

The Care and Feeding of Exceptional Performers

By

Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

Ordinary just won't succeed anymore. Organizations will increasingly depend on cutting-edge solutions to never-before-seen problems and clever ideas for those recurring headaches that have always plagued us. Research indicates that a handful of star performers create the vast majority of valuable ideas for their organizations. These top thinkers, who also deliver stellar results, define the talent you'll need moving forward, but they don't usually perform to their maximum capacity alone. They are not free agents; rather, these highly talented, extraordinary thinkers need the structure of an organization and effective leadership to do their best work.

Leaders who choose to lead a team of virtuosos need to understand that these clever—often brilliant—individuals offer more, so they expect more in return. They have high standards for themselves, so it makes sense that they will hold their places of employment to equally high standards. They want to work with other virtuosos in a culture that fosters their growth, formulates a clear strategy for their success, and then creates the day-to-day processes that allow them to succeed. In short, they want virtuoso organizations. It all starts with a commitment to excellence.

Excellence

Bureaucracy stands at cross purposes with discipline, which in turn compromises excellence and an action orientation. Many companies build the bureaucratic rules to justify the existence of those who influence rule-making and to manage the small percentage of people who simply can't or won't do their jobs. When you tie a culture of discipline to a commitment to attract and retain the best and brightest in your industry, a magical alchemy of action and results occurs.

But discipline by itself won't produce excellence. Numerous organizations throughout history have exhibited tremendous discipline as they marched in lockstep precision to ruin. You need a *system* of discipline—a quality and consistency orientation—not philosophy. That means people understand that implementation of the strategy holds the key to everyone's success and that interdependence coexists symbiotically with rugged self-reliance. They understand the structure for getting work done—excellently. Excellence starts with the right people.

Talent

How often have we heard, "Our people are our greatest asset"? The facts tell a different story. Only *some* people are true assets. These people will make the difference between surviving and thriving—between outrunning your competition and tripping at the finish line. Yet, most companies continue to struggle in their attempts to identify and develop virtuosos. They eagerly pay top dollar for the talent they want instead of getting top talent for the dollars they pay.

First, start with outstanding talent, and make no exceptions, even if you're in pain. The best of the best expect to work with other superior performers.

Second, when you establish an expectation of excellence, excellence becomes self-perpetuating. Each generation of new managers understands what top talent looks like, so hiring, development, and retention improve. Tie talent decisions to clear goals, and you have a success formula.

Third, there's no substitute for raw talent, but taken singly, it doesn't offer much. You must also assess the person's ethics and commitment to developing others. When talent, character, and behavior come together, decision makers can rest assured that they will receive the top talent for the dollars they pay.

A Culture of Change and Learning

Corporate culture—the pattern of shared assumptions that the group has adopted and adapted over a period of time—develops in much the same way as legends and traditions do. Organizations learn as they solve their problems and adapt to the world around them. When something works well over a period of time, and leaders consider it valid, members of the organization begin to teach the behavior or idea to new people. Through this process, new members find out what those around them perceive, think, and feel about issues that touch the organization. This awareness allows them to set the direction for the company—consistently and adeptly.

Three elements define corporate culture: norms, a change orientation, and a commitment to learning. Exceptional organizations change *proactively* rather than *reactively*, and they do so quickly—not at the speed of a typical glacier. A willingness to learn quickly sets the stage for agile changes, and the norms guide the process. It all happens simultaneously, one action the voice, the other the echo. But it adds up to a culture where exceptional people can do their best work.

Strategy

There are two kinds of organizations: those with a strong strategy and culture of change and those going out of business. In other words, what got you here won't necessarily get you to the next level. The Pony Express didn't become the railroad, and the railroad didn't become the airlines. Vanguards in their days, at one time, both the railroad and airline industries thrived. Today, however, both industries suffer from decades of bad management.

Unlike the leaders in these two industries, you will need to excel at reading the tea leaves. What opportunities and threats loom on your horizon? How can you leverage your strengths and mitigate your weaknesses to ready yourself for them?

Exceptional organizations start with a strong strategic principle—a shared objective about what the organization wants to accomplish. This principle guides the company's allocation of scarce resources—money, time, and talent. A well-thought-out strategic principle pinpoints the intersection of the organization's passion, excellence, and profitability, or in the case of not-for-profit organizations, its unique contribution.

The strategic principle doesn't merely aggregate a collection of objectives. Rather, it captures the thinking required to build a sustainable competitive advantage that forces trade-offs among competing resources, tests the soundness of particular initiatives, and sets clear boundaries within which decision makers must operate.

When companies face change or turmoil, the strategic principle acts as a beacon that keeps the ships from running aground. It helps maintain consistency but gives managers the freedom to make decisions that are right for their part of the organization. Even when the leadership changes, or the economic landscape shifts, the strategic principle remains the same. It helps decision makers know when to develop new practices, products, and markets.

Implementation

A breakthrough product, dazzling service, or cutting-edge technology can put you in the game, but only rock-solid implementation of a well-developed strategy can keep you there. You have to be able to deliver—to translate your brilliant strategy and operational decisions into action. Clear strategy leads the process; great performance completes it. Implementation involves discipline; it requires senior leader involvement; and it should be central to the organization's culture.

Conclusion

Exceptional organizations serve as magnets to virtuosos who, by their very nature, require superior performance of themselves and those with whom they associate. They want to feel empowered to make decisions to improve both the organization and their own lives, and they want to align their excellence with an employer that distinguishes itself through excellence. Exceptional people crave an action-oriented culture that responds to change and reinvents itself whenever new information or learning indicates it should. In short, they want to work for companies that strive to think strategically, grow dramatically, promote intelligently, and compete successfully—both today and tomorrow.