FIVE PITFALLS AND SOLUTIONS OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN A SELECTED SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY DURING COVID-19

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Abstract: This paper aims to establish the pitfalls of performance management (PM) in a selected South African Higher Education Institution (HEI) during the Covid-19 pandemic and suggest a strategic way forward. It adopted a quick review of documents in the South African HEI to identify the pitfalls. Rigid performance planning and poor timing of feedback in uncertain times, weak performance feedback culture, the performance process of accountability with lip service to employee growth and development, misperceptions of HR as the center of PM in disruptive times and lack of compassionate leadership to drive performance are the five pitfalls of PM. The identified pitfalls expose the cardinal weaknesses and offer an opportunity to transform PM in the selected South African HEI by embedding agility, integrating coaching and building a performance feedback culture. It is recommended that the South African HEI adopt a non-linear and fluid PM process, centralizing ongoing conversations and coaching for performance, employee development and organizational success. A framework for agile, continuous PM, which provides the wayward in a South African HEI, is proposed.

Keywords: pitfalls of performance management, agile performance management, performance management, higher education, agile performance management cycle.

JEL Classification: M120.

1 Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to work, the worker and the workplace, creating challenges in managing employees' performance in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in many countries, including South Africa (Kele and Mzileni, 2021). Lues, Padayachee, and de Jager (2020, p.1) are explicit that no "single event has challenged the university policy, authority, administrative and managerial structures more than the impacts of COVID-19", ultimately imposing a new norm on technology-mediated teaching, learning and working. Wigert and Barrett (2020, p.1) contend that the "COVID-19 pandemic has thrown performance management (PM) systems into chaos" and that there is a serious need for a system that is adaptive, responsive and calibrated to the new workplace.

While achieving academic and operational continuity in the 26 South African universities during the disruption by the Covid-19 pandemic is a cause for celebration, some are unhappy. Some university employees are dissatisfied and frustrated by how their respective line managers evaluated their performance in the South African HEIs during the Covid-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, the intriguing question is: what pitfalls of PM are conspicuous during the Covid-19 pandemic in the South African HEIs?

Dissatisfaction with PM by both managers and employees is at an all-time high during Covid-19 pandemic. Contemporary scholars and PM practitioners have three instructive issues on this phenomenon during the Covid-19 pandemic. First, the value of PM is under increasing scrutiny during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, Mike Falahee, CEO of Marygrove Awning Company in Michigan, questions, "how can we review someone who can't do their job the way they're accustomed to?" (O'Connell, 2020, p.1).

In a different vein, Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021b) suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic is the time to strengthen rather than abandon PM. White (2021) is explicit that PM is important to consistently monitor and manage workplace performance and see potential future problems. PM helps to communicate

a firm's strategic direction, collect valuable performance data, and provide critical feedback to individuals and workgroups in disruptive times. This resonates with the view that PM is "a continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals and workgroups and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organization" (Aguinis, 2019, p.8).

Some scholars and practitioners see the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to transform PM. Armstrong and Owen (2021, p.1) assert that PM needs to change because "by engaging employees only periodically, this method disengages for most of the year, resulting in an impoverished and unreliable data set".

Given the disruptions, how does a South African HEI conduct PM fairly, reasonably and effectively in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) context when no one is working in their usual ways? Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021, p.210) focus on the personal level of leaders to depict the impact of disruption by revealing that leaders in the HEIs in South Africa presented "stoic facades of bravery and strength" while "fearing for their own and their loved ones' safety from infection" during the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the professional level, university employees and managers face the challenge of doing more work with fewer resources and ensuring equity in the institutional response to the unprecedented disruption (Lawack, 2020). The resource inequalities in South Africa affect performance at the institutional and individual-level (e.g. student, employee, academic, highly disadvantaged Institution (HDA) in the university world (Kele and Mzileni, 2021)).

Second, PM is one of the critical tools of managerialism, touted as a panacea in the HEIs. This tool reinforces the notion that what gets measured is what gets done (Kakkar, et al., 2020). Managers emphasize setting measurable targets in well-defined output (e.g. the number of graduates per program, gender, etc.). However, critics highlight that performance measurement excludes less visible but critical qualitative outcomes in HEIs. PM "is a poorly understood and often underutilized talent management function that can help organizations navigate crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic" (Aguinis and Burgi-Tian, 2021, p.234).

Lastly, not every university in South Africa has a formalized process and policy of PM, which all employees use. For example, Musakuro (2022) found that a certain South African HEI only use PM for senior executive and encourage employees to engage in PM for developmental purpose and on an ad-hoc basis. Thus, there are problems with PM execution in the HEIs.

The scholarly lacuna is the limited research which explores PM in the disrupted world of work, including universities (e.g. Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning, remote and mobile work models) during the Covid-19 pandemic (Brown, et al., 2019). Consequently, HR practitioners and policymakers in many HEIs lack timely research evidence and guidance (e.g. rapid literature review) on the topical challenges of PM during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study aims to identify the pitfalls of PM in a selected South African HEI during the Covid-19 pandemic and suggest a strategic way forward. This study is valuable as it does not only bring together the pitfalls of PM during the Covid-19 pandemic in a South African HEI but applies PM to all employees. There is also a call for HR practitioners and university leaders to reconceptualize PM and provide a strategic way forward which addresses the identified pitfalls in a South African HEI. In pursuit of the aim, the paper presents the identified five pitfalls and solutions in the Covid-19 era. After that, it proposes an agile and continuous PM cycle which addresses the identified pitfalls and provides the way forward for the South African HEI and other institutions facing similar challenges.

