

PERFORMANCE – SMALL TALK

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the results of a focus group conducted with twelve members of a team involved in the implementation of European-funded projects. The purpose was to explore how participants conceptualize performance and identify the personal actions undertaken to achieve it. Participants primarily define performance as self-improvement, continuous development, lifelong learning, and adaptability, emphasizing progress relative to one’s own previous state rather than competition with others. Performance is understood both as an outcome (task completion and goal attainment) and as a consistent personal habit and mindset integrated into daily routines. In terms of behaviours that support performance, participants highlight continuous study, self-reflection, time management, planning, adaptability, and solution-oriented thinking. The findings reveal a strong orientation toward ongoing professional development and a dynamic perception of performance as an evolving and self-regulated process.

KEYWORDS: *Focus Group, Habit, Mindset, Performance, Self-improvement.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Focus groups offer an effective means of examining how individuals collectively interpret concepts and practices within their professional context. Rather than treating performance as an isolated individual trait, this method makes it possible to observe how meanings are co-constructed through dialogue, revealing both shared understandings and points of difference among participants (Cyr, 2019). Recent scholarship highlights that focus groups are particularly valuable when the aim is to explore how workplace concepts are defined, negotiated, and translated into action in everyday settings (Barbour, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Within contemporary organizational research, performance is increasingly conceptualized as a dynamic and evolving process, supported by self-regulation, continuous reflection, and adaptation to changing demands (Park, Lim, & Friesner, 2023). Qualitative approaches such as focus groups are well suited to illuminate these processes by capturing the experiences, routines, and strategic adjustments individuals employ to sustain performance over time. By engaging participants who share a common professional environment, the focus group conducted in this study provides insight into how performance is understood in practice and how it is maintained through daily behaviors and ongoing personal development.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Across organizational and clinical settings, focus groups have been used to surface how practitioners and employees *define* performance and which *actions* (or enabling conditions) sustain it. In nursing, five focus groups (n = 25) conducted in South Africa framed “ideal performance” not

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as a narrow output metric but as a *relational and processual construct* built on trustful manager–staff relationships, transparent criteria, fair rewards, and capability development—linking meaning (“being supported to do excellent work”) with actions (training, clear goals, fair feedback) that enable competent, high-quality practice (Ndlovu S et al, 2024).

In elite sport and performance support contexts, qualitative group designs similarly portray performance as *multi-dimensional*—combining outcomes with psychological and interpersonal capabilities—and identify concrete practices to realize it. A focus-group–based study of performance support teams in elite sport emphasized the centrality of coordinated routines, shared clarity on roles, and feedback loops to translate expertise into athlete outcomes, thus defining performance as both collective effectiveness and individual execution. A recent meta-synthesis of qualitative research on *performing under pressure* adds that athletes construe high performance as the capacity to regulate attention, appraise pressure adaptively, and enact pre-planned coping strategies—again tying meaning (performing “when it counts”) to learnable actions (preparation, regulation, debrief) (Hufton, J. R et al, 2024)

Within general practice and hospital settings, co-design work that combined interviews and focus groups shows that people on the ground link performance to *fairness, wellbeing, and learning climate*: staff described how research participation, supportive leadership, and reduced unfair treatment create conditions for better team functioning and measurable outcomes. Such studies use group discussion to map mechanisms (voice, psychological safety, cross-professional learning) through which “performance” becomes attainable (Kenning C et al, 2024).

From an organizational psychology angle, qualitative and mixed-method evidence in the last few years converges on *continuous performance feedback* as a key action pathway: people make sense of their performance through ongoing, source-diverse feedback that shapes motivation and effort in real time—recasting performance as an *iterative improvement trajectory* rather than a one-off appraisal (Giamos, D, 2023). Related expectancy-theory and workplace-environment studies—while not limited to focus groups—corroborate that clarity of expectations, supportive conditions, and perceived instrumentality drive the actions (effort allocation, strategy adjustment) that sustain higher task performance (Abu Issa Gazi Md.,2024).

Methodologically, recent guidance on focus groups underscores why they are apt for this topic: group interaction helps reveal *consensus versus contestation* about what “performance” means locally and which practices truly help. Reflexive thematic analysis within focus-group designs is recommended to capture these negotiated meanings and translate them into actionable themes (e.g., routines, feedback, role clarity, learning climate) (Catrin P. J. et al,2022).

Taken together, the last five years of focus-group-informed research depict “performance” as both an outcome standard and a continuous, socially supported improvement process. Actions consistently identified across settings include establishing fair and transparent criteria; enabling ongoing, actionable feedback; building psychological safety and trust; investing in targeted training and role clarity; and institutionalizing review/debrief routines that convert experience into capability. These actions are not merely supports—they are *how participants themselves define what it means* to perform well.

