstances, to settle for less than we want, or to compromise. We are skilled at explaining and justifying why compromising is expedient – even necessary. However, the price is high: underperformance and a growing sense of resignation and powerlessness. At these times we, individually and collectively, forget who we are as human beings. We forget we are naturally great at solving problems. We forget we are brilliant at inventing. We forget that the combined intelligence of a group of people focused on something important, more often than not, produces awesome breakthroughs. Our history is full of examples.

This underperformance touches everybody in an organization, from hourly labor to top executives, with consequences being direst at the top. In fact, most executives lay the foundations of underperformance by failing to make declarations about their vision – the future they want to mobilize their

organization to realize. This inevitably means there will be no context for big promises to be made, therefore no call for the "breakout" strategies, structures and actions that would be required to fulfill them. People do rally around a leader asking them to rise to the challenge of creating something extraordinary. Jim Collins in "Good to Great" has provided ample evidence for this assertion.

Given what executives say they want for their organizations and the prevailing paradigm of underperformance, there is ample capacity to increase performance. People need to be supported to shift from doing their "best" in the face of often overwhelming circumstance, to knowing how to realize a vision, knowing how to generate new thinking and actions, and knowing how to overcome the circumstances. People, and their organizations, are at their healthy best when they are inspired by the opportunity to do "great work".

*Dealing with underperformance means putting in place a new set of skills.* That is the obvious statement. Furthermore, these skills need to be incorporated in the daily routine so they become part of life at work. However, the persistence of underperformance is evidence that it is not that simple and that the "what to do about it" is not so obvious.

Call me, Peter Roche, if you are interested to find out more about how to have the people in your organization produce high performance results.

*The London Perret Roche Group LLC is committed to helping executives make real the future they really, really want.*

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