2 Five Pitfalls Identified and Solutions in the South African HEIs

2.1 Pitfall #1: Inflexible performance planning and timing of feedback for uncertain times

The pitfall of rigid performance planning is manifest in five different ways, which are as follows: set annual performance goals and forget mindset; lack of adaptation of performance metrics to suit appropriate disruptive time; an individual-focused performance which fails to recognize teamwork explicitly; and lack

of regular performance check-ins to review and update near-term goals.

2.1.1 Set annual performance goals and forget mindset

The pitfall labelled as "the set performance goals and forget mindset" depicts the linear approach in which individual performance goal setting is separate from formal review. This pitfall surmises the practice that once the line manager and employee agree upon the objectives and measures, they are locked and not open for change and discussion until a formal review.

The negative implication of this rigid view of performance goals is that employees and line managers in the South African HEIs are disengaged with performance during Covid-19. Line managers missed many opportunities for forward-looking conversations between goal setting and final review to coach, motivate and correct employees before it is too late. In this way, line managers could not learn more about employee concerns until the time of performance review.

On the other hand, employees in the South African HEI missed regular opportunities to hear from their managers about how they excelled or should strive to improve when WFH. Consequently, employees worked on performance goals that were out of step with reality and incentive structures were not revised in response to the disruptive times. A performance goal-based approach is only meaningful and effective when performance expectations, outcome indicators and incentives are clear, regularly updated and explicitly agreed upon (Chandel, 2016).

One possible solution to this pitfall is setting near-term goals to be accomplished in a short cycle and morph as conditions change. An agile mindset is imperative for line managers and employees to welcome and plan for change rather than lock goals in an annual process, excluding change (Korn, 2021). Near-term goals in successive short cycles are the opposite of the annual goal set for achievement in a longer time frame. Near-term goals encourage line managers and employees in South African HEIs to expect changes and look for opportunities to pivot if necessary.

The annual or biannual performance appraisal promotes "saving up" of feedback for the formal appraisal meeting (Rath, 2018). Near-term goals rely on timely feedback, mindful that feedback has little impact on employees and the organization when too much time passes between the event and the feedback being given. Agile near-term goals are a solution to inflexible goal setting in the South African HEI.

2.1.2 Lack of adaptation of performance metrics to suit disruptive times

The failure to adapt and apply appropriate performance metrics is a pitfall, mainly when Covid-19 caused unprecedented disruption in the South African HEI. Officially, the South African HEI did not revise the usual performance metrics. Instead, line managers transferred the performance metrics to evaluate employee performance during an institutional crisis. Covid-19 disrupted work, workers, and the workplace, and there was a need to adapt performance metrics used in the South African HEI. Leaders in South African HEI were also disrupted by Covid-19 pandemic in multiple ways (Kele and Mzileni, 2021).

For example, the nonavailability of traditional techniques such as "management by walking around", "open door policy" and lack of in-person social influence disrupted the work of leaders in many South African HEIs. As employees WFH, leaders could not observe the execution of tasks by employees. In addition, leaders had challenges addressing teams' social-emotional needs in the virtual working environment during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. maintaining team culture, managing social isolation, loneliness, and bonding with new employees) (Sigahi, et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic also disrupted employees and students in the South African HEI.

Notably, leaders and employees had to learn new ways of working, creating and meeting needs in a virtual and hybrid social environment (Du Plessis, et al., 2022). Given the disruptions in the South African HEI, holding employees to the usual performance standards seems unfair when circumstances are no longer the same.

Lack of clarity on the scope of adaptation or change in performance expectations and metrics is a pitfall

in PM when employees work in unusual ways in a crisis environment. Performance review conducted in the South African HEI during the Covid-19 premised on performance metrics suitable for business-as-usual scenarios reveals how some leaders emphasize the mechanical rather than the humane side of PM. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed the failure to adapt or problems of using inappropriate performance metrics at the employee level during disruptive times.

At the university level, HEIs in South Africa revised institutional priorities. They created new mantras such as #savelife, #savingtheacademicyear and #nostudentbehind (Lawack, 2020; Kele and Mzileni, 2021; Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021). At the employee level, there were no conversations to revise performance goals and metrics, particularly between the line managers and employees in the selected university.

Changing performance metrics is pivotal in setting expectations and clarifying for employees the more appropriate and new behaviors in rhythm with new and emergent work challenges (Kanyangale and Zvarevashe, 2013). There were instances when the South African HEI encouraged employees to copy or edit previous performance agreements. This practice is inconsistent with the view that line managers and employees are agile and plan, anticipate and welcome changes in performance objectives and priorities as work changes.

One of the possible solutions to the pitfall of using inappropriate metrics or failure to adapt performance metrics is the adoption of continuous review and update of agile performance goals and KPI through regular check-ins by line managers and employees to reflect changes in work and behaviors necessary to excel. Ngcamu (2021, p.95) advises leaders in African HEIs to use agile performance goals, which are sensitive to change in the internal and external environment.