3. METHOD

3.1 Focus group

The empirical data was gathered through one focus group discussion with a complete office team working on an EU project. The focus group approach was selected to capture practitioners’ experiences and reflections regarding performance. As “focus group conversations are inherently social in their form” (Cyr, 2019), this qualitative method was well suited to reveal where shared understandings emerged and where viewpoints diverged among participants. In line with the qualitative research tradition that has employed focus groups since the 1980s to “enhance the

collection of deep, strongly held beliefs and perspectives" (Carey & Asbury, 2016; Morgan, 1998), this study used group discussion to elicit rich, nuanced insights. Consequently, while individual interviews might have elicited personal perspectives on performance and actions towards it, the focus group format made it possible to observe how these reflections were interactively negotiated among the team members (Lundström, 2023).

3.2 Data collection

The study focused on one focus group with twelve members of an EU project office team. It was conducted in September 2025. The focus group included four sessions to have a good saturation of the qualitative data (Cyr, 2019). With the division of the team in four groups we could observe also the theme reached a point of saturation. The gathering of more data would have been redundant. The team members work together for at least one years and have a good knowledge of their role and project detail. The division in four groups of three persons assured the maximal individual engagement (Wilkinson, 2008). The focus group took place in the same day; each session had a duration of maximum 60 minutes.

We preferred a more relaxed atmosphere and a semi-structured interview guide formed from only two topics destined to reveal the perception of performance and the action that enable the participants to be performant. We have encouraged free discussions on the theme and a authentic exchange of ideas. By doing this we consider that we have minimized the risk of the "fallacy of adhering to fixed questions" (Morgan,1996).

The structure of the conversations was open with just two open questions, but with a permanent attention to stay on topic. The moderator engaged the group only if it was necessary assuring an intense and engaged discussion and enabled the registration of the conversation with all the details and intensity (Hennink, 2013).

The notes were transcribed as soon as possible to ensure that there is no loss of information.

3.3 Participants

For this study we used purposive sampling that is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are deliberately selected based on their relevance to the research objectives. In this approach, the aim is not to achieve statistical representativeness, but rather to recruit individuals who possess the experience, knowledge, or perspectives necessary to provide meaningful insight into the phenomenon under investigation. The primary criterion for selection is therefore the informational value and relevance of participants to the research topic, rather than randomness or mere availability.

This study is a part of much larger research, and the aim was to see the dynamic of a focus group with this structure on a fixed theme from an experienced team used with fixed KPI and deadlines who cand bring a meaningful insight on the performance topic.

The chosen group was formed from an entire EU project office implementation team formed by twelve people from the same organization and the same project. Therefore, they share the same objectives and the same resources. The participants included both men (n=3) and women (n=9). With formal education in implementation of projects and with both high school (n=1) and university degrees (n=11). The age groups were equilibrated; most of the participants are aged between 30 – 45 years old (n=9). All the participants gave their consent to participate in the study according to the ethical principles of research. The study was conducted with strict confidentiality rules and involved no personal data. We used pseudonyms for the participants quoted in the research.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Inductive Coding Analysis (Grounded Theory Approach)

The analysis follows the stages of open coding → category development → thematic integration → interpretation.

The focus group was examined through an inductive coding approach grounded in the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis unfolded across four iterative phases, each designed to distill key aspects of the perception of performance from the focus group transcripts.

The first phase was the open coding where the transcripts were analyzed multiple times, with segments of text being broken down and assigned descriptive codes that captured their meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The subsequent category development stage entailed organizing these initial codes into more coherent clusters, which began to form the basis of emerging thematic categories (Charmaz, 2006). These developing themes were refined through ongoing comparison, re-labelling, and structural adjustment, accompanied by close engagement with the relevant interview passages (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the thematic integration phase (Qureshi & Ünlü, 2020), the clarified themes relating to performance were interpreted. And in the final phase we have interpreted all the data resulted from the analysis.

4.2 Open coding phase

Question 1 – “What does performance mean to you?”

