

The backstage of performance

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Abstract

While performance is the main interest in competitive environments, due attention must be given to the ‘backstage’ work that makes it happen.

1 Introduction

Performance (Perdicoúlis, 2013) typically refers to the achieved outcomes, which often overshadow the efforts made behind the scenes. To appreciate what ‘makes or breaks’ performance, let us take a look at the ‘backstage’ from the operational (§ 2) and strategic (§ 3) perspectives.

2 Operational perspective

Executives are chiefly concerned with producing intended outcomes, by which they will be assessed. Hence, they must know well what they are after, and trust their own conduct (Figure 1).

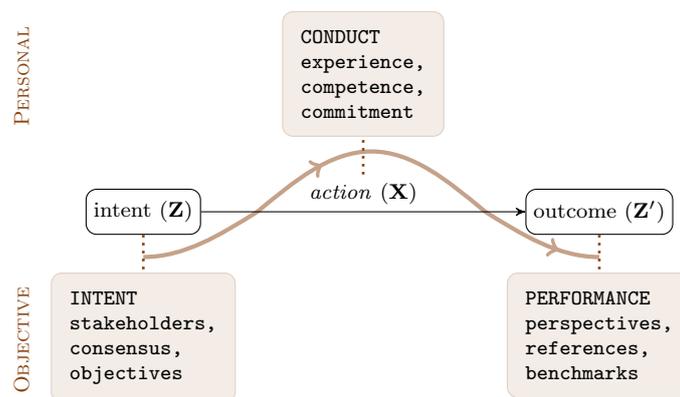


FIGURE 1 Workflow of the operational perspective; the shaded boxes contain phases (in uppercase) and associated personal and objective factors (v. § 4)

One of the revelations of the backstage view is that the action (i.e. the conduct phase) requires *inter alia* experience, competence, and commitment. Such personal factors, associated with the operator, are crucial for achieving good outcomes and are highly sought after upon recruitment — but still remain hard to ‘prove’, especially to those seeking numerical facts.

3 Strategic perspective

The strategic perspective is more extensive (Figure 2), and thus more laborious. In contrast to its operational counterpart, the strategic perspective runs no risk of ‘bad performance’: if the outcome (Z') of a given action (X) appears to be not satisfactory, there is always the opportunity to go back to the ‘drawing board’ (e.g. resolution phase) and prepare a new proposal for action.

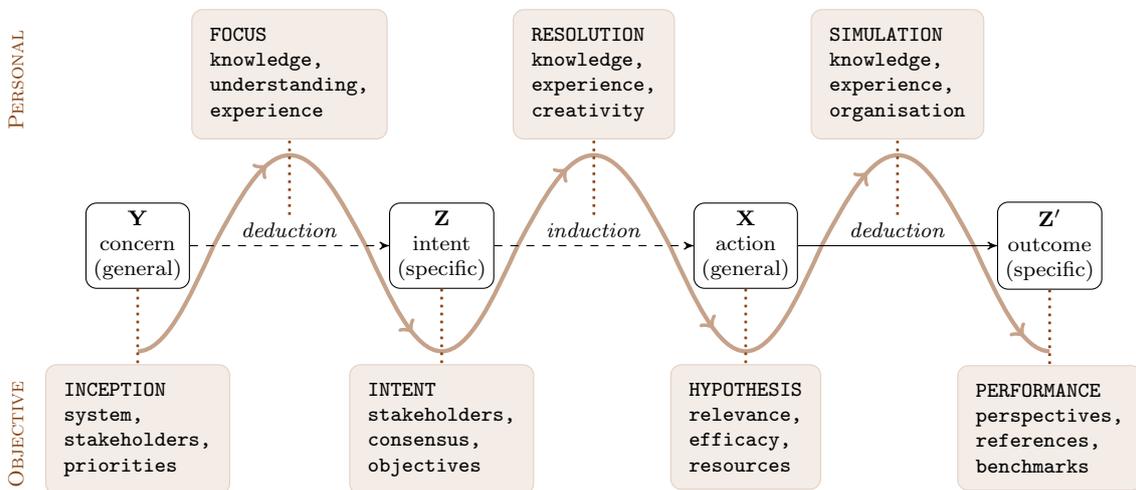


FIGURE 2 Workflow of the strategic perspective; the shaded boxes contain phases (in uppercase) and associated personal and objective factors (v. § 4)

The virtue of the strategic perspective lies not in its innocuous nature, but in its wider scope: it involves more analytic, formal, and extended reasoning (e.g. concerns, priorities, stakeholders) and thus gives a fair opportunity to intelligence¹ in the preparation of options for action (X). Even so, this intelligence depends on the personal qualities of the planner(s).

4 Discussion

Conceptually, performance² refers to the degree of accomplishment of a single task or a full operation, in which case it is synonymous with *effectiveness* — i.e. the degree to which an effort is successful in producing the intended outcome. However, when the use of resources comes into account (e.g. time, money, materials, work), then performance becomes synonymous with *efficiency*, or the state of achieving the best outcome with the least resources (Perdicoulis, 2014a).

The operational and strategic perspectives are alternative, but complementary: the former (Figure 1) has a narrower scope, as suits its practical or applied nature, while the latter (Figure 2) has a

¹The ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills — from *inter* [L], between + *legere* [L], to choose.

²From *par* [F], through, to completion + *fournir* [F], to furnish, provide.

wider scope, as befits the theoretical³ capacity for strategic study. Both perspectives are essential for thorough planning⁴ and, consequently, good performance, and the coordination between them needs firm teamwork.

As competitive endeavours focus on outcomes, most of the backstage work is kept out of view or explicit consideration. Consequently, there is little shared experience about the assessment of intents, resolutions, stakeholders, or the achievement of consensus and — more importantly — the factors that affect their quality. Explicit analysis and experimentation are highly welcome, and capable of creating a new ‘explicit planning’ culture (Perdicoulis, 2010). A sign of encouragement is that the induction–deduction sequences observed in the strategic perspective (Figure 2) are common in scientific protocols (Perdicoulis, 2014b), so those with scientific training should be at ease with these ‘difficult’ undertakings of reasoning.

At least in principle, though, the backstage view of performance enhances the resolution of information for the hiring and/ or promotion of employees — e.g. executives and administrators. Their assessment can extend beyond the mainstream thinking based on outcomes, and venture into personality (e.g. willingness, attitude) as well as culture, competences, and principles. Such *personal* factors, relating to people (e.g. planner, executive), together with *objective* factors, relating to the procedure (e.g. state of affairs, priorities, potential solutions), are indicated in the workflow phases of Figures 1 and 2. These factors are merely listed, without any mention of causal relationships between them or with the workflow. Capturing alternative mental models of how the personal and objective factors shape performance is a challenging idea, and indicated for future work.

5 Conclusion

Outcome-based performance is underpinned by a great deal of backstage work. Even though not directly visible or valued, the ‘backstage’ is crucial to understanding and enhancing performance, so it should be highlighted (e.g. pointed out, studied) in both the operational and strategic perspectives, with the participation of all stakeholders — or at least the assessors and the assessed.

References

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³From θεωρεῖν [Gk], to look at (from a distance) — e.g. θεωρός [Gk], spectator.

⁴*Sensu lato*, planning is practically ‘preparation’, albeit with some experienced care.