



Performance Management and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Framework for an Agile, Continuous Performance Management System for the South African Higher Education Institution

MacDonald Isaac Kanyangale¹, Christopher Tarisayi Chikandiwa²

Abstract: The main objective of this article is to shed some light on one of the burning questions in the South African university on how to manage people's performance in disruptive times. There is a shortage of scholarly work exploring PM during the COVID-19 in the university. Most of the extant studies examined PM before universities were forced to use Remote Emergency Teaching and Learning (RETL), the remote and hybrid work model. This article attempts to achieve its main objective by first re-examining the weaknesses of the traditional PM systems during disruptive times and developing an innovative performance management system to bridge the gap. An Agile performance management system framework for South African Higher Education Institution (HEI) was developed in light of the pitfalls of the PM systems and other relevant literature. The proposed Agile, Continuous Performance Management framework calls for an agile mind-set and the development of new competencies, which include manager-as-coach and compassionate leadership. This article is valuable as it does not only fill this gap by bringing together the pitfalls of PM during the COVID-19 in a South African HEI. It also calls for strategic change and reconceptualisation of PM to provide a strategic way forward.

Keywords: Coronavirus pandemic; university; innovative performance management system; pitfalls of performance management

JEL Classification: H12

1. Introduction

One of the burning questions in the South African university is how to manage people's performance in disruptive times. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to work, the worker and the workplace, exposing the

¹ Associate Professor, Graduate School of Business and Leadership Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Address: 238 Mazisi Kunene Rd, Glenwood, Durban, 4041, South Africa, Tel: +27312607934, E-mail: kanyangalem@ukzn.ac.za.

² Senior Lecturer, Graduate School of Business and Leadership Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Address: 238 Mazisi Kunene Rd, Glenwood, Durban, 4041, South Africa, Corresponding author: chikandiwa@ukzn.ac.za.

weaknesses of our current performance management (PM) (Ngcamu, B.S., (2021). Lues, Padayachee and de Jager (2020:1) are explicit that no “single event has challenged university policy, authority, administrative and managerial structures more than the impacts of COVID-19”. Covid pandemic imposed a new norm of technology-mediated teaching, learning and working in the university. Wigert and Barrett (2020:1) contend that the “COVID-19 pandemic has thrown performance management systems into chaos”. HR practitioners and scholars face the challenge of developing adaptive and responsive PM calibrated to the new workplace.

Contemporary scholars and PM practitioners have three instructive issues on this phenomenon during the COVID-19. First, the value of PM is under increasing scrutiny during the COVID-19 (Murphy, 2020. 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). In a different vein, Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021b) suggest that the COVID-19 is time to strengthen rather than abandon PM. PM helps communicate a firm’s strategic direction, collect valuable performance data, and provides critical feedback to individuals and workgroups in disruptive times. 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 organisation” (Aguinis, 2019, p. 8).

Some scholars and practitioners see the COVID-19 as an opportunity to transform PM. Armstrong and Owen (2021:1) 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, it is prudent to contemplate how a South African HEI conducts 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) focus on the personal level of leaders to depict the impact of disruption by the COVID-19. 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 (Lawton-Misra and Pretorius, 2021, p. 210).

At the professional level, university employees and managers face the challenge of doing more work with fewer resources in response to the unprecedented disruption (Lawack, 2020). Given the predicament, 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, Dash, Vohra & Saha, 2020). Managers emphasise setting measurable targets in well-defined output (e.g. the number of graduates per programme, gender). However, critics highlight that

performance measurement excludes less visible but critical qualitative outcomes in an organisation (Brown., O’Kane, Mazumdar & McCracken, 2019). PM “is a poorly understood and often underutilised talent management function that can help organisations navigate crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic”(Aguinis & Burgi-Tian, 2021, p. 234). Musakuro (2022) exemplify problems of executing PM by illuminating that some South African HEIs have formalised process and policy only for senior executives. Employees are encouraged to engage in PM for developmental purposes and on an adhoc basis.