2.1.3 Individual-focused performance

Another element of rigidity exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in the South African HEI is individual-focused performance without performance metrics promoting team, collaborative work and transparency. During the Covid-19 pandemic, individualistic KPIs and behaviors were the focus of performance agreements in the South African HEI. This behavior expressed in the performance agreement was inconsistent with purposeful collaboration and team-based behaviors, which emerged as critical in responding quickly to volatility and introducing RETL.

Many universities such as the University of Johannesburg, University of Free State, University of Nelson Mandela and the University of Kwazulu Natal quickly created multi-task forces for rapid collective sense-making and response to the VUCA during the Covid-19 pandemic (Du Plessis, et al., 2022; Menon and Motala, 2021). For many employees in the South African HEI involved in these task forces, their performance agreements did not explicitly include team orientation as a KPI.

Furthermore, the selected South African HEI treated the performance goals of individual employees as confidential and not shared with team members. Without transparency, collaboration is difficult as team members fail to see what everyone else is working on and how they did in the past. According to Brown, et al. (2019), individualistic focus within PM harms team dynamics and employee reaction towards their team.

The Covid-19 pandemic has largely exposed the need for the HEI to accelerate performance goal setting towards integrating individual and team-oriented behaviors in rhythm with changes in disruptive times. The pitfall also reveals the need for researchers to explore how HRD practitioners can play a more active role in integrating individual and team goals with overall organizational goals in the South African HEI.

2.1.4 Lack of check-in for near-term goal review and update

Another manifestation of rigidity in performance goal planning is the absence of check-ins to develop and review near-term goals. With high volatility, the pursuit of annual goals and year-end performance reviews risks a gap growing between desired performance and actual performance (Chowdhury and Williams, 2020).

As the Covid-19 pandemic created unprecedented VUCA, the lack of regular discussions on goals resulted in line managers and employees in the South African HEI reviewing old, irrelevant annual goals which were no longer in tandem with the unfolding reality. For example, most of the annual goals set for community engagement were impossible to pursue due to lockdown and social distance. However, line managers and employees still retained them on the employee performance agreement. Sticking to the original goals purely for its own sake is as misdirected as changing the goal at every whim.

Check-ins involve regular conversations focusing on individual and organizational goals, development and changing priorities (Ledford and Schneider, 2018). The urgency to engage in ongoing check-in arises because of the need for timely and forward-looking conversations, which are vital for planning performance goals to keep pace with environmental change. In this way, check-in is critical to avoid drifting of goals.

Feedback at the moment where the receiver's impact would be most significant is essential for revising goals and progressive actions towards the South African HEI and employee-oriented goals. In disruptive times, timely performance conversations on goals offer clarity on both the current results (the "what") and employee behaviors (the "how") necessary to achieve adjusted priorities in time.

Agile performance goal planning and review are essential. These force line managers and employees to engage in ongoing forward-looking conversations that examine relevance, validity, and alignment between near-term and annual goals. Given the limited or lack of flexibility in the South African HEI yearly performance goals, the solution is to promote the practice of regular updates of near-term goals.

Regular check-in focusing on goals forms the foundation for effective coaching premised on regular, two-way feedback. Employees have the opportunity to learn what they are doing well and where they might be missing the near-term goals. In the South African HEI, there is a need for line managers to model agile performance planning. Thus, a line manager and employee continuously develop and attain successive near-goal alignment and review employee-oriented outcomes (e.g. motivation, development, retention).

2.2 Pitfall #2: Weak performance feedback culture (PFC)

The second pitfall is the weak PFC which was more glaring in the South African HEI during the Covid-19 pandemic. Weak PFC has exposed the (a) over-reliance on the annual rear-view of employee performance; (b) lack of bottom-up feedback to monitor check-ins by line managers; (c) weak inclusive psychological safety; and (d) lack of coaching conversation between line manager and employee as shown below.

2.2.1 Overreliance on annual rear-view of employee performance

The pitfall identified in the South African HEI is the predominant reliance on the rear-view of employee performance. Performance appraisal or formal performance review relies on hindsight and infrequent feedback (Murphy, 2020). More importantly, the South African HEI used backwards-looking feedback during the Covid-19 pandemic, which did not serve to drive current and future performance.

Most employees and their line managers in the South African HEI rarely engaged in discussions to check recent performance feedback and the future during the Covid-19 pandemic. There are challenges to ensuring goal alignment, energizing, and empowering employees based on continuous performance conversations.

The use of annual performance reviews by line managers impeded the development of people using timely, ongoing forward-looking discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Zenger's (2017, p.1) criticism, performance appraisal "looks in the rear-view mirror instead of through the windshield and plans for a brighter future".

To build a performance feedback culture, the South African HEI needs to encourage and emphasize the importance of informal feedback (or in the moment) and formal feedback via traditional appraisals or multisource feedback. Line managers and employees must not think of feedback as a tool for special occasions but instead runs through everything they do (Korn, 2021).

Exchange of frequent performance feedback and goal clarity is what line managers and employees in the South African HEI craved so much during the Covid-19 pandemic but was not adequate as they WFH and in the hybrid model.

