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Operational Clarity

Practical thinking on people, operations, risk and organisational performance

From Steve

Over more than 25 years of working across operations, organisational change, governance, people management and business improvement, one thing I have repeatedly seen is that organisational problems rarely sit neatly within the function to which they are assigned. A people issue can quickly become an operational problem. An inefficient process creates a financial cost. Deferred maintenance can become a health and safety, service continuity and reputational risk. Poor information management can result in duplication, inconsistent decisions and knowledge being lost when people move on.

It is one of the reasons I have always tended to look beyond the immediate problem and ask what sits underneath it. Sometimes the issue that first becomes visible is only a symptom. A missed deadline might appear to be a performance problem, for example, when the underlying cause is unclear ownership, an unnecessarily complicated process, inadequate communication or several people duplicating work because nobody is quite sure who is responsible for what.

That way of thinking has shaped how I have approached different organisations and sectors throughout my career. I have introduced structures where little existed, documented processes and decisions so that knowledge did not depend upon individual memory, challenged duplication, clarified responsibilities, dealt with difficult people and performance matters, managed risk and looked for practical ways of making organisations work more effectively. Not every intervention produces the result you expect, and experience has also taught me a great deal from the occasions when it hasn't.

My experiences outside work have reinforced some of the same lessons. Navigating complex organisations from the other side can provide a very different perspective on how a process that appears perfectly reasonable internally actually feels to the person expected to use it. It can also reveal the consequences when communication breaks down, ownership is unclear, records do not join up or a problem is repeatedly passed between different parts of an organisation without anyone taking responsibility for the whole.

That is the thinking behind *Operational Clarity*.

Each month, I will look at a small number of issues affecting organisations and the people who run them, drawing on current developments alongside lessons from professional and personal experience. The subjects will vary, including operations, people, financial management, facilities, health and safety, data protection, HR, governance, process improvement and organisational change, but the underlying questions will remain broadly the same.

What is really happening? Where is the risk? What is creating unnecessary cost, waste or duplication? Is the process achieving what it was designed to achieve? And, perhaps most importantly, what could be done differently?

I don't believe effective organisations are created by adding process for the sake of process. Good structure should make responsibilities clearer, decisions easier to understand and problems easier to identify. Good documentation should create organisational memory rather than bureaucracy. Good management should enable people to perform well while dealing properly and fairly with situations where that does not happen.

Operational Clarity is an opportunity to explore those connections and share some of what experience has taught me. If it occasionally causes someone to look at a familiar organisational problem differently, ask a question they had not previously considered or remove something that creates work without creating value, it will be doing what I intended it to do.

People & Performance

When poor performance goes unmanaged, somebody else pays for it

There is a strong and important argument that performance problems are often system problems. I have made that argument myself because individual performance is too easily considered in isolation from the environment in which somebody is expected to work.

Unclear expectations, poor processes, inadequate training, conflicting priorities, weak communication and inconsistent management can all create outcomes that are subsequently attributed to the individual. Before concluding that somebody is underperforming, a manager should therefore ask whether the organisation has created reasonable conditions for that person to succeed.

But there is another side to that principle.

Once expectations are clear, appropriate support has been provided and the working environment has been examined, genuine individual underperformance still has to be managed. Avoiding that distinction can be just as damaging as blaming the individual too quickly.

Structure can reveal what informality was hiding

In one operational area I inherited, there had been no regular team meeting. I introduced a weekly meeting with a consistent agenda covering priorities, progress, emerging issues, actions and ownership, while also creating space for people to contribute, raise concerns and understand what was happening across the wider area.

The intention was not to create meetings for their own sake or increase control. It was to improve communication, strengthen engagement and give people greater clarity about what needed to happen and why.

Introducing that structure did not create the performance issues that subsequently became more visible. It made patterns easier to see. Commitments could be followed up. Missed actions became apparent. Differences in contribution were easier to understand. Expectations that had previously remained informal could be discussed openly.

Creating an opportunity for engagement does not guarantee engagement. Creating clarity does not guarantee that every expectation will be met. A manager still needs to understand why.