Therefore, this paper seeks to establish the pitfalls of PM in a selected South African HEI during the COVID-19 and suggest a strategic way forward. As the pandemic is new, there is a shortage of scholarly work exploring PM during the COVID-19 in the university. Most of the extant studies examined PM before universities were forced to use Remote Emergency Teaching and Learning (RETL), the remote and hybrid work model. This paper is valuable as it does not only fill this gap by bringing together the pitfalls of PM during the COVID-19 in a South African HEI. It also calls for strategic change and reconceptualization of PM to provide a strategic way forward in the light of the identified pitfalls.

First, the paper discusses the identified five pitfalls of PM during 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.

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: set annual performance goals and forget mindset; lack of adaptation of performance metrics to suit disruptive time; an individual-focused performance which fails to recognise teamwork explicitly; and lack of regular performance check-ins to review and up-date near-term goals.

2.1.1. Set Annual Performance Goals and Forget Mindset

This pitfall is about the tendency to set performance goals and forget them until the final performance review. It depicts the linear approach in which individual performance goal setting is separate from formal review. At the core of this pitfall is the idea that once the line manager and employee agree upon objectives and measures, they are locked and not open for change. The negative implication of this rigid view of performance goals is that employees and line managers in the South African HEIs disengaged with performance most of the time 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 as Covid-19 unfolded. 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 Ferry, 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 organisation 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 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. The performance metrics used to evaluate employee performance during the COVID-19 were the same as those used in normal times. As Covid-19 disrupted work, workers, and the workplace, there was a need to adapt performance metrics used in the South African HEI. Menone and Motala(2021) discuss a pandemic leadership model adopted at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in South Africa. The non-availability of traditional techniques such as “management by walking around”, “open door policy”, and lack of in-person social influence affected the work of leaders in many South African HEIs. When employees WFH, leaders focused on employee output and impact as it was impossible to observe employee task execution. During the COVID-19, leaders had challenges addressing social-emotional needs in the virtual working environment (e.g., maintaining team culture, managing social isolation, loneliness, and bonding with new employees) (Sigahi, Kawasaki, Bolis & Morioka, 2021). The COVID-19 also equally disrupted employees in the South African HEI. Employees had to learn new ways of working from home and in hybrid models (Du Plessis, Jansen van

Vuuren, Simons, Frantz, Roman and Andipatin, 2022). Given the disruptions, applying pre-determined performance expectations and metrics designed for a stable face-to-face working environment was inappropriate and unfair to employees working in unusual ways in a crisis environment. Any performance review conducted in the South African HEIs during the Covid-19 premised on performance metrics for business-as-usual was a clear manifestation of not understanding the humane side of performance. The COVID-19 exposed problems of using inappropriate performance metrics at the employee level in times of unprecedented disruption.

At the university level, HEIs in South Africa revised institutional priorities. They created new mantras such as #savelife, #savingtheacademicyear and #nostudentbehind, which were sensitive to the inequalities in the country (Kele and Mzileni, 2021). At the employee level, there were no conversations, particularly among line managers and employees in the selected university, to revise performance goals and metrics. Changing performance metrics is pivotal in setting expectations and clarifying for employees the more appropriate and new behaviours in rhythm with new and emergent work challenges (Kanyangale & Zvarevashe, 2013). Some 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.

2.1.3. Individual-Focused Performance

Another element of rigidity exposed by the COVID-19 in the South African HEI is individual-focused performance without performance metrics promoting team, collaborative work and transparency. During the COVID-19, line managers and employees dwelled more on individualistic rather than team-oriented KPIs and behaviours when crafting performance agreements in the South African HEI. This behaviour expressed in the performance agreement was inconsistent with purposeful collaboration and team-based behaviours, 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 (Kele and Mzileni, 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 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, O'Kane, Mazumdar, and McCracken (2019), individualistic focus within PM harms team dynamics and

employee reaction toward their team. COVID-19 has largely exposed the need for the HEI to accelerate performance goal setting towards integrating individual and team-oriented behaviours in rhythm with changes in disruptive times.