The key lesson is that PFC integrates proactive, forward-looking conversations on the one hand and backwards-looking feedback on the other. This holistic feedback shapes purposeful collaboration, enabling more employee and organizational agility.

Line managers need to serve as role models to address over-reliance on performance appraisal, revealing the significance of high-quality and regular performance conversations. In a PFC, the line manager and employee have mutual hunger and expectation for future-oriented conversations that motivate and deliver innovation and transformation (Korn, 2021).

HR practitioners face the challenge of moving the South African HEI from performance appraisal, which is backwards-looking and done at a prescribed period, to a more PFC. Performance appraisal is an annual evaluation exercise, while PM is an ongoing, if not continuous, activity that focuses on defining, assessing and developing performance to align with strategic goals (Brown, et al., 2019, p.49). PM must be a more fluid and nonlinear process where feedback is natural, regular and highly personalized. Cycles of conversations need to be linked more closely to the rhythm of an individual's work and relate goal setting to the final performance evaluation (Korn, 2021). Close collaboration between supervisor and employee as feedback giver and feedback receiver is a critical element of PFC. Table 1 reflects some of the crucial components of performance which require attention for the South African HEI to migrate from performance appraisal mode to performance feedback culture.

Table 1. The shift from performance appraisal to a performance feedback culture (*Source:* own research)

Element of PM	From performance Appraisal in South African HEI	To performance feedback culture in South African HEI
Overarching orientation	Reactive, evaluation exercise of what has already happened	Proactive, continuous, driving current and future performance
Type of process	Linear	Fluid, non-linear
Temporal focus	Backwards-looking; top-down feedback provided as part of a PM process	Forward-looking, integrated and illuminating past, present and future; input from the team facilitated by the boss
Timing	Prescribed time in a year	Ongoing check-ins in between goals and final review, cycle linked to the rhythm of an individual's work
Leader of the performance process	Led by HR with some input from management	Led by supervisors and management
Level of focus	Operational	Strategic
Who triggers the feedback process	Year-end review, initiated by the organization	Stand-back review at the end of the work cycle, triggered by the individual

2.2.2 Missing bottom-up feedback to line managers on the conduct of PM

The second element of weak PFC evident in the South African HEI is the lack of bottom-up feedback from employees, which evaluates the skills of their line managers in the conduct of performance evaluation and check-ins. Employees in the South African HEI lack mechanisms for the safe provision of bottom-up feedback necessary for line managers to improve how they give and receive performance feedback in disruptive times.

In the selected South African HEI, top-down feedback to employees is common. PFC is not just typified by giving top-down, hierarchical feedback but also bottom-up monitoring of how supervisors are engaging in performance feedback conversations with their employees (Ledford and Schneider, 2018). Providing regular, honest and effective feedback to monitor, train and reward supervisors for ongoing employee performance feedback is critical in nurturing a PFC during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is pivotal that bottom-up feedback becomes an input into the manager's metrics at the South African HEI.

One of the necessary conditions to develop, embed and sustain a PFC is to enable free-flowing feedback to thrive within the South African HEI. However, without clear policies, favorable conditions and mechanisms, employees in the South African HEI may not feel safe and comfortable providing bottom-up feedback to supervisors.

There is a need for a clear policy which promotes this type of feedback by employees. A broad commitment to shared performance purpose in the South African HEI is imperative to encourage people to seek out, accept and understand developmental input because there is a context and direction.

There is a need to develop supervisors who are hungry for developmental feedback. The bottom-up feedback is salient if the ability to conduct effective performance appraisals and check-ins is part of the performance metrics of supervisors.

2.2.3 Weak inclusive psychological safety

The third element of weak PFC is the lack of an inclusive climate of psychological safety for line managers and employees in the South African HEI during the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, employees in the South African HEI had the feelings of being (a) included, (b) enjoying safety to learn, and (c) safety to contribute, but did not perceive themselves as (d) safe to challenge the status quo, without fear of being marginalized or punished in some way.

One extreme case that depicts a lack of psychological safety is when the HR department instructed staff and line managers in the university in 2022 to complete their 2021 PM agreements retrospectively. As the period was already over, the instruction was illogical. Lack of psychological safety made it difficult for many of the individual employees to openly challenge the illogical communication from HR without fear of repercussions.

A group of academics questioned the logic and legality of employee performance contracts entered retrospectively. This instance reveals a failure to recognize that people improve their performance when given space and time to reflect on current performance and act on real-time feedback.

The opportunity for employees to develop based on real-time feedback hinges on clearly and explicitly agreed on performance expectations between the line manager and employee, timely feedback for action and reflection. Driving performance entails a proactive and future-oriented approach that is open to initiating and pursuing organizational change and employee development of new skills as work changes (Mruthyanjaya, et al., 2020).

The proactive and developmental stance differs from the rear-view of performance, which looks at an employee's past actions within a set period. Psychological safety is a prerequisite for line managers and employees to engage in backward and forward-looking conversations (Korn, 2021). Employees use these conversations to link performance expectations more closely with the rhythm of work as they identify and react to the need for change to influence performance outcomes.

