



{A}

{B}

{C}

IS PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AS SIMPLE AS ABC

Effectively managing employee performance breeds organizational success. >>

By Alice Gresham Walker

When you encounter poor customer service at the hands of under-performing employees, is it linked to poor training or a disengaged worker?

Recently, a training class participant angrily spoke of the time he and a co-worker walked out of a restaurant because of poor service. It was during the grand opening week, and although the restaurant was not busy, it took 15 minutes for anyone to notice that they were there. Hoping to rescue the experience, they asked to speak with a manager before leaving. While trying to help her understand their frustration with the poor quality of service, the manager's

cell phone rang. Without saying a word, she held her palm up to their faces, took the call, and wandered away to finish chatting. Needless to say, they left dissatisfied with the experience.

Customer service can make or break a business deal, so as the late Peter Drucker once said, "Quality in a service or product is not what you put into it. It is what the client or customer gets out of it."

A review of the performance management literature confirms that performance management is the single largest contributor to organizational effectiveness. It takes innovative thinking and courageous actions to quell a performance crisis that is generated by under-performing, poorly managed employ-

ees, but it may be the most important action you perform as a manager.

One size doesn't fit all

Diversity is alive and well in employees' personalities, skills, abilities, interests, and levels of motivation and disengagement. Therefore, the traditional one-size-fits-all performance management thinking is obsolete in today's business environment.

Adopting a simple ABC performance model (A=excellent, B=good, C=poor) requires knowledge of the behaviors and personality traits of each employee.

An A player's tendencies—such as dependability, trustworthiness, confidence, great people skills, adaptability, and vision—make him a critical player

in the organization. The A player's behaviors—proactive problem solver, project oriented, career focused, and responds well to change—can be a model for other employees in the group. The A player will perform effectively as a mentor and performance coach if he embraces the idea that different people excel at different rates.

The B player, while not a stellar performer, is a steady one. B players effectively and efficiently execute the mission. They tend to be steady, loyal, and consistent. They can be depended on to get the job done exactly as directed.

The C player is the most challenging performer, most easily characterized as actively disengaged from both the purpose and meaning of work, and the achievement of team goals. Negative work attitudes and behaviors can have a disabling effect on team morale and productivity.

Performance strategy

Releasing your A player's (high performer) potential, grooming your Bs (steady performer) into As, and assuring that your C players (poor performers) are reprimanded for unsatisfactory performance, will not only raise your organiza-

tion's performance efficiency, but also the level of team satisfaction and customer service delivery as well.

ABC performance management contributes to talent management and extends into recruitment, retention, and succession planning.

Your organization's performance strategy should assess the costs of a disengaged worker, be realistic about your workplace, and effectively address the way you handle underperformers.

Underperformers—also known as disengaged workers—wield immense power by exerting control over the customer's experience, which can destroy customer loyalty.

Also disconcerting is the critical effect that poor performing employees have on staffing, turnover, retention, and morale. According to a 2002 Gallop Poll, disengaged workers are costing

U.S.-based organizations more than \$250 billion a year. Recent research indicates that as many as 65 percent of all employees are disengaged.

But what is even more disconcerting is the way organizations respond to underperformers. Some managers badmouth the situation but do nothing about it, transfer or promote the employee to a different department, or provide inconsistent disciplinary action.

This kind of inconsistent behavior can have damaging consequences in the workplace. Some employees lose motivation to exceed customer expectations because they perceive that the rewards or consequences for both good and bad behavior are exactly the same. When left unattended, the poor performance of a few underperforming employees can become the new office norm or culture. It is all about acknowledging the costs of inconsistent action toward the disengaged worker and the influence it has on other employees in the workplace.

While most organizations have what they consider to be effective performance management systems, many of those systems do not reflect the reality of the everyday workplace. Traditional performance goals sound good on paper, but their meaning is unclear.