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). 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 lock-down 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 which focus on the individual and organisational goals, development and changing priorities (Ledford and Schneider, 2018). The urgency to engage in ongoing check-in arise 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 behaviours (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 annual performance goals, the solution is to promote the practice of regular up-dates of near-term goals.

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. 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 emphasises hindsight and relies on infrequent feedback (Zenger, 2017). More importantly, the South African HEI used backwards-looking feedback during the COVID-19, 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. There are challenges to ensuring goal alignment, energising, 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. In Zenge's (2017:1) criticism, performance appraisal "look in the rear-view mirror instead of through the windshield and planning for a brighter future".

To build a performance feedback culture, the South African HEI needs to encourage and emphasise 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. Feedback needs to run through everything people do (Korn Ferry, 2021). Exchange of frequent performance feedback and goal clarity is what line managers and employees craved so much during the COVID-19 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 organisational 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 Ferry, 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.

2.2.2. Missing Bottom-Up Feedback to Line Managers on Performance Evaluation

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 manager 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 was 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 performance feedback to employees is critical in nurturing a PFC during the COVID-19. 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.

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. 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 marginalised 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 concluded, the instruction was illogical. Lack of psychological safety made it difficult for many of the individual employees to openly challenge the illogical instruction from HR without fear of repercussions. It had to take a group of academics to raise questions on the logic and legality of employee performance contracts entered into retrospectively. This instance reveals a failure to recognise that people improve their performance when given space and time to reflect on current performance and act on real-time feedback. Opportunity for employees to develop based on real-time feedback hinge on clearly and explicitly agreed on performance expectations between the line manager and employee and timely feedback for action. Lack of psychological safety may result in a PM system that documents employee performance (Korn Ferry, 2021). Driving performance entails a proactive and future-oriented approach that is open to initiating and pursuing organisational change and employee development of new skills as work changes (Mruthyanjaya, Prasad, Vaidya, and Muralidhar, 2020). The proactive and developmental stance is different 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 Ferry, 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. Line managers and employees in the South African HEI faced increased discomfort and constant stress due to the pursuit of academic and operational continuity. They lacked time for many things, including coaching employees. Du Plessis, Vuuren, Simons, Frantz, Roman and Andipatin (2022:6) observed that busy leaders and employees might view self-care as “a luxury they cannot afford”. Lawton-Misra and Pretorius (2021:209) assert that leaders in South African HEIs face the challenge of shouldering 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. The selected South African HEI did not integrate feedback with coaching for employee performance during the COVID-19. The HEIs 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, realise 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 of progress, driving performance and providing opportunities to reflect on growth and learning. The challenge is for the South African HEI to make coaching an integral part of management. Coaching conversations which focuses on the personalised experience are critical as every employee is on a developmental 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 triggered by coaching conversations. 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 personalised and developmental feedback to employees during performance evaluation. There are instances when line managers trivialise concerns raised by employees to pronounce the process for accountability. This signals the need for feedback givers to thoroughly understand the dual purpose of performance evaluation for employee accountability and employee development. Line managers need to understand that achieving high performance and adherence to the process does not mean ignoring the human element (Mortensen and Gardner, 2022). Performance evaluation for accountability rather than development makes people defensive and hide rather than reveal and confront their shortcomings. A humane conversation on organisational and employee performance needs to start with the feedback giver who can see the person, not just the process (Korn Ferry, 2021). It is helpful if ongoing feedback for employee development is tailored to every individual's needs and context to ensure employees' feelings of being supported rather than participation in PM for the sake of the process.

2.4. Pitfall#4: Negative Perceptions of HR as the Centre of PM

The fourth pitfall is evident in the perception that HR is the centre 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 that they engage in PM for the sake of the HR department. This perception makes line managers and employees comply with instructions by HR (e.g. establish performance agreements, evaluate and document performance).