Response (original meaning)

Doing the best I can in what I must do

Performance means surpassing yourself

Difference between sports performance and everyday performance; constant training

Being better than you were yesterday

Evolution, growth, learning every day

Performance is linked to the project I am working on

Capacity to adapt and be open

A daily habit or routine

Surpassing the proposed objectives

Daily learning and continuous training

Openness to new experiences and learning

Completing tasks correctly and on time

Meeting deadlines

Broadening personal and professional knowledge

Surpassing proposed objectives (repeated)

Code Assigned

personal effort; commitment

self-improvement; self-surpassing

discipline; consistency; sustained effort

progressive improvement

continuous development

goal orientation; project-based results

adaptability

performance as habit formation

goal exceeding; achievement orientation

continuous learning

openness; learning orientation

accuracy; task completion standards

time management

cognitive expansion

exceeding performance targets

Question 2 – “What do you do to be performant?”

Response (original meaning)

I study constantly

I am adaptable

I analyze my daily work

I learn continuously

I socialize, maintain a positive attitude and openness

I study, adapt, and analyze

I do my job as well as I can and look for solutions

I stay informed and problematize issues

I organize and plan my time

I am involved, curious, and organized

I analyze and organize everything

I use trial-and-error processes

Code Assigned

continuous learning

adaptability

self-reflection

continuous training

openness; positive mindset

learning + adaptation + reflection

solution-oriented approach

cognitive exploration

time management and planning

engagement; curiosity; organization

structured work; analysis

experiential learning

4.3 Axial Coding: Grouping Codes into Categories

Category	Codes Included	Meaning
Continuous Personal Development	continuous learning, curiosity, cognitive expansion	Performance is associated with ongoing intellectual and professional growth.
Self-Improvement and Progress	self-surpassing, being better than before, progressive growth	Performance is perceived as a developmental progression rather than a fixed state.
Adaptability and Openness	adaptability, openness to new experiences, positive attitude	Adjusting to change is considered essential for maintaining performance.
Discipline, Routine, and Consistent Practice	habit formation, regular analysis, time management, planning	Performance is sustained through structured routines and self-monitoring practices.
Result Orientation and Standards	goal achievement, meeting deadlines, accurate execution	Performance is also linked to efficiency and achieving/measuring results.

4.4 Emergent Themes (Selective Coding)

Core Theme

Performance as a Continuous Self-Improvement Process

Performance Sustained by Routine, Discipline, and Self-Reflection

Performance Requires Continuous Learning and Adaptation

Description

Performance is not seen as a fixed outcome, but as ongoing, incremental growth.

Daily practices such as planning, analyzing, and organizing support performance.

Performance involves actively learning, adjusting, and responding to change

4.5 Interpretation (Analytical Summary)

The participants conceptualize performance as a dynamic and evolving process, rather than a singular result. Performance is strongly associated with self-improvement, continuous learning, and adaptability, supported by consistent routines such as planning, analysis, and organized work. While achieving goals and meeting deadlines remains important, the primary emphasis is placed on personal growth and daily incremental progress. Therefore, performance is understood as a balance between internal development and measurable external outcomes.

Performance as a Continuous Self-Improvement Process

Performance is not seen as a singular result but as a dynamic and evolving process. During the focus group sessions several participants underlined that for them performance is a process of learning every day, of surpassing the results from yesterday, etc. analyzing the perception of the performance concept linked to the action related question we could observe the dynamic of the answers. Responses like “Performance means surpassing yourself” or “Being better than you were yesterday” linked to actions like “I learn continuously” or “I study constantly” indicate a process that involves mainly personal growth and ongoing self-improvement. Personal development refers to an intentional and goal-directed process through which individuals work toward bettering themselves and pursuing their aspirations in relation to the opportunities they encounter (Prisniakova, Aharkov, Samoilov, & Nesprava, 2023)

Performance Sustained by Routine, Discipline, and Self-Reflection

The focus group participants consistently described performance as something that is *maintained through daily discipline* rather than achieved through one-off effort. Participants emphasized planning, organizing, time management, and continuous self-review as core practices that enable sustained performance. For example, several participants stated that they “organize [their] time and plan everything,” and that performance requires “a daily analysis of the activities” undertaken. Participants also reported engaging in iterative refinement, such as “analyzing everything” and learning through “trial and error,” describing performance as a continuous cycle of action and adjustment.

These accounts reflect performance as a self-regulatory process, in which individuals intentionally structure their work routines, monitor their progress, and make ongoing corrections. Recent research supports this interpretation. Studies across organizational and educational settings show that habitual planning and structured routines increase task consistency and reduce cognitive overload, enabling individuals to maintain high levels of performance under varying demands (Trenz et al., 2024; Gollwitzer & Oettingen, 2020). Similarly, time-management strategies—such as scheduling tasks and prioritizing goals—have been associated with higher work engagement and improved task outcomes (Wolters & Brady, 2022).

