

Getting the 'Best' from Employees



By Janis Foord Kirk
Career Monitor

Toronto Star Business section Page D12
Saturday October 7, 2006

"We want strong performers; top performers," the company president said, casting a no-nonsense gaze at the two consultants hired to assist in the firm's recruiting drive.

"What exactly does that mean in this organization"? one of them asked, pen poised to take notes. "What are your performance criteria? What qualities do your top performers possess?"

The president sat back in his chair, thought for a moment, then said: "They're people who know what needs to be done, know how to do it, and then do it, consistently and well."

Snappy yet vague descriptions of this kind do little to explain what strong performers actually do to stand out from the crowd at work. Yet employers everywhere want to hire so-called "top performers". And most everyone wants to be one.

"There's a huge drive to measure performance because there's a huge drive to pay for performance," says Janet Hardy, founding partner of the Chrysalis Group, a Toronto-based company which designs and helps implement performance management programs. "But there is a trick to it.

"Performance is not a technical term," she explains. "It's easy to pick out the financial metrics, there are probably marketing and some operational metrics which aren't difficult to do, but identifying at an individual level, how a specific person impacts the success of an organization is tough work."

A short article on the American Psychological Association website called, Which Traits Predict Job Performance? sheds some light on the topic. (www.apahelpcentre.org)

Having the "smarts" to do a particular kind of work is only part of the job performance equation, the article notes. Performance capabilities like creativity, leadership, integrity and cooperation are related more to personality and interpersonal skills. The "Big Five" personality traits that tend to predict performance, according to this psychological perspective, are extraversion and whether someone is agreeable, conscientious, open to new experience and emotionally stable.

"Those are pretty good attributes in the realm of business or health care or sectors of that kind," says Hardy. "It speaks to a certain mindset, a positive, adaptive, fluid mindset, a highly communicative individual.

"Unfortunately, it tars everyone with the same brush," she adds. "And I'm not sure that it reflects strong performance in a car assembly plant, for example, or for somebody working as a research scientist."

There's no question that intellectual intelligence, emotional intelligence and social intelligence are prerequisites for strong performance, says Bob Angel, whose consulting firm, The Gilford Group,

works to enhance organizational and individual performance by facilitating cultural change. “But they are not evidence of performance.”

“Even when you have all these attributes,” Angel says, “there can be barriers in the way the organizational culture works that prevent you from capitalizing on them.”

His point is well made. On-the job performance is never a solo act. As with any performance, there is always a venue or setting, an audience and, at times, others on the stage with you.

On the job, your employer establishes the setting; the culture in which you work, the way you are led, the effectiveness of the organization’s programs to measure, encourage and reward performance.

Your audience is your customers and clients, as well as the people with whom you interact every day, virtually all of them performing along with you; your bosses, colleagues, suppliers and associates.

In all sorts of complex and interrelated ways, the setting which your employer creates, and the cast of characters with whom you work, directly affect the quality of your own performance.

“Performance management” is what employers and human resource specialists call the nuanced, multifaceted task of maximizing the performance of each employee. Few contemporary workplace issues have caused more ink to be spilled, more seminar hours to be booked or more executive insomnia.

And yet, says Angel: “Many senior managers are starting to get worried about performance, starting to realize that they’re spending a lot of effort on performance but not seeing very much in the way of results for it.”

The results are illusive because comprehensive performance management is a bit like a juggling act, with three balls that have to be kept aloft at the same time.

“There’s the employee ball,” says Hardy. “Each individual has to have the right talent, the right behavioural attributes for the job they’re in. They have to manage their own careers, their own success and performance and not expect it to be delegated to their managers.”

The organization’s performance programs are another ball. “There’s performance management, pay for performance, all the criteria used for performance,” she explains. “Programs like these need to be well designed, integrated and executed.

“Then, there’s the leader ball,” Hardy says. “Managers need to be capable, confident and courageous. They have to define performance, provide feedback on performance and have positive acknowledging conversations as well as difficult conversations. They have to make the right decisions around rewards, recognition and promotion.”

Hiring and keeping top performers, or being one, for that matter, is tough work because only rarely are these three balls juggled successfully all the time.

Even when they are not, however, there are ways to position your self as a “top performer”: More about this on October 21st.

Sidebar: Getting on the same page as the boss

“You can say to somebody, be a stronger performer on the job, but that person may have a very different view as the worker than you do as his boss, as to what strong

performance on the job actually means,” says Bob Angel, of Toronto’s Gilford Group Limited/

“You have to get agreement between the two of you, on what you mean by strong performance on the job.”



Bob Angel of Toronto’s Gilford Group Limited

Janis Foord Kirk is a speaker and author of *Survivability, Career Strategies for the New World of Work*. Write to her c/o The Toronto Star, 1 Yonge St. M5E 1E6. Email: janis@survivability.net Website <http://www.survivability.net>

<http://thestar.workopolis.com/servlet/Content/torontostar/20061010/star20061010?section=TORSTAR>

© [The Toronto Star](#). Republished with permission. All Rights Reserved. No part of this article may be reproduced or republished or redistributed without the prior written consent of the copyright holder.