That means examining whether somebody has the knowledge, skills and resources required to do the work. It means considering whether priorities are realistic, processes make sense and instructions have been understood. It means looking at workload, dependencies and whether the manager has provided appropriate support.

Sometimes that examination identifies a system problem that needs to be fixed. Sometimes it identifies an individual capability or conduct issue that needs to be managed.

Sometimes the problem is the system. Sometimes it is not.

The conversation should come before the process

Formal performance processes have a place, but a formal process should not be the first time somebody clearly understands that there is a problem.

Difficult conversations are part of management. When expectations are not being met, the most useful starting point is usually a clear and proportionate conversation about what has been observed, what was expected, what may be preventing the required outcome and what needs to change.

That conversation should also help distinguish between capability and conduct. Somebody who is trying but does not yet have the capability to meet an expectation may need training, coaching or a different form of support. Somebody who has the capability but repeatedly chooses not to meet reasonable expectations presents a different management issue.

Both situations deserve fairness. They do not necessarily require the same response.

Documentation matters here too. Recording expectations, agreed support, actions and review points creates clarity for the employee and the manager. It also reduces the risk of later disagreement about what was discussed or what somebody was expected to do.

Somebody else absorbs the cost

When poor performance continues unmanaged, its cost rarely remains with the individual concerned.

Colleagues may correct work, repeat tasks or compensate for missed responsibilities. Managers spend increasing amounts of time checking work that should not require checking. Deadlines move. Decisions wait. Service quality can deteriorate and other priorities receive less attention.

If one employee regularly requires three hours of another employee's time each week to correct avoidable errors, the organisation is not only losing the capacity associated with the original problem. It is also losing part of the second employee's capacity.

That cost can remain almost invisible because it is absorbed into everybody else's workload.

There is a cultural cost as well. Good employees notice when poor performance is repeatedly tolerated. They notice when dependable people receive more work because they can be relied upon to complete it, while somebody who contributes less is allowed to continue without meaningful intervention.

People notice what organisations tolerate.

Over time, that changes behaviour. People may stop volunteering, lower their own standards or become frustrated that accountability appears to operate differently depending on the person involved.

Accountability and empowerment should coexist

Good management should not force a choice between empowerment and accountability.

People generally perform better when they understand the purpose of their work, have appropriate autonomy and feel able to contribute ideas and challenge assumptions. But empowerment still requires clarity about responsibilities and expected outcomes.

Empowerment without accountability can become ambiguity. Accountability without engagement can become control.

The aim is to create an environment in which people have a fair opportunity to perform well and understand what is expected of them, while managers remain willing to intervene when reasonable expectations are persistently not met.

That requires judgement because the answer is not always obvious.

Sometimes the problem is the system. Sometimes it is not.

Effective management requires the judgement to know the difference, and the willingness to deal fairly and reasonably with both.

Operational Pattern

Structure doesn't necessarily create problems. Sometimes it makes existing problems visible.

Introducing clearer reporting, regular meetings, documented actions or defined ownership can initially appear to create more issues. Suddenly there are missed actions to discuss, inconsistencies to resolve and responsibilities that were previously unclear.

The structure has not necessarily caused them. It may simply have made them harder to overlook.

That distinction matters. When greater visibility exposes weaknesses, the answer is not to remove the structure that revealed them. It is to understand what the information is telling you and address the underlying cause.

Good structure should make an organisation easier to understand. Sometimes that means seeing things that were more comfortable when they remained hidden.

On the Radar

Employment law is changing. Are your management processes ready?

October will bring another significant stage in the implementation of the Employment Rights Act 2025. For employers, there will understandably be considerable attention on what the legislation says, what is changing and whether existing policies need to be updated. Those things matter, but legislation and policy are only part of the picture.

The more important operational question is whether everyday management practice is ready for the changes.

From 1 October 2026, the time limit for bringing most Employment Tribunal claims increases from three months to six months. The change generally applies where the relevant problem at work occurs on or after 1 October, rather than simply extending every existing three-month deadline. The requirement to notify ACAS before bringing a claim also remains in place.