First and foremost, a solid performance objective is behavioral in nature, which subsequently makes it observable and measurable. For instance, commonly used performance feedback, which directs the employee to improve communication, fails to provide tangible direction and may elicit unasked questions such as Which communication skills?, Improve how?, or How much improvement is necessary?

Communication, in general covers a broad spectrum of skills, but can be further defined as attentive listening, clear and succinct articulation, conflict resolution skills and public speaking abilities. The more closely the observable behaviors are related to the employee's job duties, the better. Think about the communication skills that are necessary to successfully close a sale or facilitate an effective staff meeting. An excellent source for behaviorally specific performance goals is the employee job description, which provides a concrete

list of the required knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to execute the duties and responsibilities for that position.

Organizational mission statements boast admirable goals, such as exceeding customer expectations, but what does the statement really mean. How do these performance goals translate into everyday measurable behavior?

Many times, organizations tell you what not to do, but never actually explain what to do. Organizational best practices provide important performance how-to specifics regarding the achievement of mission-related goals. They also are great sources of observable and measurable behaviors. The lists are simply compilations of the individual employee, department, or organizational actions necessary to achieve and maintain success. If your organization has not yet developed such a list of critical success factors, you need to research similar industries for a useful model.

How can organizations begin to consistently and effectively address the lazy, under-skilled, poorly trained, unmotivated, disengaged employee? Simply stated, you must decide to change the way you view this employee. All successfully executed behavior change begins with the process of making a decision.

Employees become disengaged for a variety of reasons. Some arrive in that condition and others lose focus while employed by the organization. The best way to approach this employee is immediately, instead of waiting for the six-month or annual performance evaluation. Start by gathering recent and relevant facts, which include performance data from reliable sources, such as co-workers and supervisors combined with your own observations and interactions.

Compare your recently acquired information to the information in his personnel file. Next, schedule a performance conversation with the employee to determine the level of disengagement and the source. Your subsequent actions will depend upon what you discover. A short-term performance disruption caused by a life crisis, such as illness or divorce, is easy to address by identifying a reasonable time frame by which you both agree the employee shall have resolved her issues.



Document this discussion for your personal employee files and follow up at the close of the time frame. Longer-term poor performance requires the same preparation for the performance discussion in addition to having a prepared outline of a behaviorally specific performance improvement plan. The presence of a third-party witness during this discussion will reduce the severity of anticipated unpleasantness, which often occurs when unexpectedly raising or changing an employee's performance expectations.

You must confront the ineffectiveness of your current performance management process by embracing the fact that performance, like employees, comes in all shapes and sizes. Employee performance—ranging from the top performer down to the bottom dwelling slacker—ends up being distributed throughout all levels of the organization.

Acknowledging personality and capability differences paves the way for a more realistic view of short- and long-term performance management. Common exam-

ples of workplace personality differences can be found in the infamous Type A and Type B personality types. The A's reputation of "anally retentive, go-getter, doer" is in direct contrast to the B's more laid back, less driven by urgency approach. Type A's tend to respond better to short-term performance objectives that provide immediate gratification as they check them off of the performance short list. Type B's tend to be more comfortable with objectives that are spaced further apart to allow for long-term project work.

A list performers

Encouraging superior performance is one of the most unique leadership abilities because of how easy it is to become threatened by the consistently stellar performance of A players.

If ego can be managed, A players make everyone look good. Fortunately, the concept of having an "A game" or superior performance is universally translated across culture, ethnicity, gender, and generation.

Start by making a list of your organization's A players. Remember that A players first envision the possibilities and then quickly make things happen, all the while pulling B players along.

Before formulating an effective performance diversity management strategy, a few questions must be addressed:

- Are there performance strategies in your organization that keep A players engaged, encourage Bs, and weed out Cs?
- Are there opportunities to retain A players by encouraging them to shine?
- Are there mechanisms for the B players to be groomed and mentored to move to the next level?