2.2.4 Lack of coaching conversation between line manager and employee

The last element of weak PFC is the failure of line managers and employees to engage in coaching conversations for employee development, which was more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic. Line managers and employees in the South African HEI faced increased discomfort and constant stress due to the pursuit of academic and operational continuity (Du Plessis, et al., 2022). They lacked time for many things, including coaching employees.

Du Plessis, et al. (2022, p.6) observed that busy leaders and employees might view self-care as "a luxury they cannot afford" in disruptive times. Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021, p.209) assert that "leaders in South African HEIs shoulder the responsibility to give employees opportunities for reflection on affective experience and learning and coaching". However, there were few coaching conversations to purposely help the employees build or enhance self-awareness in the South African HEI during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The selected South African HEI did not integrate feedback with coaching for employee performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. The HEI lacked the effort to develop and reinforce the collaborative relationship between the line manager as coach and the employee as the coachee in disruptive times. Generally, coaching motivates employees to reach a high level of performance, realize their potential, and stay engaged in meaningful work.

Coaching needs to be strengthened rather than weakened if employees are to identify and address problems before they become too prominent in disruptive times. Coaching also helps employees understand what is in it if they invest the time and energy to improve. Through coaching, employees understand what success looks like and identify and accurately describe their skills, knowledge, abilities, areas of weakness and what they are not good at. More importantly, continuous coaching conversations are essential for regular assessment, making PM more like a motivational than a judgment tool.

Feedback "in the moment" helps employees know what they are doing right and where they can improve, rather than waiting until the end of the year when it is too late to do anything about it (Brown, et al., 2019). The challenge is for the South African HEI to make coaching an integral part of management with clarity of coaching competencies to evaluate the line manager's competency as a coach. There is a need to develop line managers and team supervisors as internal coaches to pursue this option.

Coaching models must be clear and well-structured with a good cultural fit in the South African HEI. External coaching may be for top leadership, particularly in the case of politically sensitive information or where specialized skills or experiences are required. Focusing on the personalized experience and better coaching conversations is crucial as each employee is on a development journey.

2.3 Pitfall #3: Performance process for accountability and lip service to employee growth and development

The third pitfall depicts how line managers predominantly focused on the process-related aspects of PM for accountability and not for employee development. As a result, there was little effort to identify and act on employee developmental opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic arising from coaching conversations and check-ins.

First, line managers in the South African HEI focused on adherence to the steps, timing and process of setting performance goals and annual performance reviews, which is very important. However, after goal setting, line managers were busy with day-to-day responsibilities. A pitfall was the absence of purposeful interactions for development between the feedback giver and receiver after performance goal setting. Employees could not grow and develop their performance based on check-in conversations with line managers as Covid-19 unfolded.

Some line managers adopted an approach of summative evaluation for employee accountability. Thus, they simply fell back on giving summative and standard rather than personalized and developmental feedback to employees during performance evaluation.

For example, academics in a particular school in the South African HEI who had exceeded the number of journal articles expected at their level of seniority

were given the same lower score on research productivity by their line manager. The line manager told employees that it was only after the verification process of the publications by the university research office that they would revise the rating accordingly.

While employees were mindful of the importance of the verification process, they were unhappy. Employees feared that they would permanently remain with a score lower than they had performed. More importantly, employees were concerned that the lower score would affect the performance-pay progression and future promotion decisions if not revised accordingly.

The employees could hardly understand why their line manager could not use the presented evidence to score them properly and let the verification process validate the score. When line managers trivialize developmental concerns raised by employees to pronounce the process for accountability, it signals the need for feedback givers to thoroughly understand the dual purpose of performance evaluation which may be for employee accountability and employee development.

Line managers must understand that achieving high performance and adherence to the process does not mean ignoring the human element (Mortensen and Gardner, 2022). Behaviors like these compel the appraisee to perceive PM negatively as coercive managerial power to police employee behaviors.

The performance evaluation approach for accountability makes people defensive and hide rather than reveal and confront their shortcomings.

A developmental and humane conversation starts with the feedback giver who can see the person, not just the process (Korn, 2021). Development-oriented approach to PM calls for line managers to provide ongoing feedback for employee development and tailor it to every individual's needs and context rather than disregard employees' feelings for the sake of the process. Employees must learn to seek out, accept and understand developmental feedback from multiple sources. Some of these sources may be peers and subordinates with valuable feedback to drive improvements on a day-to-day basis.

2.4 Pitfall #4: Negative perceptions of HR as the center of PM

The fourth pitfall is evident in the perception that HR is the center of the PM, making line managers and employees feel peripheral and detached from the bureaucratic chores of the PM. The pitfall is when employees and line managers in the South African HEI think they engage in PM as a mechanical and annual ritual for the sake of the HR department. Govender and Bussin (2020, p.1) are fully aware that "for most organizations in South Africa, [performance management] is a bi-annual tick box exercise that leaves managers and employees unchanged either way".

Within the selected South African HEI, some line managers and employees uphold this perception and comply with instructions by HR regarding this tick-box exercise (e.g. establish performance agreements, evaluate and document performance). In the selected South African HEI, the HR department is far from day-to-day operational activities and conversations between line managers and employees at the coalface.