However, the HR department is far from day to day operational activities at the coalface, which matters to enhance employee performance. The core of PM is meaningful conversations between supervisors and their employees, which have implications that drive employee performance and development. In this case, continuous performance conversations involving supervisor and employee as feedback givers and receivers are at the centre of performance goal setting and all activities until formal performance review. It is crucial to enhance performance by empowering line managers and employees. 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. Addressing this perception is significant for an employee-centric PM experience 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 centre of performance calls for a shift from perceptions of the PM process as a bureaucratic chore and a sheer waste of time by line managers to performance 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 police of PM. 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, the inclusion of continuous coaching as an integral part of PM is crucial to force line managers and employees regularly converse on different aspects of performance. Still, it also reinforces the collaborative relationship between these two at the centre of the performance. This integration necessitates that the South African HEI introduce and develop the competence of manager-as-coach.

Coaching models need to be clear and well-structured with a good cultural fit. Integrating coaching into PM is necessary to ensure that line managers and employees no longer see themselves as busy with their work. Line managers and employees must cease to see involvement in PM as a departure from their regular work. Integrating coaching with PM brings the line managers and the employees to the centre of driving performance. The integrative approach can weaken the perceptions among line managers and employees that getting involved in PM predominantly makes the HR department happy.

2.5. Pitfall#5: Lack of Compassionate Leadership for Performance

The lack of compassionate leadership for performance is manifest when a binary choice between compassion or performance shapes the behaviour 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 & Motala, 2021). However, some line managers acted with indifference and lack of a deep sense of empathising, appraising and responding to what employees were experiencing during the COVID-19. Supervisors and line managers did not like to be seen as weak, lacking control, and enabling bad behaviour 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 pressurised them for unrealistic results and productivity in pursuit of the mantra #nostudentleftbehind.

Line managers in the South African HEI were having difficulties delivering compassion to maximise 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 work WFH comfortably and productively alone or in the back-to-back online meetings. Despite the unique circumstances and varied ways in which employees were affected personally and professionally, some line managers treated employees as if all were the same, without regard for individuality. The COVID-19 affected employees and managers emotionally, socially, and financially in their personal and professional lives. Masitera (2020:6) reported that conditions of social and economic inequalities in South Africa called for acts of care driven by the ethos of Ubuntu.

Wise, compassionate leadership for a line manager and team leader is not just about showing genuine care for people's feelings, well-being, and soft action 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, empathise, 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 (2021:212) 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 Performance Management

Given the identified pitfalls and solutions in the South African HEI, it is time for a thoughtful change in PM. In this case, the paper proposes a framework which pronounces an agile, continuous, and holistic approach to remodelling PM in ways which revolve around collaborative performance conversations and coaching for performance. PM is not a linear but rather a non-linear and fluid process in the proposed framework. Continuous feedback and coaching conversations are at the centre of PM. These are key drivers in shaping and responding to the four vital and interdependent elements of the agile, continuous PM.

The key elements are: agile planning, PFC, performance development, and performance appraisal, constituting an agile, continuous PM cycle. The framework asserts that agility in setting near-term goals requires a more forward-looking approach. Agility is critical to tightly connect relevant goals with timely feedback valuable to up-date goals and ensure goal alignment and relevance in successive short cycles within a changing environment. It is noteworthy that while the traditional linear performance process disconnects goal setting from formal

evaluation, the proposed framework underscores that continuous performance conversation and regular check-ins serve as essential bridges between near-term goals and formal evaluation. In this regard, a formal performance review summarises what has happened to work and the employee in a series of check-ins conducted in the year. The proposed agile and continuous PM cycle signals a move towards shorter cycles of goal-setting and developmental activities. Real-time feedback and coaching are critical in adapting the course of action and necessary behaviours to bring the desired result. The framework reinforces the idea that the best way to manage performance is to merge the insights from backwards-looking indicators with more ongoing forward-looking insights which arise during regular check-ins. The agile, continuous PM calls for a shift from over-reliance on annual feedback from the line manager only to opening up to multiple feedback channels. 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 emphasises regular discussions about performance and provides opportunities for feedback instead of only discussing performance during the annual review when it is often late. Ongoing feedback and coaching in each framework's key elements require new behaviour, knowledge, and thinking to conduct regular check-in to ensure employees feel supported. In pursuing agile and continuous PM, supervisors and employees 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 humanely 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 figure 1, which depicts the proposed framework and its five constitutive elements in a non-linear approach.

