

# The Exemplary Performer

Harold D. Stolovitch, Ph.D.

"How do I get top performance from my people?" This is a reasonable question, but watch out for the barrage of enthusiastic responses. I could hose down this page with miracle solutions, but the probability of any one of these miracle cures having a persistent, powerful impact on building and sustaining top performance over time is doubtful. If life were that simple, we would all be basking in the glow of overwhelming success.

Over the years, I have found that if you want top performance, your best bet is to start by studying your top people or, as the research literature labels them, "exemplary" performers. Everyone has an opinion about what makes for top performance. As an HR professional, you should only pay attention to hard evidence derived from actual exemplary performers.

Exemplary performers produce valued accomplishments far greater than those of their average colleagues. How much greater? The McKinsey Quarterly's study "The Way for Talent, Part 2" suggests 45 percent to 75 percent superior results. In a study conducted with automobile dealership sales consultants, we found that the ratio of exemplary performers' sales (the top two or three per dealership) to average was 2.1-to-1. This translated into more than twice the number of vehicles sold per year and more than twice the revenues and profits for both dealerships and the corporation. Astonishingly, in this study of roughly 40,000 sales consultants, the overall ratio remained fairly steady regardless of dealership location, size or status.

But is this true for more complex, knowledge-intensive environments? In a study conducted by a European, cross-national agency on the performance of its high-end analysts, the ratio of completed projects by exemplary performers compared to

average was a stunning 3-to-1



Harold D. Stolovitch, Ph.D., is a principal of HSA Learning & Performance Solutions LLC and is emeritus professor of instructional and performance technology at the Université de Montréal. He can be reached at [hstolovitch@wpsmag.com](mailto:hstolovitch@wpsmag.com).

in terms of output, with no significant differences in performance quality.

So what makes for exemplary performers? It is generally a combination of characteristics, competencies, values, experience and ability to discern what is important in both processes and outcomes. Top performers identify what needs to be accomplished, set goals and organize themselves to achieve them efficiently. They exploit every useful resource, listen, observe and learn from all valid sources, including their own misadventures. They are fearless in doing what it takes to succeed.

## You are in a strategic position to help generate ever-improving performance success from your people.

Average performers never quite get it. It's not a lack of desire. Rather, what might be missing are appropriate characteristics, knowledge of what it takes to achieve top results or adequate support systems—and especially, helpful feedback to hit the mark.

You are in a strategic position to help generate ever-improving performance success from your people. Here are actions you can take:

- **Study top performers:** Go into the field to the source. With managers, identify top performers. Observe them in action. Don't just listen to what they say. Watch what they do. With them, define top performance operationally. Validate your findings with other exemplary performers, their managers and customers.
- **Study average performers:** Identify these as you did top performers and observe them in action. Note critical differences between top and average.
- **Build a portrait of exemplary performer characteristics, behaviors and accomplishments:** Create a model of the

exemplary performer. It's bound to be a composite model as no one person possesses all of the desirable characteristics and capabilities.

- **Establish performance-based selection criteria:** Based on your model, develop selection criteria for the targeted position. Include "fatal-flaw" criteria that raise red flags about a candidate. Validate your criteria with top performers and managers.
- **Select candidates using performance-based hiring procedures:** Develop performance-

based questions, scenarios, role-plays and actual tasks for candidates to perform. Observe. Have top performers watch them as well.

- **Set clear performance expectations along with suitable rewards:** Ensure performers know, unambiguously, what is expected of them. Develop feedback systems that provide timely, meaningful feedback on behaviors and accomplishments. Reward exemplary performance.
- **Support and monitor performance:** Help set challenging, escalating yet attainable performance goals. Assist managers to provide varied opportunities for learning and growth. Ensure continued recognition and reward for exemplary performance.

Exemplary performers do well because they have been appropriately selected, have clear, meaningful objectives to achieve and are trained, developed and supported as valued assets. They receive suitable feedback and rewards for their results. They also make huge contributions to overall organizational success. ♦