In this way, the meaningful conversations between supervisors and their employees have implications that drive employee performance and development. In reality, continuous performance conversations involving supervisor and employee as feedback givers and receivers are at the center of performance goal setting and all activities until formal performance review. It is crucial for the South African HEI to enhance performance by empowering line managers and employees as the center of driving performance. Giving them the freedom to structure their check-in and employee review sessions between goal setting and formal performance evaluation empowers line managers and employees to manage performance.

This change is significant for an employee-centric PM experience in the South African HEI driven by collaboration between the line manager and employee rather than coercive mechanisms by HR. Practically, employees and line managers are responsible for performance accountability and alignment of shared goals in disruptive times. Placing feedback givers and receivers at the center of performance calls for a shift from perceptions of the PM process as a bureaucratic chore and annual ritual, which is a sheer waste of time by line managers and employees.

The new perception should help stakeholders such as line managers and employees see PM as a tool for employee growth and development. Re-orientation of both line managers and employees on one hand and HR on the others is part of the solution to address the pitfalls inherent in the negative perceptions of HR as the center of PM and its impact on the behavior and attitude of line managers and employees. The critical lesson is that collaboration and meaningful conversations between line managers and their employees drive employee performance, development and engagement in agile PM.

Furthermore, including continuous coaching as an integral part of PM is crucial to force line managers and employees to converse regularly on different aspects of performance. It also reinforces the collaborative relationship between these two at the center of the performance. This integration necessitates the South African HEI to introduce and develop the competence of manager-as-coach.

Coaching models need to be clear and well-structured with a good cultural fit. The integrative approach will ensure that line managers and employees no longer see themselves as busy with work and that involvement in PM is a departure from their regular work. Coaching combined with PM brings the line managers and the employees to the center of driving performance. The integrative approach can weaken the perceptions among line managers and employees that getting involved in PM is predominantly for making the HR department happy.

2.5 Pitfall #5: Lack of compassionate leadership for performance

The lack of compassionate leadership for performance manifests when a binary choice between compassion and performance shapes the behavior of line managers at the South African HEI. The pandemic increased the call for managers to be understanding and lenient with employees as they navigated various work and personal stressors (Menon and Motala, 2021). However, some line managers acted indifferently and lacked a deep sense of empathizing, appraising, and responding to what employees were experiencing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Supervisors and line managers did not like to be seen as weak, lacking control and enabling bad behavior during Covid-19 pandemic when there was much scrutiny on HEIs. For instance, some leaders in the South African HEI treated employees more like resources than humans and pressurized them for unrealistic results and productivity in pursuit of the mantra #nostudentleftbehind.

Line managers in the South African HEI had difficulties delivering compassion to maximize their employees' support and productivity. With resource inequalities in South Africa, compassion was necessary. It is naive to think all employees had conducive settings to WFH comfortably and productively (e.g. some lacked proper office chairs and worked using dining chairs, others from the bed) or endured the back-to-back online meetings.

Despite the unique circumstances and varied ways employees were affected personally and professionally, some line managers treated employees as if all were the same, without regard for individuality.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected employees and managers emotionally, socially, and financially in their personal and professional lives. Masitera (2020, p.6) reported that conditions of social and economic inequalities in South Africa called for acts of care driven by the ethos of Ubuntu during Covid-19 disruptions of work.

Wise, compassionate leadership for a line manager and team leader is not just about showing genuine care for people's feelings, well-being, and empathy during a crisis but also about getting tough things done humanely (Mortensen and Gardner, 2022). Compassionate leaders deeply search for a shared (rather than imposed) understanding of the challenges they face, empathize and act to help employees (Gallo, 2021). In this regard, compassion is a crucial competence for line managers and teams to boost the performance of others in the South African HEI.

There is a need to clarify ways to develop and evaluate managers based on their ability to engage their teams and lead with compassion to enable and boost performance. Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021, p.212) echoed that “the pandemic has highlighted the need for people-oriented leadership with a focus on, among

others, caring, empathy and compassion" in South Africa's HEIs.

3 Proposed framework for an agile, continuous PM

Given the identified pitfalls and solutions in the South African HEI, the paper proposes a framework which pronounces an agile, continuous, and holistic approach to remodeling PM as the strategic way forward. The underlying logic and framework of agile, ongoing PM are presented as follows:

3.1 Constitutive elements and underlying logic of non-linear process

PM is not a linear but rather a non-linear and fluid process with four key and interdependent elements: agile planning, PFC, performance development and performance appraisal. These four elements constitute a framework of agile, continuous PM cycle. In this framework, agility in setting near-term goals requires a more forward-looking approach.

Agility tightly connects relevant performance goals with timely feedback. In this way, agility helps to ensure revision of performance goals and alignment in successive short cycles, contributing to results evident in the final review.

The proposed framework underscores continuous performance conversation and regular check-ins as the bridges between near-term goals and formal evaluation. In this regard, a formal performance review summarizes what has happened to work and the employee in a series of check-ins throughout the year. The proposed agile and continuous PM cycle signals a move towards shorter cycles of goal-setting activities and continuous review of performance.

Real-time feedback and coaching are critical in adapting the course of action and necessary behaviors to bring the desired result. Third, the framework reinforces the idea that the best way to manage performance requires merging the insights from backwards-looking indicators with more ongoing forward-looking insights and predictions (e.g. future outcomes) which arise during regular check-ins.

