

## Poetry & Performance Management: Ways of Implementing Strategy

“No man is an island, entire of itself.”

John Donne, Meditation XVII

Perhaps it is apt that Donne is meditating on death when he writes these lines. For many lawyers the idea of performance management involves dying a little; giving in to the inevitability of change; the ghastly realities of “management”.

We all aspire to doing what we do for the right reasons, in the correct way. We are lawyers for heaven’s sake! But, more than ever, it is vital for the profession to be seen as modern, progressive and able to deliver a high quality service. We all know that others are after that territory. Getting equipped with a few management tools makes good sense.

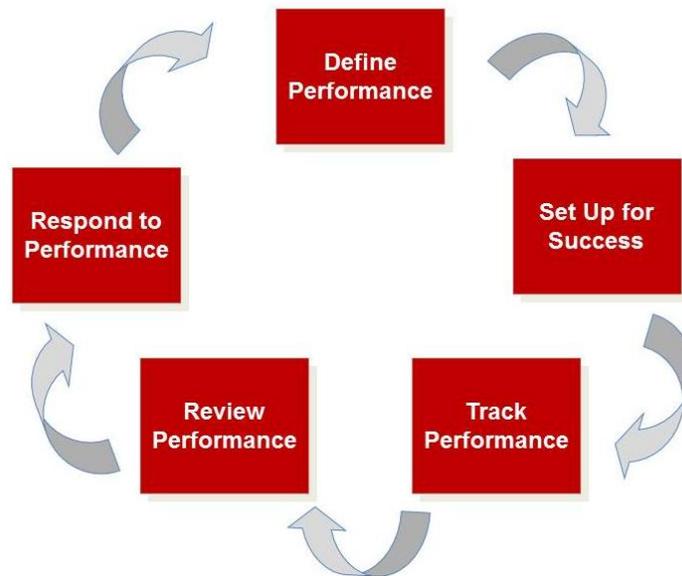
So, the legal sector is screaming for efficiency and growth and I am offering you a 17<sup>th</sup> century divine poet. Indulge me. Great literature delivers truths. It articulates values with which we can identify. Whilst reading John Donne to your staff may be esoteric, there are more practical things you can do. Performance management is one of them.

More than ever low cost, high efficiency processes, growth and sustainability of effort, are crucial in the legal sector. Perhaps you are using technology, out-sourcing or recruiting non-lawyers to do some aspects of the work. “More for less” is the mantra. One important element of implementing strategy & getting the most out of your staff is to establish expectations and manage performance.

And this is where we could get poetic again, because the answer is not in Schedule III of the Act, or Rule VI ii of the Rules of Procedure. The answer is to manage how people behave.

Naturally, everyone likes to think they know how to behave. This is not, however, a matter of civility or courtesy. Neither is it a matter of creating a bunch of automatons. This is about how individuals can use their strengths to serve business needs. It is a means of gathering powerful information about where the challenges lie, for individuals and for the organisation as a whole. Achieving a level of awareness, personal and organisational, is valuable. Using that awareness to shape individual

performance and to develop business strength is the real Holy Grail. As the business grows the cycle of defining performance, review and development goes on too:



The first step is to define the behaviour you want to encourage e.g.

**Workload Management:** Making effective use of time when managing workload for self and others

**Strategic Awareness:** The ability to develop, share and focus own and others' activity on the firm's strategic direction

Under each of these headings the firm can identify how it expects its staff to behave. If these criteria are used consistently, at recruitment, at appraisal and for promotion, then staff will know:

- what is expected of them
- how to perform well
- how to identify areas to develop

If performance is not analysed using consistent criteria over time, then inequality and lack of opportunity could be the result.

None of us likes to think we are being "measured". We all like to think that our best is good enough. And perhaps it is; it would be good to know. "No man is an island", but once you introduce other people and tasks things can get complicated. Ask those people to adhere to a set of values or to promote interests other than their own, and it gets harder still. Resorting to abstracts is tempting,



but practical steps are what is needed to create change. Donne's Meditation XVII ends, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee". I interpret that as an expression of our common humanity, in all its frail and complex glory. It could be read as a call to action.

Nicola Jones is a Director of Athena Legal ([www.athenalegal.co.uk](http://www.athenalegal.co.uk)). She is a former barrister and a specialist in Learning & Development. You can contact her at [nicola@athenalegal.co.uk](mailto:nicola@athenalegal.co.uk)