Effectively managing performance diversity requires a commitment from all involved parties. Reinforce your organization's performance goals and objectives to your employees.

Early intervention

The best opportunity to salvage a B or C player is to intervene early, at the first signs of underperformance.

To create an effective talent pipeline for your organization, it is essential to identify and reward both effort and accomplishment for these future leaders. Develop leadership initiatives, such as mentor programs, leadership training, and community volunteer projects.

B player performance is ripe for assignment to a special community volunteer project such as Junior Achievement or an internal employee recognition rewards committee. The opportunity to perform at a higher level requiring the flexing of leadership abilities is often enough to spur the confidence necessary for improved on-the-job performance.

Although at first mention it may seem like a mismatch, improved performance can be sparked in a poorly performing C player by pairing him with a mentor who models the desired performance behavior. This is an effective strategy when coupled with a last chance performance agreement, which notifies the employee of the final opportunity to meet performance standards and the consequences for failing to do so.

In an effort to create longer grooming periods for a blossoming B player, leadership roundtables, as a part of the organization's larger leadership de-

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velopment program, provide effective ongoing, long-term opportunities for engagement and observation of future performance potential.

Monitor the B player for A player potential and offer encouragement on how he can reach the next level. Showing concern for a B player's future increases his level of employee engagement. The B player's development plan should include one-on-one coaching from an A player.

For the C player, you must first assess if that player is worth keeping. It's imperative that you immediately address any unresolved performance issues and initiate performance-counseling sessions to determine roadblocks to future performance improvement.

Begin with that long overdue performance evaluation followed by a performance improvement plan with specific goals and timelines. If goals are not consistently met, swiftly implement progressive action.

Most likely, there will be either no documented or an inconsistently documented history of the C player's poor performance record, so begin with your organization's progressive discipline procedure. Start with the verbal warning (documented on your calendar or as a memo to your personal employee files), followed by a first and second written reprimand, concluding in a written notification of termination of employment.

The first or second written reprimand can be rendered more effective if accompanied by a performance improvement plan or a last chance agreement. Once these aggressive strategies are in place, expect attrition as a result of consistent pressure.

Effective performance management on both ends of the performance spectrum is critical. You can count on A players to raise the organization's performance bar just as much as you can count on C players to lower it. **T+D**

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WHO ARE THE KEY PLAYERS?

To successfully manage employee performance, you must be able to identify the key players as A, B, or C performers.

Each profile of the A player, B player, and C player should evoke critical introspection and lively debate in staff meetings or during performance reviews.

Some employees may perform on the cusp of both A and B levels or B and C levels. Be open to discoveries of untapped potential.

A-player philosophy:

"I make a point of doing the best work I can, even if it interferes with other areas of my life."

Behaviors/ A players are actively engaged, go above and beyond expectations, make good decisions, problem solve, take direction well, request performance feedback, respond well to change, are project oriented, work well independently, are career focused, and mentor others.

Personality tendencies/ A players have great people skills; are confident, natural competitors; are satisfaction-driven and internally directed; are dependable, trustworthy, and accountable; have great vision; are perfectionists, and are change agents.

B-player philosophy:

"I work hard, but not so as to interfere with other areas of my life."

Behaviors/ B players do what is necessary at the time it is required, can be led or misled by others, take direction without objection, go along to get along, and pursue advancement if encouraged.

Personality tendencies/ B players have average people skills. They are impressionable, loyal, peaceful, and dependable. They are work-ethic driven, and externally directed.

C-player philosophy:

"I work only as hard as I have to."

Behaviors/ C players blame other people or circumstances for their failures; have low energy and poor productivity, and a poor work attitude. They also tend to have high absenteeism or tardiness.

Personality Tendencies/ C players are actively disengaged. They seem to be apathetic, clueless, insubordinate, defensive or argumentative, and are unreliable. C players also lack motivation, have low self-esteem, and carry an entitlement mentality.

Source: Alice Gresham Walker



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