The agile, continuous PM calls for a shift from over-reliance on feedback from the line manager only to opening up to multiple feedback channels for timely, exhaustive and holistic feedback. The effort to get performance feedback about an employee from various sources is salient to get and use developmental feedback, which is more accurate and comprehensive than the views of the manager alone. This type of feedback is also valuable to employees to take timely action to overcome obstacles as they arise or change when necessary to succeed.

The framework emphasizes regular discussions about performance and provides opportunities for feedback instead of only discussing performance during the annual review when it is late. Ongoing feedback and coaching in each framework's key elements require new behavior, knowledge and thinking to conduct regular check-in to ensure employees feel supported. In pursuing agile and continuous PM, supervisors need to understand the underlying logic and the competence of manager-as-coach and compassionate leadership.

The framework integrates coaching and PM to unleash line managers and employees in the South African HEI who value receiving and giving valuable feedback as part of PFC. As feedback is central in this framework, line managers must be good feedback givers. At the same time, employees need capability and psychological safety to give bottom-up feedback in a non-linear, open-ended, and exploratory process of unlocking high performance. Below is Fig. 1, which depicts the proposed framework and its five constitutive elements in a non-linear approach.

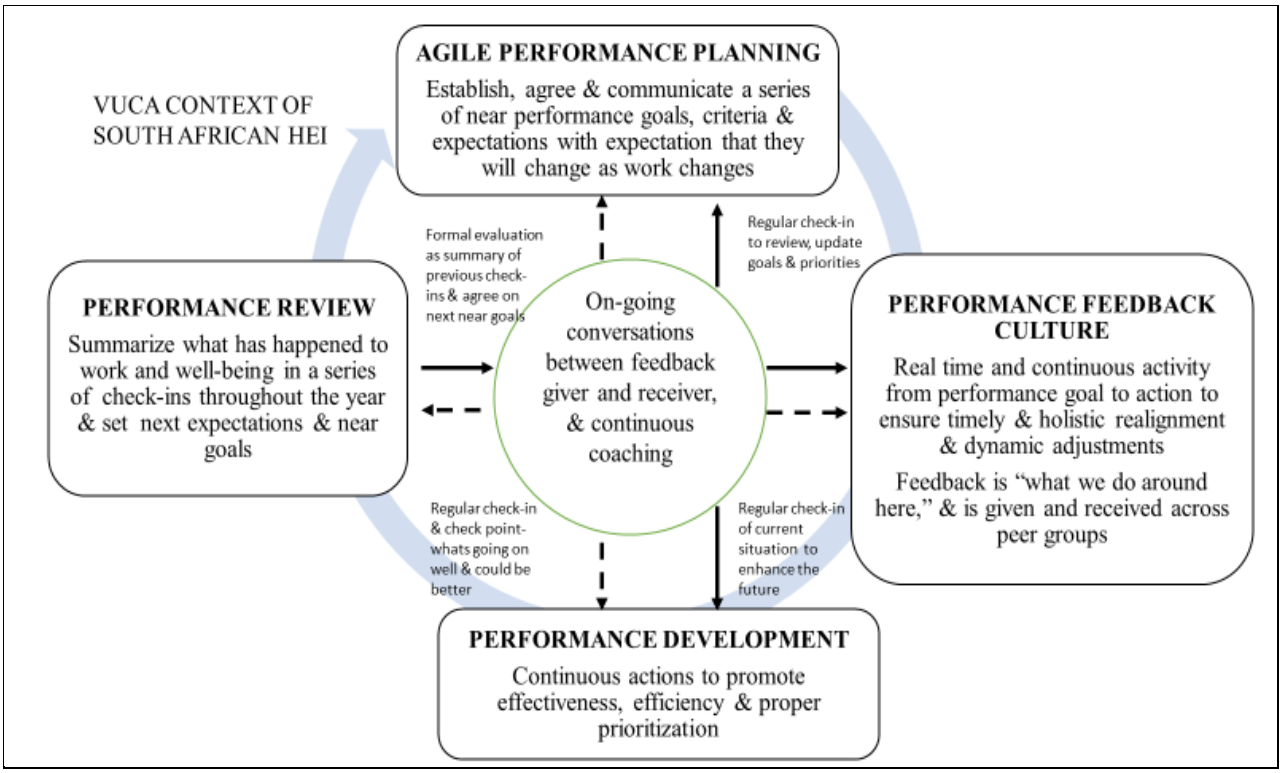


Figure 1. Agile, continuous PM cycle
(*Source:* own research)

To enhance the conceptual clarity of the agile, continuous PM framework, which is more comprehensive, holistic, and developmental, below is a brief discussion of each element that remodels PM.

3.2. Check-in and continuous coaching for the performance system

In the proposed framework, check-ins facilitate feedback in each of the four elements and integrate the notion of manager-as-coach who seek to unlock employee potential to perform and meet desired goals. Check-ins are regular discussions between the line manager and employee throughout the year between goal setting and formal evaluation. Check-ins provide performance conversations which are part of the center driving organizational and employee performance and employee-oriented outcomes. Ongoing check-ins are the key to on-the-job learning – the most critical way people improve and grow at work.