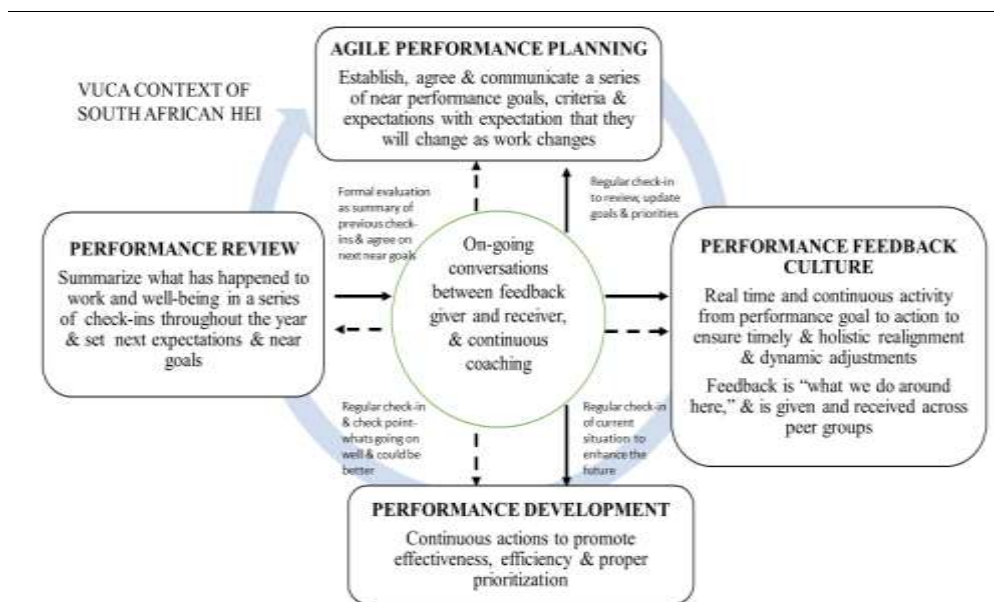


Figure 1. Agile, Continuous PM cycle

Source: Authors Own

To enhance the conceptual clarity of the framework of agile, continuous PM, below is a brief discussion of each element which remodels PM.

Check-in and Continuous Coaching for the Performance System

First, 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. In this framework, check-ins are regular discussions between the line manager and employee throughout the year between goal setting and formal evaluation. These performance conversations are part of the centre driving organisational 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.

Second, ongoing coaching for performance is another part of the centre driving performance. It involves a series of techniques to improve an individual's continuous improvement. Performance development is fostered through continuous feedback and coaching that supports agile goal-setting, feedback culture, and appraisal to unlock a person's potential to maximise their performance.

Check-in and continuous coaching for performance shape and adapt to each of the four critical elements of the agile performance cycle as follows:

3.1. Agile Performance Planning

The process of agile and continuous PM begins with goal setting. Line managers and employees need to discuss goals and revise them to align with the priorities as work changes. Agile performance planning hinge 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. In this way, near-term goals redefine employee behaviours and result in a timely manner to drive performance. The framework pronounces agility as key for the organisation, teams and individuals to quickly reorient towards more realistic, near-term 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 seek to continuously check the alignment of the individual, team and organisational goals to avoid goal drift. The premise is that goals become less relevant quickly, and priorities change in a VUCA.

3.2. Performance Feedback Culture

The ongoing performance and coaching conversations are a source of feedback, shaping and reinforcing the assumptions and behaviours of employees and line managers regarding the nature, value and quality of performance feedback. In this framework, feedback is the key to shaping growth, improvement and course correction. As such, 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. The framework shows that 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, performance feedback between line managers and employees is less frequent or non-existent. Individuals need to set a personal rhythm for feedback directly linked to their work cycle in a PFC.

