

# Managing your average performers

Every manager has them. Every organization depends on them. In fact, they represent the majority of all workers everywhere. Who are they? The average performers—all those people whose work, if seldom exceptional, is seldom less than acceptable, either.

No matter how much experience a manager accumulates, the same problems keep getting in the way when it comes to giving average performers the sort of supervision they really need—the sort that will support their current efforts, while still encouraging them to reach a little higher.

Though difficult to avoid entirely, the problems that complicate the management of the work of average performers can be resolved. Here are some of the more common problems and some suggestions about what to do the next time they arise on your team.

## Taking people for granted

"It won't really matter if I don't see Shelley and Nelda this afternoon. They won't get upset if we don't meet. That's the way they are. They didn't even mind last month when I had to put off their reviews for a week."

As we all know, it's the squeaking wheel that gets the grease. And it's the employees with the most obvious problems who get the most attention from the manager. Studies show that nearly all the time most managers spent on "people work" is divided between their best performers and their worst ones. The people in the middle end up fending for themselves. Here are some ways you can change that:

Pay attention to how you are spending your "people time." Get around regularly to each of your employees, including the average performers. Find out what matters to them; don't assume that Nelda doesn't voice particular needs, interests or wants because she doesn't have any. It's vital that you show you care enough to find out what they are.

Consider all employees for training. Assume that everyone has some interest in developing new skills. It's easy to forget, for example, that the average performer has just as great a need, perhaps even greater, to learn communication and problem-solving skills as anyone else. The increased self-confidence that such training often brings may be just what Shelley needs to raise her sights.

Give average performers chances to branch out. New tasks may help Shelley and Nelda get out of their rut—or help you see them with a fresh eye. If they enjoy the new work, find out why. Because they got a chance to do something different? Or because they got more of your time, attention and approval? even if they don't enjoy or excel at a new task, finding out why helps you clue into their most important motivations.

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## Losing patience

"Why is Jerry so slow about learning anything new? I wish they had never assigned him to my team. Now I have

three people struggling to learn the basics, and I don't have time for hand-holding."

Some average performers do learn more slowly, but most can learn and pick up speed as well as anyone else. It's not a lack of ability, but rather of motivation, that keeps them from excelling. Promote more motivation and keep from losing your patience with these strategies:

Set measurable short-term goals for each of your people. Many employees who are content with average results don't have any clear-cut goals in mind; they're working, but not toward anything in particular. The experience of setting goals, striving to meet them and (importantly) getting lots of positive reinforcement for reaching them can give them a whole new frame of reference.

Make sure goals are challenging but attainable. People who are not goal-oriented often accept, or set for themselves, goals that are simply unrealistic. Then, when they don't meet them, they conclude that goal setting doesn't work or that "average" is all they'll ever be. Start out with targets that call for only modest improvements in results—but that need to be achieved relatively soon. This will get average performers into the habit of attaining goals and feeling the resulting satisfaction.

Help people evaluate their own work. Let them keep track of their own quality and productivity. This shows them what they're accomplishing and how it compares to expectations. It also helps demonstrate to average performers how easy it would be for them to improve, making it easy for you to secure agreement on more challenging goals.

## **Giving up for good**

"I knew Betty wouldn't be able to pull those reports together, and I was right. Now I've got to turn them over to one of my good people. It would really be a lot better if everyone just stuck to what they already know how to do."

Expecting too much improvement too soon can be frustrating, but expecting too little can be even worse. That's what tells people you don't care and results don't matter. Try the following instead:

Keep an open mind about everyone's potential. People perform at different levels in different jobs and at different points in their careers. expect good performance from all your people, and do what you can to facilitate it. Allow people the freedom to fail, learn from their mistakes and then succeed.

If there's room for improvement, expect it. "Expecting improvement" is not a spectator sport—it's the heart of the manager's job. But no one, not even your star performers, can improve constantly. There needs to be resting periods where people can adjust to the new standards they've begun to meet. Though not particularly rapid or dramatic, the gains in performance made this way will be permanent—which is what you want.

## **Staying on track with your high achievers**

While supervising average performers can be a challenge, managing the work of your best people can also be trying for team leaders. Here are some strategies to consider:

Give meaningful assignments. For high achievers, job satisfaction is more important than money; top-level performers who feel they are accomplishing something worthwhile will stay with it.

Offer challenges, not frustrations. High achievers are capable of, and often enjoy, overcoming difficult obstacles. But don't put them in situations where they feel totally blocked and wear themselves (and you!) out trying to do the impossible.

Provide direction, not directions. High achievers do well when given an overall approach and then encouraged to

work out its applications on their own. Try the "SOS" approach: Lay out the situation, the objectives and the strategy, and then step back.

Resist the urge to reject or revise results. Allow your achievers to generate fresh ideas and unorthodox solutions. Even if you don't like an idea, let your people present it to clients or higher-ups anyway, alongside solutions you may prefer. That's what shows people you're a secure enough manager to encourage top talent.

When it's time to coach or correct, be firm. Show respect for your achievers' abilities—and expect it in return. It's easy for high achievers to test your boundaries and their own strength. Be specific and prompt when you feel someone's getting out of line—but reaffirm your confidence in his ability to change course.