It's the need to achieve that drives top performers



By Janis Foord Kirk
Career Monitor

Toronto Star Business section Page D11
Saturday October 21, 2006

Developing self-management skills is a key competency of top performers, career developers say.

Your company has a fast track and you want to get on it.

"It's reserved for top performers" your boss tells you.

"I'm reliable and hardworking," you reply. "Doesn't that make me a top performer?"

"There's more to it than that," she says. "What more?" you ask. "What do I need to do to earn that label?"

Look for a simple answer to this question and you'll be disappointed. As noted in this column on Oct. 7, "Getting the 'best' from employees," individual performance doesn't happen in a vacuum. In myriad interrelated ways, your boss, your job, your organization's culture and the people with whom you work, directly affect the quality of your own performance.

Still, if "top-performer" status is important to you, there are things you can do to move in that direction. Three performance specialists, based in Toronto, offer the following counsel. Be warned, it's not for the faint-of-heart.

► **Build self-management skills.** Few people have put a finer point on the relationship between self-management and performance than Dr. John Marshall, chair of The Self-Management Group, a company specializing in the selection, development and retention of top performers (and in the spirit of full disclosure, a business associate of mine).

Tip of the week

"People you trust do what they say they're going to do," says Dr. John Marshall of The Self-management Group. "That's what top performers do. They put their energy into doing it rather than thinking about doing it. They make a decision. They make a commitment and they meet it."

"No matter what position you are in," Marshall says, "to look at your own performance you've got to look at your internal environment; how you manage your energy, how you manage yourself, your own personal resources. That's self-management and it's the Number 1 key competency of top performers."

Self-managers are savvy people, self-aware and alert. "They get up in the morning, set goals, set activities, commit to the activities," he says. "They evaluate the results, seek resources to get better and then start that whole process the next day."

"Three things interact," Marshall observes. "There are your goals – that's the strategic target that you want to go after. There are results – that's what happens. In the middle is the self-management piece; it's 80 per cent of the process and the only thing you can really manage, your effort, and your commitment."

► **Align your goals with your employer's goals.** In today's busy workplace, goals aren't necessarily top-of-mind, says Bob Angel, founder of the Gilford Group Limited. "People are very busy trying to just get their work done for tomorrow morning," he explains. "And they don't find it easy to articulate what their work goals really mean over the long haul. Even if they can identify them, they have great difficulty in putting together an actual plan."

"Fuzzy thinking" of this kind is complicated by the fact that there are at least two sets of performance objectives in most organizations, he adds. .And the organizational goals that cascade down from senior management (often couched in terms of revenues, profits and share price) are quite different from the goals of individuals, taxed as they are keeping chaos at bay in their particular corner of the workplace while juggling the demands of busy, complex lives.

Top performers find a way to align the two. It's a lengthy career management process, Angel acknowledges, "an exercise of thinking about the things you need to do to make yourself successful, your job successful, and the organization successful both in the short-term and the long term."

► **Engage your boss in performance discussions.** You may get help from your employer's performance management process, or you may not. It depends on your boss. There's a strong likelihood that despite the best of intentions he may not be up to coaching you.

"People are busy; they've got a million things on their plate," says Janet Hardy, founding partner of The Chrysalis Group. "And frankly at the end the day, a lot of people don't want to talk about performance. They aren't comfortable appreciating and acknowledging it positively, and when there's a performance problem, it's the last conversation they want to have.

"Very few organizations, she says, "are moving forward aggressively to train and coach managers about what great performance looks like, about how to make smart decisions around who to pay, who to reward, who to recognize, who to have difficult conversations with."

Top performers find a way around this, actively seeking out feedback. "Individuals who manage themselves well, who aren't afraid to ask questions, aren't afraid to say: 'How can I be better? How can you help me be better? Talk to me about how well I'm doing,' are the ones who distinguish themselves," Hardy says.

► **Present your own business case.** When looking at a new job or at your next opportunity, adopt "a pragmatic," practical, business focus," she advises. "Prepare to state what you've accomplished and what impact that has had, whether in a leadership position, in school or at a past job. Demonstrate the progress you've made to a certain set of goals.

"Establish that you clearly understand your role in the overall business plan – and that you can deliver your piece very effectively, even if it's just a tiny piece of the organization," Hardy adds. "Convince employers that you have what it will take to make them more successful moving forward."

In Marshall's view, one overriding characteristic sets top performers apart – an internal "achievement motivation."

"Successful people, top performers, continue to get better and continue to perform at a high level not because of the external results they're getting," he says. "That's just a scorecard. The real drive is the need to achieve."

Janis Foord Kirk is a speaker and author of *Survivability, Career Strategies for the New World of Work*. Write to her c/o The Toronto Star, 1 Yonge St. M5E 1E6. Email: janis@survivability.net or visit <http://www.survivability.net> on the Web.