Furthermore, participants’ emphasis on reflective evaluation aligns with contemporary work on reflective practice, which highlights reflection as a mechanism for identifying performance barriers, adjusting strategies, and developing more effective work habits (Sherwood & Horton-Deutsch, 2021; Harvey et al., 2023). When combined with disciplined routines, reflection enables individuals not only to repeat effective practices but also to continuously refine them. Thus, performance emerges as a *dynamic process* that depends on both consistency in behavior and ongoing self-adjustment.

In summary, the focus group results suggest that performance is sustained through the interaction of routine (planning and organizing), discipline (consistent effort and adherence to standards), and self-reflection (evaluation and strategic adaptation). This perspective reinforces the idea of performance as an evolving practice, rather than a static end state.

Performance Requires Continuous Learning and Adaptation

Participants consistently articulated that performance is not a static outcome, but a process of ongoing learning, curiosity, and adaptability. Several participants stated that they “study

constantly,” “stay informed,” and “learn continuously” to maintain performance effectiveness. Others emphasized adaptability, describing performance as the ability to adjust methods and perspectives in response to new project demands or challenges (e.g., “For performance, I adapt and analyze everything I do,” “Being performant means being open to new approaches”).

This understanding aligns with recent research conceptualizing performance as an adaptive capability, where individuals continuously update their skills and strategies in response to dynamic work environments (Pulakos et al., 2019; Park et al., 2023). A learning orientation—defined as the tendency to pursue competence improvement over time—has been shown to predict higher levels of individual performance and problem-solving effectiveness, particularly in knowledge-intensive and project-based work (Lai, Li, & Hsu, 2022).

Participants also described learning through experimentation, including iterative problem-solving and reflection on error. This aligns with findings that trial-and-error learning, when supported by psychological safety, promotes improved task performance and innovation (Rudolph, Katz, & Lavigne, 2020). Moreover, the emphasis on being “open to the new” reflects a growth mindset, which has been linked to greater adaptability and resilience in the face of uncertainty (Yeager et al., 2019).

Taken together, the focus group data demonstrate that performance is understood as a continuous developmental process, sustained not only by formal skill acquisition but also by active curiosity, reflective self-assessment, and willingness to revise existing practices. Performance, in this view, emerges from the interaction between learning and adaptability.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that performance is understood by participants not as a fixed endpoint, but as a dynamic developmental process grounded in ongoing personal effort, disciplined routines, and adaptive learning. Across the focus group discussions, participants consistently emphasized that the ability to perform well emerges through continuous self-improvement, enacted through both internal and behavioral strategies. This understanding aligns with contemporary organizational psychology research, which positions performance as an evolving construct shaped by personal agency, reflection, and responsiveness to changing demands (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Park, Lim, & Friesner, 2023).

First, the theme *Performance as a Continuous Self-Improvement Process* highlights how participants perceived performance as requiring the sustained pursuit of becoming “better than yesterday.” This orientation corresponds with research demonstrating that individuals who adopt a growth mindset—that is, who view their abilities as improvable through effort and learning—show greater motivation, persistence, and long-term performance outcomes (Yeager et al., 2019). Performance is therefore seen as something cultivated through deliberate, self-directed development rather than as a static reflection of existing capability.

Second, the theme *Performance Sustained by Routine, Discipline, and Self-Reflection* underscores the role of daily practices in maintaining performance. Participants noted that systematic planning, time management, and ongoing self-evaluation enable them to focus effort and adjust behavior effectively. This perspective is strongly supported by recent evidence that self-regulatory routines—such as progress monitoring, prioritization, and structured reflection—are central mechanisms through which individuals maintain performance consistency and prevent overload (Wolters & Brady, 2022; Harvey, Marra, & Clarke, 2023). Performance is therefore portrayed as habitual and reflective, requiring both behavioral discipline and cognitive flexibility.

Third, the theme *Performance Requires Continuous Learning and Adaptation* illustrates that the work context was perceived as dynamic, requiring individuals to update skills and approaches continuously. Participants emphasized adaptability, openness to new strategies, and learning

through experimentation. Recent studies confirm that adaptive performance—the ability to adjust behavior in response to change—is increasingly recognized as a critical competence in contemporary professional environments (Park et al., 2023). Learning is therefore not only a means of acquiring new knowledge but a core feature of performing effectively under evolving conditions. In sum, the focus group results indicate that performance is experienced as an iterative and self-sustaining process, enacted through the interplay of internal motivation, structured habits, and adaptive learning. This understanding reflects a broader shift in performance theory from output-based evaluation toward models that emphasize continuous development, self-regulation, and adaptability as essential foundations of effective professional practice in complex work contexts.

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