

Accurate, but Insufficient

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The task was completed, the deadline was met, and the problem was resolved. A leader looking at those results has good reason to believe something was accomplished. The evidence is visible, the expected outcome occurred, and if the same result appears repeatedly, confidence in that conclusion may grow. Nothing about the scenario itself needs to be wrong for the explanation that follows it to remain incomplete.

Consider what becomes available when looking beyond the result. The task may have been completed because someone outside the role stepped in to finish it. The deadline may have been met after priorities shifted somewhere else. The problem may have been resolved when a leader made the decision the team had been expected to make. The original evidence remains intact, but the additional information changes what that evidence can reasonably tell us.

The person assigned the task may have had the capability to complete it independently. The team may have understood the deadline and intended to meet it. The people closest to the problem may have had enough information to make the decision themselves. Looking only at the result would not make any of those possibilities visible, just as learning more about the people involved would not necessarily explain why the situation unfolded as it did.

Stay with the same scenario a little longer. Perhaps the person completing the task independently had previously been asked to redo work after making a reasonable decision without approval. Perhaps competing priorities routinely remained in place until a deadline became urgent enough for a leader to reorder them. Perhaps the team had learned through earlier experience that bringing a difficult decision to the leader produced a faster and safer resolution than exercising the authority they had been given. Each additional relationship changes what becomes available for understanding the result without requiring us to discard what we saw at the beginning.

Looking across this scenario, the result tells us what was accomplished. The work becomes visible in how it was accomplished: the decisions made, actions taken, judgment exercised, problems resolved, and responses to the conditions encountered along the way. This scenario is one occasion in which work develops. Looking across this occasion with others allows performance to become visible as the cumulative expression of that work over time.

A leader stepping in may resolve an immediate problem, and the intervention may be exactly what the situation requires. Looking across occasions makes it possible to see that resolution within a longer relationship. People experience what happens when uncertainty appears, where decisions ultimately reside, and what follows when they exercise their own judgment. Those experiences become part of the conditions they encounter when another occasion arises.

Across time, relationships that are difficult to see within a single result may become increasingly visible. A team may learn when to wait for the leader. A capable employee may learn that escalation carries less risk than independent judgment. A leader who repeatedly protects an important outcome may gradually become part of the conditions through which that outcome is produced. The earlier resolution remains successful, while the work developing around it begins to tell us more about the performance taking shape.

Return to where we began. The task was completed, the deadline was met, and the problem was resolved. Every one of those observations remains accurate. We now know that the work through which those results were produced may tell us something very different about the performance developing over time.

The question was never whether what we saw was true. It was whether what we saw was enough.

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