

thought leadership

High Performance

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Getting the right people in the right jobs and giving them the tools they need to perform, to the very best of their ability is not a job 'for the boys', its the holy grail of business success. Even in the very best run organisations (small or large) up to ¼ of the employee population will be actively thinking of leaving or just spinning along, either under or over challenged but definitely not fully engaged and contributing to their max. This isn't an issue of good will on the part of the individual's concerned it is the result of insufficient application of the rules of high performance i.e. how to get the best from people.

No business is too small (or too large!) to apply the rules of high performance. Think of a small business as a sports team, even the smallest sports team will clearly define the job it wants each player to do, will systematically review the performance of each player and the whole team after each game and will celebrate success. The bigger the team, the more important it is that these elements are present. In business it's the same: a job needs to be designed, performance needs constant review and the story of the business needs to be written.

High performance rule 1 – carefully design the job that you want a person to do.

There are a number of characteristics that make a job great to do. A great job includes meaningful work, responsibility for outcomes and knowledge of results. If you design a job with these three elements, your employees will be twice as likely to be motivated, satisfied and productive. 'Meaningful work' means providing the opportunity for the individual to use a variety of skills and apply them to tasks that are important to the success of the business i.e. this means if the tasks aren't completed successfully the consequences will be obvious. 'Responsibility' means that there is sufficient autonomy such that an individual can see where their responsibility starts and ends. And, 'knowledge of results' means that there must be a mechanism for the individual to get feedback about the results of what they do and how they do it, so that they can work out how to do it better and differently next time round.

High performance rule 2 – get the right people in to the right jobs.

In sport as in life, it is important to play to your strengths. It is easy to imagine that sports men and women are super-competent, but in reality they vary as much as any other person. Some are plagued with lack of self-confidence which keeps them practising and practising, others will take on anyone at anything and never seem to doubt their ability. In sports teams colleagues quickly work out what the strengths and limitations of each person are. In training, individual's work to eradicate limitations, in play, the team pulls together to maximise the strengths of each individual. What matters is that every single person is an individual with important assets and is treated as such.

Knowing a person well means, knowing what they can do (their capability and competence), and what they are willing to do (what motivates them). Motivation is a key concern for businesses today. When you read a persons high octane CV it's all too easy to conclude that a person 'can do' anything. Even when scored against competencies in assessment centre exercises, individuals seem to have the 'can do' to do a number of things well. But their performance in the real-life work situation will ultimately depend on not just their competence but also the extent to which they are motivated to perform in that particular role. Selecting people on this basis of just competence is a one-way street – i.e. what the individual can bring to the job

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(the 'can do' factor) but this will have no bearing on whether the job is going to suit the individual. Assessing intrinsic motivation makes selecting people for a job a two-way exchange by taking into account the extent to which the individual will thrive in the role (the 'will do' factor), and it consequently often proves to be a more powerful indicator of overall success. A motivational style profile will tell you straight whether an individual needs structure, prefers to work alone, likes taking on seemingly impossible tasks or is ultimately motivated by achieving things through others. Profiling the job for its motivational attributes tells you which one of these is important. Lets face it with the best will in the world only a certain number of people make great change agents, great CEO's or great people managers and if you want people to succeed in their roles, it's important not to recruit a Ferrari when an off-roader is required!

High performance rule 3 – tell it straight.

One of the biggest contributors to employee performance is straightforward, accurate, and fair, detailed feedback. A study of high performing organisations conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council (2002) concluded that informal feedback from a knowledgeable source is the single biggest performance lever available to an organisation. In the same way that individuals leave sports teams because of their coach, individuals leave businesses because of their manager. Estimates conclude that over one third of employees leave for another job because their manager didn't give them sufficiently challenging feedback. Employees who receive regular, fair and accurate, detailed feedback are more likely to invest more in trying to do their job better and differently. Feedback must take two forms: firstly, managers must help employees find tangible solutions to specific work challenges. If your sales person can't decide how to price a deal, he/she will need tangible support, there and then, otherwise he/she can't deliver on his/her promise. Providing solutions or direction on how to resolve issues is a fundamental part of a manager's role.

Secondly, managers must provide voluntary, detailed, immediate and positive feedback about performance to employees. There isn't a right time and feedback can't wait until a performance review, it must be given regularly and voluntarily. As an athlete a part of your daily regime is feedback for the purposes of improvement. Feedback comes from colleagues and coaches alike. It's not structured and formal, but informal, regular, detailed and focused on improving performance; "your concentration was poor in that last session which is ruining the passing sequence. Think back to the last session, you were really focused on the phases of the sequence, the feeling, the timing and the routine. I want you to apply that again, zone in on the timing then you will be more focused and it will help the rest of the team". In sport every detail counts, in business it does too. Genuine, focused feedback on agreed outcomes makes the difference to how quickly people improve performance and to how much effort they will put in to doing things better. There are few people who don't want to improve. Without feedback, employees don't have the tools they need to perform.

High performance rule 4 – make success and failure memorable.

When training for the Olympic Gold, success along the way often gets missed, yet strangely, when you stand on the podium the medal is nothing without all the memories of what got you there. Like any good story, the final success is more memorable if getting there has been somewhat of a quest. Remember Steve Redgrave at the Sydney Olympics 2004 and the story of his five gold medals: the 'shoot me if I get in a boat again episode'; the 'years of suffering episode' when against all odds he overcame diabetes and colitis; the 'transformational coach episode' winning with an eighteen year old school boy, Matthew Pinsent on board. Business is like this too, a series of unique episodes. Each business needs to write its own story. If you want the story of your business to bind employees together, your story needs to be colourful and engaging. To write the quest you must help people to make successes and failures memorable. Clive Woodward, England

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Rugby Team Manager for the 2003 World Cup was infamous for sending the boys out for a beer when the team failed. What ever your methods, inclusion and good humour are important for encouraging people to tell their stories and make both success and failure a memorable part of the story.

Apply 4 rules for success.

However exciting your product, motivated people will not give their best unless you apply these four simple rules:

- design jobs that are meaningful
- recruit the right people in to the right roles
- give people the tools they need to perform
- encourage all employees to write the story of the business.

You do the math, what would it mean if 25% of your employees were just 10% more engaged and productive 100% of the time!

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