Further changes take effect from 30 October. Employers will be required to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of their employees, strengthening the existing requirement to take reasonable steps. Employers will also have obligations concerning harassment by third parties, which can include customers, clients, service users, contractors and others with whom employees come into contact through their work. Other provisions taking effect during October include important measures relating to trade unions.

For the current implementation timetable, see the Government timeline and ACAS guidance.

Organisations should understand which changes apply to them and obtain appropriate professional advice where required. There is, however, a broader management question worth considering.

Policy is not the same as practice

It is relatively straightforward to update a policy. It is considerably harder to ensure that the principles within it are understood and applied consistently, fairly and reasonably across an organisation.

A policy may explain how an employee should raise a concern, but does the employee know how to do that in practice? If something is raised informally with a manager, does the manager know what to do next? If responsibility crosses HR and operational management, is ownership clear? Is the concern recorded appropriately, and can subsequent actions be followed through?

The strengthened harassment provisions make this particularly relevant. Prevention requires organisations to think about the environments in which people actually work and the people with whom they interact. The risks in a hotel, college, office, charity or customer-facing organisation will not necessarily be the same.

Updating the wording of a policy does not, by itself, manage those risks.

Documentation creates organisational memory

The longer Employment Tribunal time limit also provides a useful reminder about documentation.

Six months can be a long time in an organisation. Managers leave, responsibilities change, employees move teams and memories become less reliable. Decisions that seemed perfectly clear at the time can become considerably harder to reconstruct later.

Good documentation should not mean recording everything. Its purpose should be to preserve what the organisation needs to understand what happened, why a decision was made, what information was considered, what was agreed, who owned the next action and what happened afterwards.

Documentation creates organisational memory.

Used proportionately, documentation is not simply evidence that a process took place. It is an operational control and a source of organisational memory.

The cost starts before a claim does

By the time an employment problem reaches a formal grievance, disciplinary process, ACAS Early Conciliation or consideration of an Employment Tribunal claim, the organisation may already have invested considerable time in it.

Managers and HR may need to reconstruct events, review correspondence, establish chronology, locate records, consider policies, obtain advice and assess the risks and costs of continuing or resolving a dispute.

Any eventual claim or settlement is therefore only one part of the potential cost. Management time has a value. HR time has a value. External advice has a value. Disruption has a value.

This is why I see preventing avoidable employment disputes as a form of process improvement.

Not every dispute can or should be prevented, and managers should not manage people defensively simply because a claim might eventually be made. Formal processes exist for good reason and difficult decisions will sometimes be necessary.

The objective is much simpler: manage people properly in the first place.

Clear expectations, timely communication, appropriate support, consistent, fair and reasonable decision-making, proportionate documentation and clear ownership will not remove every employment problem. They can, however, reduce the likelihood that an ordinary management issue develops into an unnecessarily complicated organisational dispute.

October's legislative changes are therefore an opportunity to review more than policies. They are an opportunity to ask whether what happens in practice genuinely reflects what those policies say should happen.

Questions Worth Asking

- 01 If a management decision made today were questioned six months from now, could your organisation clearly reconstruct what happened, what information was considered and why the decision was made?

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- 02 When somebody is not performing as expected, how confident are you that the organisation distinguishes between an individual performance issue and a problem created by unclear expectations, inadequate support, poor processes or the wider working environment?
 - 03 Do managers have difficult conversations early enough, or are problems being accommodated, worked around or discussed elsewhere until formal intervention becomes unavoidable?
 - 04 When responsibility crosses different functions, such as HR and operational management, is somebody clearly accountable for ensuring the issue is followed through from beginning to end?
 - 05 Where people regularly compensate for weak performance, inefficient processes or unclear ownership, do you know how much time and organisational capacity is being consumed by work that should not need to happen?
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Closing Thought

Good organisations are not created by process alone. They are built through clear expectations, sound judgement, appropriate challenge, good communication and people taking responsibility for what happens next.

Processes should support those things, not substitute for them.

When something is not working, greater clarity often begins with a simple question: is the problem really where it first appears to be, or is something underneath it creating the outcome?

Sometimes asking that question is where improvement starts.

For more thinking on operational leadership, organisational performance, governance and improvement, explore my latest
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