Creating Top Performing Employees – Making the tough call

We have all hired employees who never quite seem to measure up to the expectations of the job. Yet for some reason or another, we keep them on hoping that they will improve or going through our corrective action process that never quite seems to get them out the door.

We either need to coach and train lower performers quickly to become “A players”, redeploy them to positions in the company where they can be “A players” or move them out of the company so they can be successful somewhere else.

Having the right people is essential to your competitive advantage and overall business success. Lower performers will hurt the company and hinder growth.

Leading experts in the field like Bradford D. Smart, Topgrading and Jim Collins, Good to Great, emphasize the importance of hiring the right people and not settling for average or below average performers. “First who, then what”, says Jim Collins.

In his book Topgrading, Bradford Smart states:” “After studying literally thousands of successful and failed careers, and over one hundred successful and failed companies, one overriding factor emerges: talent. Human-capital. The single most important driver of organizational performance and individual managerial success is talent. The ability to actually do what every company and every manager professes to do—hire the best—is what distinguishes premier companies from mediocre firms, successful versus ordinary careers. The vast majority of organizations and managers simply can’t figure out how to overcome the many obstacles to packing their team with "A" players.”

Kurt Southam, PhD, of Southam Consulting, offers a useful acid test that tells how to determine if you have a “C players”.

1. If this person were to come to you and announce that he/she was resigning and was giving you a four -week notice, would you be secretly relieved?
2. When you work with this person on a project or task, does the interaction suck energy out of you, or put energy into you?
3. If the job this person currently holds were open and you were looking to fill it and the person in question did not work for you but applied for the job…knowing what you know about him/her, would you hire him/her?
4. Look into the future 6 months and candidly assess the situation, even with coaching and training, will the person still struggle with the concerns that bother you now… will there be any significant change?

“The answers to these four questions usually point to a solution that you probably need to make a change and the sooner the better” say Kurt Southam.

According to Mr. Smart “Topgrading is the practice of packing the team with "A players” and clearing out the “C players”. An “A player” is defined as the top 10 percent of talent available at all salary levels—best of class. With this radical definition, you are not a topgrader until your team consists of all "A players". Period.”
OK, so the experts tell us to get rid of our dead wood, non-performing employees. Yet why are we so afraid to move these individuals on down the road? The answers lie in the high number of wrongful termination lawsuits and risk of multi-million dollar settlements, fines and court costs.

Effective performance management, the hiring process, corrective action and termination practices do not have to put your organization at risk, when done correctly. The following guidelines will help you get started in creating your work force of “A players”.

**Guidelines**
Define performance and performance standards for every position in your organization.

Define people requirements such as knowledge, skills, abilities, experience and qualifications needed to be successful by position. It is equally important to define fit needs such as fit with pay, job, career plans, team, company culture and fit with your leadership style.

Hire individuals who meet your hiring criteria or people requirements. This is not as easy as sitting in an interview and feeling good about what someone is telling you. Find ways to get job candidates to demonstrate how they have handled real related challenges in the past. This is a pretty good indicator as to how they will do things in the future. It’s as much about personality and fit as it is about skills. If they don’t love what they do, they will never really engage in the job.

Conduct a clear orientation process helping new employees clearly understand what is expected, and how their performance will be tracked and measured.

Assess performance early on, providing training and coaching to get individuals up to “A level” performance. If the coaching and training do not work within the first 90 days or so, consider transferring them to an area where they can be successful or discharging them. As painful as it is, everyone will be better off in the long-run, including the discharged employee. When possible accept responsibility for your bad hire and help them through the transition with severance money and outplacement assistance.

Once an employee is established in a position, performance should still be tracked and measured on an on-going basis. There are a number of effective ways to do this using such performance standards as specific, measurable objectives and desired competencies or behaviors.

Your performance management system should help you identify Level A, B and C performers. The hard part is taking the needed steps to coach, train, transfer or discharge as necessary. Where organizations get into trouble is when they are inconsistent in their corrective action or discharge practices or when they make employment decisions on non-job related issues.

Training your leaders and establishing good guidelines for these practices help limit the risk and empower you in building a successful work force of “A players”.

Finally, remember to be respectful to employees, especially when taking corrective action and throughout the discharge process, if it comes to this point. Nothing starts the legal process faster than leaving someone feeling that they were unjustly treated, embarrassed or resentful in how the final actions were handled.

By: Ken Spencer, SPHR, MHRM, Sr. Human Resources Consultant, HR Service, Inc.

Source: Kurt Southam, Southam Consulting, *Topgrading* by Bradford D. Smart, and *Good to Great* by Jim Collins.

---

**Need Assistance?**
HR Service, Inc. specializes in helping organizations create high performing employees and work environments. For assistance, coaching or training call: (801) 255-6166. Visit us on the web at: [www.hrserviceinc.com](http://www.hrserviceinc.com)