3.3. Performance Development

The proposed framework underlines that regular, meaningful conversations are critical for on-the-job 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 are essential

issues 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 prioritisation of activities for employee and organisational performance improvement.

3.4. Performance Review

Performance evaluation includes measuring effectiveness in meeting expectations for achieving results and how those results are achieved (i.e., behaviours). Lagging indicators are essential to reveal what has already happened.

It is salient to highlight that performance evaluation is summative for accountability at the end of the year. The nuance in the proposed framework is that formal performance evaluation summarises what has been already discussed throughout the year. It is the final step in the PM process where there are no surprises before restarting the performance cycle.

4. Managerial Implication and the Strategic Way Forward

The identified five pitfalls expose cardinal weaknesses in the PM and create an opportunity for progressive HR practitioners to call for change, reconceptualisation and transformation of PM in the South African HEI. Reconceptualising PM as constitutive of holistic, non-linear and employee-centric characteristics results in an agile, continuous PM framework. HR professionals can use the findings to understand PM challenges not only in the selected HEI but also in other universities facing similar issues (e.g. rigid performance goal planning, infrequent feedback, lack of focus on employee-oriented development and growth outcomes) in disruptive times. The adoption of agile, continuous PM calls for an agile mindset and the development of new competencies, which include manager-as-coach and compassionate leadership.

5. Conclusion

The five identified pitfalls of PM during the COVID-19 are a compelling need for a strategic change away from 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 HR practitioners and leaders in the university to transform PM in the South African HEI. First is the opportunity to reconceptualise PM into a non-linear, fluid, holistic and agile process. Pursuing this reconceptualisation entails integrating and

situating ongoing feedback and coaching for performance and development at the centre of PM to fit with the ever-changing world of work. Second is the opportunity of integrating continuous feedback with coaching in an agile PM. Covid-19 has created exciting times for the innovative HR practitioners to change PM to an agile tool for organisations and employees to succeed and thrive in times of crisis.

References

- Aguinis, H. & Burgi-Tian, J. (2021). Talent management challenges during COVID-19 and beyond: Performance management to the rescue, *Business Research Quarterly*, 24(3), pp. 233–240.
- Aguinis, H. & Burgi-Tian, J. (2021b). Measuring performance during crises and beyond: The Performance Promoter Score. *Business Horizons*, 64(1), pp. 149–160.
- Aguinis, H. (2019). *Performance management for dummies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.
- Aguinis, H.; Joo, H., & Gottfredson, R. K. (2011). Why we hate performance management and why we should love it. *Business Horizons*, 54(6), pp. 503–507.
- Armstrong, P. & Owen, C (2020). Performance Management during the COVID-19 Crisis: An Opportunity for Transformation, *HR Tech247*. <https://hrtech247.com/performance-management-during-the-covid-19-crisis-an-opportunity-for-transformation/>.
- Brown, T.C.; O’Kane, P.; Mazumdar, B. & McCracken, M. (2019). Performance Management: A Scoping Review of the Literature and an Agenda for Future Research, *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(1), pp. 47–82.
- Chandel, M.N. (2016). *Performance Management - Brief History and Development*. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/performance-management-brief-history-development-chandel>.
- Chowdhury, S. & Williams, O. (2020). *Individual performance management in the COVID-19 world*, *McKinsey Organization Blog*.
- Du Plessis M.; Jansen van Vuuren CD, Simons, A.; Frantz, J.; Roman, N. & Andipatin M. (2022). South African Higher Education Institutions at the Beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Sense-Making and Lessons Learnt. *Frontiers in education*, 6, pp. 1-17.
- Gallo, A (2021). Managers, Compassion and Accountability Aren’t Mutually Exclusive, *Harvard Business Review*. <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/08/30/managers-compassion-and-accountability-arent-mutually-exclusive/>.
- Kakkar, S.; Dash, S.; Vohra, N. & Saha, S. (2020). Engaging employees through effective performance management: An empirical examination. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 27(5), pp. 1843–1860. DOI:10.1108/bij-10-2019-0440.
- Kanyangale, M. & Zvarevashe, M. (2013). From the Lens of an Appraiser Manager: Influence of Performance Metrics on Management level Employees in a Professional Services Firm in South Africa. *African Journal of Business Management*, Vol.7 (31), pp. 3052-3062.

