

Watchstander Woes Worksheet:
A Performance Improvement Tool



By: LT Gordon A. Hood

The United States Coast Guard, like many 24x7 response-oriented organizations, relies heavily on the watchstander – the person on duty any given minute of the day to take the call, maintain the equipment, or ensure the security of a facility. Day in and day out, the watchstander has immense responsibility. However, the significance of this responsibility is easily forgotten. Due to the repetitive nature of the duty, complacency sets in. Soon tasks are missed; mistakes are made. This tool has been developed to help analyze and address that performance problem. It is a list of steps designed for use at the management level; we will refer to them as the leadership team. In the Coast Guard, this level is the unit Command Cadre and Department Heads. Each step presents a series of questions – some for the leadership team, others to ask the employee. The tool is a synthesis of several models developed and published by founders in the field of performance improvement, applied for practical use in this workplace scenario, specifically:

- Toyoda's Five Whys
- Gilbert's Leisurely Theorems
- Mager & Pipe's Performance Analysis Flowchart

Step One: Identify the perceived problem.

The leadership team completes this step together. At a Department head meeting, for example, discuss the following questions:

- *Who is the problem?*
- *What is the problem?*
- *Where is the problem?*
- *When did the problem originate or become noticed?*
- *Why is it actually a problem?*
- *Has action already been taken to address it?*

The last question is a critical piece to the analysis. Although not explicitly part of the aforementioned models, the person using this tool must know what potential solutions have already been attempted. It is common for supervisors, with some leadership training and experience, to try and solve the problem with the skills and techniques they have learned or used in the past.

Step Two: Identify the difference (known as the performance gap).

Gilbert (as cited in Huglin, 2014) recommends comparing an exemplary performer to the typical (problem) performer. The Chiefs can probably identify these members relatively easily, maybe more than one on each end of the spectrum. They should then sit down with each separately and ask him or her the following questions, derived from Mager and Pipe's Performance Analysis Flowchart (1997). You might consider having a Department head or Chief that is not in the member's direct chain of command conduct the interview to minimize concern of retribution and allow for the most honest feedback. If the responses begin to sound like a potential origin or reason for the problem, the interviewer must ask "why?" as many times as the person can answer. This is the application of Toyoda's Five Whys model (as cited in Huglin, 2014) to peel away the layers of reasons or excuses. It is important to get input from both extremes on the performance scale. Once you do so, triangulate the answers with those you discussed in Step One and attempt to identify the true root cause of the performance problem.

- *Are watchstanding expectations clear?*

It is likely that the Commanding Officer's Standing Orders instruction broadly states what is required of the watchstander. It may even get specific in certain areas, like when to call for help. But is the observed performance problem clearly addressed in that document? Or somewhere else where it can be referenced? The simplest intervention may be to provide clear expectations.

- *Do we provide adequate resources to stand the watch?*

The concept of resources is broad, but get down to specifics. The watchstander cannot lock the gate without the key. It is similarly hard to inspect the inside of a dark tank without a flashlight. Obtaining or providing the proper resources can sometimes be a costly intervention, but you cannot expect your people to do their job to your expectation without the necessary tools.

- *Up to this point, have you received any feedback on your watchstanding?*

If this is the first time the member has heard that there was a problem, there is probably a gap in the feedback process. Senior members must be correcting subordinates. Oncoming watchstanders should refuse to relieve the watch until the previous duty section's tasks are done. Supervisors are obligated to walk around and report observed discrepancies. Provide feedback! Bringing to light may be all that is required to correct the issue.

- *Is there anything frustrating or disappointing about being a diligent watchstander?*

Sometimes a member may feel punished for doing the right thing. From simply being exposed to cold weather to being subjected to criticism because they relayed some bad news, certain behaviors may be punishing. These punishments should be removed, as best they can.

