

Managing performance – getting the balance right



I have observed over my working life a distribution of people's performance exists such that something like 20% of people drive or deliver value adding activities of the organization. That is, those activities which assist the organization to deliver against its goal. I also have observed that about 10% of people drive value destroying activities. The distribution of the other 70% is skewed in their value adding or value destroying behaviour dependent on how the 20% value adding and 10% value destroying are rewarded for their behaviour.

Jack Welch observed the same and assiduously managed out the bottom 10 percent of performers. Whilst not advocating such action is right for every organization, my observations have led me to believe that we spend far too much time on the bottom 10% and not enough time with the 20% giving them the head space and resources to do even better. We also do not spend enough time with the middle 70% helping them understand the benefits of aspiring to do better and how they can achieve it.

Willing and Able matrix

The willing and able matrix provides a standard thought process to managing performance of the 70:20:10 distributions prevalent in most organizations.

Yes Able	Counsel and then confront if no improvement	Sponsor
	Confront	Educate and encourage
No	No	Yes

Willing

Willing and able:

Sponsor people who are willing and able to help them further their development as a person and as an organizational resource. This includes but is not limited to:

- Assignments in different functions of the business
- Membership of cross-functional project teams tackling difficult issues
- Elite training programs
- Control over assignments in their area of expertise with stretch targets
- Relieving duties for more senior managers while they are absent for extended periods of time
- Assignment of a mentor.

Willing but unable:

Educate and encourage people who are willing but unable to complete more difficult activities. This includes but is not limited to:

- Corporate training programmes
- On-the-job training programmes
- Assessment of knowledge and practical execution of processes and procedures to understand knowledge and skill gaps
- Assignment of a coach to coach in skills and provide a role model for behaviour
- Provision of reading materials assessed as being relevant to the behaviours required for their role.

Able but not willing:

Counsel those who are able but not willing to use their talents and skills to make a better life for themselves and a better outcome for the organization. If that does not work after several tries, move to confrontation. This includes but is not limited to:

- Seeking understanding of their interests to ensure that they are in roles that match their interests. It is much easier to build skills when you are in a role that matches your interests
- Determine if there are blockers to their performance and agree where possible to remove those blockers in return for a concerted effort to improve their performance
- Determine if they feel valued or not and seek to improve their perception of their value
- Agree on an action plan of mutually agreed actions to improve performance. If repeated attempts to execute an action plan results in insufficient improvement in behaviour and performance move to confronting them on their behaviour and ask them "What are you going to do about your problem" passing ownership of the problem from a joint between you and the employee to them alone.

Unable and unwilling:

Those who have shown themselves to be consistently unwilling and unable or have done so through an act resulting in extremely poor performance or grossly affecting the performance of others, must be confronted with their behaviour leading to the poor performance and asked what they will do to correct their behaviour. This includes but is not limited to:

- Having a one-on-one meeting with the person and developing an action plan with clear timelines of what they will do to improve their performance with equally clear consequences for not doing so.

Getting the balance right

Using a model such as the willing and able matrix is a good approach to managing the performance of people across the 70:20:10 divides. The problem I observe is not people using such a model to guide their thinking but that most of the effort of the Human Resources function and line management is directed at the 10%, the unwilling and unable, through some misguided sympathy for people in this position. The end result of the over allocation of resources and time to this group is that less effort is spent with the 20%, the willing and able. The result is a perception that more attention is paid to those that do not perform than those that do. When the 70% perceive this is clearly the case, their performance skews towards the 10% rather than the 20%. Additionally usually more fuss and more noise are made of the 10% than the 20% magnifying the perception.

So what to do if my assertion is true?

In my experience, what is required is a performance management process as described by the willing and able matrix that is clearly articulated and in which supervisors and managers are well trained to execute. In addition supervisors and managers who it is known are affected emotionally when it comes to counselling and confronting and thus lose objectivity should be assigned a coach who has shown themselves to be able to remain objective in such situations. Further to this, the treatment of the 20% should be proactive and public whereas the treatment of the 10% is necessarily reactive and should be kept as private as possible in a workplace.