In the proposed framework, ongoing coaching for performance is another part of the center driving performance. It involves a series of techniques to improve an individual's continuous improvement. Performance development is fostered through continuous feedback and coaching around the agile goals, feedback culture and appraisal to unlock a person's potential to maximize their performance. Framing coaching conversations around the direct report's performance put their best interest first, leading to the organization's best interest.

Check-in and continuous coaching for performance shape and adapt each of the constitutive elements of the agile performance cycle as follows.

3.2.1 Agile performance planning

The process begins with goal setting. Line managers and employees need to discuss goals and revise and adapt them to align with the team's priorities. Goal setting process needs to be "bottoms up" and driven by collaboration between individuals, their team and their manager. Agile performance planning hinges on establishing, agreeing and communicating a series of near-term goals, criteria and expectations that can be tracked more regularly and with greater relevance to the individual's work.

The underlying assumption is that near-term goals are achievable within a short period and can change quickly in response to changes in work and external changes. Agility is vital for the organization, teams and individuals to reorient swiftly towards more realistic goals, real-time feedback and flexibility to improve performance. In this way, continuous conversations and coaching address recency bias.

The ongoing feedback and coaching conversation as the center of performance management is critical to continuously checking the alignment of the individual, team, and organizational goals to avoid goal drift. Ongoing feedback in check-ins and coaching is crucial as goals become less relevant quickly. Setting near-term goals in response to the change in a VUCA is critical.

3.2.2 Performance feedback culture

In this framework, feedback is a fundamental part of everyday life. It involves real-time and continuous activity from performance goal to action to ensure timely and holistic realignment and dynamic adjustments. Feedback is not only given by the supervisor but rather given and received across peer groups. In the proposed framework, ongoing conversations between feedback givers and receivers are critical. PFC creates the necessary environment that determines whether managers feel compelled to deliver high-quality performance feedback to employees. With no system in place, there is a risk that performance feedback between line managers and employees may be less frequent or non-existent. Individuals need to set a personal rhythm for feedback directly linked to their work cycle in a PFC.

3.2.3 Performance development

Regular and meaningful conversations are critical for on-the-job employee learning and development. Ongoing check-in and coaching conversations focus on what is going well and what could be better. Understanding performance, identifying gaps, and improving future performance is essential for performance development. There is a need to motivate and provide development opportunities to employees and managers to fulfil their personal development objectives and career goals. The continuous conversations focus on actions to promote effectiveness, efficiency, and proper prioritization of activities for employee and organizational performance improvement.

3.2.4 Performance review

Performance evaluation includes measuring effectiveness in meeting expectations, achieving results and how those results are achieved (i.e., behaviors). Lagging indicators are essential to reveal what has already happened. In agile, continuous performance, a formal evaluation summarizes what has been discussed throughout the year. It is the final step in the PM process before restarting the performance cycle. It is not only summative for accountability but also a source of insights for further agile planning (Mruthyanjaya, et al., 2020).

4 Managerial implication and the strategic way forward

The following are the two key implications based on the identified five pitfalls. First, the pitfalls expose cardinal weaknesses in the PM and create an opportunity for progressive HR practitioners to reconceptualize and transform PM in the HEI by embedding agility, integrating coaching, and building a performance feedback culture. Reconceptualizing PM as constitutive of holistic, non-linear, and employee-centric characteristics results in an agile, continuous PM framework.

HR professionals in the South African HEI can use the findings to understand PM challenges in disruptive times and address rigid performance goal planning, infrequent feedback, and a lack of focus on employee-oriented development and growth outcomes. Second, any attempt to adopt agile, continuous PM in the South African HEI calls for an agile mindset and the development of new competencies, including manager-as-coach and compassionate leadership.

5 Limitations of the study

There are limitations of the study that must be recognized. First, some documents are likely not reviewed

when identifying these pitfalls. This is partly because PM is often a personal and confidential issue that creates a potential source of bias and difficulty accessing documents. Second, the pitfalls are not identified based on primary data from participants or previous studies. As Covid-19 is new, there is limited research on PM in the university during this short period to constitute enough load for a systematic literature review. There is a need for exploratory studies of PM practices in the HEI during the Covid-19 pandemic from the viewpoint of appraisees and appraisers to enrich our empirical understanding.

This paper is significant as a critical step towards a "situated" and more "dynamic" understanding of PM as a non-linear and continuous process which embraces agility and places ongoing feedback and coaching at the center of all activities to drive the performance cycle. As PM problems are prevalent in many universities, this paper is also significant to other universities in South Africa and beyond with similar challenges.

6 Conclusion

Employees are an asset in any South African HEI. Managing performance needs to be more than a tick box bi-annual exercise. The five identified pitfalls of PM during the Covid-19 pandemic are a compelling need to change the overall linear process, inflexible performance goal setting, weak PFC, and lack of compassionate leadership for performance in the South African HEI. Covid-19 pandemic has presented two critical opportunities for PM in the South African HEI.

These are for HR practitioners and university leaders to reconceptualize and transform PM into a non-linear, fluid, holistic and agile process, which integrates and situates ongoing feedback and coaching for performance and development at the center to fit the ever-changing world of work. Researchers need to delve into the strategic and operational implications of integrating continuous feedback and coaching for performance and development in a South African HEI for shaping and responding to the vital interdependent elements of the agile, continuous performance cycle.

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