- *Are there any benefits to being lax in your duties?*

There may be incentives for poor performance. Not doing this or that dirty, difficult, or annoying job during their watch may be benefit enough (encouraging the “next guy can take care of that” attitude). Maybe the watchstander rushes through their round of the facility in order to get back to a movie or ball game on the television. Benefits that reinforce the problem may be hard to recognize, but could be easy to remove if they are identified.

- *What are the consequences to you, or to the unit, for poor watchstanding?*

It may be hard to change behavior without perceived or actual consequences. They may be organization consequences (if this piece of equipment fails, we will not be able to respond to that distress call) or personal (your marks will reflect your failure to stand the watch as required). Often we are eager to highlight theoretical consequences to the unit but hesitant to implement real consequences to the member; however, one set of honest marks that accurately reflect and document the problem of poor performance identified in Step One may be all that is necessary to avert true disaster for the unit and a future pattern of sub-standard watchstanding by the member. Remember: Even if they are a stellar performer in all other aspects, watchstanding is a critical part of their job and duty.

Step Three: Identify deficiency of skill.

These three questions are directed at the typical (poor) performer. They may be asked in the same forum or interview as Step Two, or afterward if the root cause of the problem has not been identified after the information has been triangulated. Again, if the responses begin to sound like a potential origin or reason for the problem, the interviewer must ask “why?” as many times as the member can answer.

- *How often do you stand the watch?*

If the member has duty only once a month, or just returned from a six-week school, this may explain why their performance is substandard. Note: This question may also identify the other extreme; for example, he or she may be completely burned out by standing duty every third day.

- *Did you learn how to complete a proper round?*

A substandard initial qualification process will probably result in substandard watchstander performance – he or she never learned how to do the job the right way. In this case you may

need to revisit your qualification procedure, which is likely to be a big undertaking but a necessary one to halt the harmful pattern.

- *Has your watchstanding behavior or standard changed?*

It is likely that the member can self-identify changes in their performance. These changes may be caused by innumerable factors, from personal struggles to somebody incorrectly telling them to do a process differently. This is a question that may be maximized by continually asking “why?”

Step Four: Identify and implement solutions.

This is the point, right? Finally, let’s get to some solutions! You may have already come up with a list of potential interventions from the information gathered in Step Two, comparing the exemplary and typical (or poor) performers. The next two questions should be asked of the exemplary performer; they are already doing a good job and likely to provide constructive feedback and suggestions to the problem. Then the leadership team must consider, decide on, and implement interventions.

- *Can we make it easier? How?*

It may not really be necessary to do a certain task every hour, just because. A job aid or checklist may come in handy. Creating one will likely be a big undertaking, but the benefit to having all or the most frequent required tasks in a list could be significant if it solves the problem. It may also add a level of accountability if the watchstander is required to initial or sign off the task when completed. Warning: The answers you get to this question may be hard to accept. “It is duty, why should it be easier?” and “this is the way we have always done it” are common objections, but often our members will suggest more efficient ways of getting the job done.

- *Can we provide training? On what?*

Training should be a last resort, but may be necessary if watchstanders really did not learn proper policy and procedure during their qualification process. If they know how to do it, and have done so properly in the past, training is probably not a necessity.

- *Can we implement an intervention previously identified?*

Finally, go back and look at the answers to questions in Step Two and Three. What can you do to solve the performance problem? There will likely be more than one answer. You might even come up with other options that will improve the situation more than simply addressing the root cause, and make your watchstanders’ duty day all the better for it.

Table 1. Hood's view: A merger of models.

Toyoda's Five Whys	Gilbert's Leisurely Theorems Mager & Pipe's Performance Analysis Flowchart
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References

Huglin, L. (2014). 5 Whys. Retrieved from OPWL 536 4202/4203 course database.

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This article as an excerpt; the original work was submitted to satisfy a course assignment.

Leadership Competencies: Accountability & Responsibility, Mentoring, Management & Process Improvement, and Human Resource Management

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