Kele, K. & Mzileni, P. (2021). 'Higher education leadership responses applied in two South African comprehensive universities during the COVID-19 pandemic: A critical discourse analysis', *Transformation in Higher Education* 6(0), a114.

Korn, Ferry (2021). *Performance Management A bold new perspective on how individuals, teams and organisations excel*.
file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/Performance_Management_Executive_Summary%20Korn%20Ferry%202021.pdf.

Lawack, V (2020). *UWC has resilience by the bucketful*, *Mail & Guardian*, 7 May.
<https://mg.co.za/coronavirus-essentials/2020-05-07-uwc-has-resilience-by-the-bucketful/>.

Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, T. (2021). Leading with heart: academic leadership during the COVID-19 crisis. *South African Journal of Psychology*, 51(2), pp. 205–2014.

Ledford, E.G. & Schneider, B. (2018). *Performance Feedback Culture Drives Business Impact, Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) and the Center for Effective Organizations (CEO)*.
file:///C:/Users/User/Desktop/University%20of%20Minnesota%20Short%20courses/Performance-Feedback-Culture-Drives-Business-Performance-i4cp-CEO-002-1.pdf.

Lues, R.; Padayachee, A. & Jager, H. (2020). *Universities of technology in the post-COVID-19 landscape*. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200713153430109>

Masitera, E. (2020). Towards a humane community: The search for disability justice in higher education through African moral thinking. *Transformation in Higher Education* 5(0), a85.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v5i0.85>.

Menon, K. & Motala, S. (2021). Pandemic Leadership in Higher Education: New Horizons, Risks and Complexities, *Education as Change*, 25, pp. 1-19.

Mortensen, M. & Gardner, H.K. (2022). Leaders Don't Have to Choose Between Compassion and Performance. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2022/02/leaders-dont-have-to-choose-between-compassion-and-performance>.

Mruthyanjaya, R.M, Prasad, KDV., Vaidya,R.W and Muralidhar,B(2020). Evolution of Performance Management Systems and the Impact on Organization's Approach: A Statistical Perspective. *International Journal of Management*, 11 (5), 2020, pp. 935-947.

Murphy, K. R. (2020). Performance evaluation will not die, but it should. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 30(1), pp. 13–31.

Musakuro, R. (2022). Talent management practices in a selected South African higher education institution. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, 20(1), pp. 532-542.
doi:10.21511/ppm.20(1).2022.42.

Ngcamu, B.S. (2021). Change Management Strategies as the Nexus of Performance Improvement in African Universities Post-COVID-19 Pandemic. *Global Perspectives on Change Management and Leadership in the Post-COVID-19 Era*, pp. 90-105.

O'Connell, B. (2020). Performance Management Evolves, *SHRM*. <https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/all-things-work/pages/performance-management-evolves.aspx>.

Rath, A. (2018). Evolution of Performance Management System: A Review of Literature. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)* 6(2), pp. 874-884

Sigahi, T. F. A. C.; Kawasaki, B. C.; Bolis, I. & Morioka, S. N. (2021). A systematic review on the impacts of Covid-19 on work: Contributions and a path forward from the perspectives of ergonomics

and psychodynamics of work. *Human Factors and Ergonomics in Manufacturing & Service Industries*, pp. 1–14.

Wigert, B. & Barrett, H. (2020). *Performance Management Must Evolve to survive COVID-19*, *Gallup Workplace*. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/318029/performance-management-evolve-survive-covid.aspx>.

Zenger, J (2017). *The 6 Vital Elements Of Effective Performance Management Systems*, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackzenger/2017/02/16/the-6-vital-elements-of-effective-performance-management-systems/?sh=7f3e8e90618e>.