

Motivating Middle Performers

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Most leaders assume that middle performers are already doing the best they can, and so dismiss taking any action to improve their performance. Middle performers, in turn, internalize this assumption and stop trying to be anything more than what they already are. Employees need feedback, both good and bad, in order to succeed. Middle performers typically account for 70 percent of the workforce. This translates to two-thirds of your employee base that, if you are like most leaders, by the very merit of not being told whether they are doing "good" or "bad," are being encouraged to tread water at only average performance levels.

While it is likely that a few of your middle performers simply do not have any more to give, most of them, for reasons we will explore, have substantial unrecognized potential. In other words, middle performers absolutely have the ability to tip the scales of success in your favor. As a leader, it is your job to uncover this hidden talent and motivate middle performers to reach towards higher performance.

It sends a powerful message when you tell a middle performer, "You've got what it takes. Go ahead and run with this. I trust you." When you can say these words with conviction, and a middle performer suddenly realizes they can be more than what they currently are, it's a powerful moment for them, for you as a leader, and for the organization as a whole. You may even find that when given a little time and attention, middle performers will rise considerably on the performance curve and become high performers.

Middle performers are not some amorphous group that can be lumped into a single category and uniformly addressed. There are five critical reasons why middle performers remain middle performers, and we've created a grouping for each. In the course of working day-to-day with these folks, you should be able to pick out the patterns and key elements that assign them to one of these five groups. If not, it's time to get out there and get to know your middle performers. Most of them are eager to be noticed and heard, and with just a little prompting, they'll probably tell you exactly what you need to know. Let's take a look at these middle performer groups and explore what can be done to maximize their hidden potential.

Maxed Out

The first group consists of employees that are simply maxed out. These are the folks who are perfectly competent at doing what they've always done, but who are consistently unable to produce when given more challenging tasks. There may have been a time when those in the "maxed out" group had a desire to be high performers, but they've since reached a pinnacle of performance they're unable to eclipse. Most leaders mistakenly assume that all middle performers belong to this group; however, only 10 to 15 percent of those in the middle are truly maxed out.

It's a poor use of a leader's time to try and develop those in the "maxed out" group. This is not to say this group of middle performers is incapable of bringing value to an organization. Not everyone can run a four-minute mile, but this does not mean that those who can't should give up running. If this were the case, Mark, by his own admission, would never have started running, let alone plodded his way through a marathon! The "maxed out" are steady, reliable employees that meet expectations and tend to be generally happy where they are. They may not win the race, but they definitely know the way to the finish line. Investing time to develop "maxed out" employees may be unwise, but remember, these folks still have Shoves and Tugs that need to be recognized and acknowledged if you hope to retain them.

Don't Know How

The employees that make up the second group are those that just don't know how to reach high performer status. They seem to be going full steam ahead, but somehow always fall short of distinguished performance. The "don't know how" middle performers are often stuck in this performance rut due to working for leaders that don't take the time to clearly state high performance expectations---or any expectations at all. This is often a result of the afore mentioned misconception that middle performers have no more to give, hence the belief that it is a poor use of time to try and develop any of them. And so the cycle of middle performance begins.

As discussed in our other articles, a leader will never successfully create a high performance workplace if he or she does not clearly communicate expectations. Even a high performer is going to be at a loss for how to meet the mark if told, "Sales are just not good enough. I need to see improvement." Without knowing how much improvement and by when, the "don't know how" middle performer may give what he or she thinks is high performer effort, only to be met by dissatisfaction from the boss. Ongoing, this situation becomes a confusing hit or miss scenario where the employee is never sure whether or not they are on target. They start viewing their leaders as capricious, and making the effort to try and please them becomes obsolete.

No Confidence

Middle performers that lack confidence in their ability to achieve high performer status make up the third group. By and large, this situation exists due to an erroneous notion of what defines a high performer. When a leader's time and attention is primarily focused on combating low performers and praising high performers, a very clear, although often inaccurate, message of "good" and "bad" is absorbed by those in the middle. By merit of the positive attention they receive; high performers can appear to be perched on a pedestal that seems impossible to reach. Even though many middle performers possess the skills and attitude of a high performer, they simply do not see themselves as having what it takes to make the climb to the top.

As a leader, there is much you can do to induce "no confidence" middle performers to make the climb to higher performance. If employees don't get regular feedback from the boss, they are left to their own devices to figure out how they are doing with respect to performance. And if communicating displeasure over negative performance seems to come easier to you than giving positive feedback over a job well done (as is the case with many leaders), you are actually promoting negative reinforcement that will have an equally negative effect on getting middle performers to shoot higher.

Because middle performers tend to discount their own accomplishments, it is especially important to take the time to comment on the good work being done by this group of employees. Granted, their efforts may not be in the same realm as high performers, but their positive actions warrant your attention nonetheless. This is your opportunity to set the record straight that middle performers are of value to the company, and to start turning their confidence levels around.

Costs Are too High

A common misconception among some middle performers is that being a high performer goes hand-in-hand with being a chronic workaholic. The fourth group of middle performers refrains from giving their all as they foresee that the costs of being a high performer are just too high. It may be that they have been witness to a few high performers that compulsively feel the need to work, and who, in doing so, embrace long hours and weekends at the office. It may also be that this group of middle performers does not fully understand what the expectations of high performance are, and so imagine that the only way to move to the next level of performance is to trade personal life and outside interests for increased work time.

The "costs are too high" middle performers are blocked from becoming high performers by their apprehension over the Shoves they think accompany the role. It may be that these Shoves are only hypothetical, and that you can easily assuage these concerns by talking these middle performers through their incorrect assumptions. However, there is always the chance that these high performer Shoves are in fact quite real. Once again, employees can provide a clear view to organizational problems of which you may not be aware. It is worth your while to ask your high performers, during your monthly or quarterly Shoves and Tugs conversation, if any of these shove factors are factual. You may uncover valuable information by which you can instigate some changes that not only will help you motivate middle performers to a higher level of production, but will have the added bonus of working to retain high performers.

Benefits Are Too Low

The fifth group of middle performers is comprised of those employees that believe the benefits of being a high performer are just too low. These are the folks that have the skills and attitude of a high performer, and who would be happy to do what it takes to move up to the next level, if only they could see the tangible benefit of doing so. They question each possibility of advancement, and if they foresee no favorable return, suspecting instead that the "rewards" will be factors such as a minimal pay increase, added hassle, and little to no promise of promotion, they turn away from making high performer efforts.

Not unlike the "costs are too high" middle performers, those in the "benefits are too low" group may simply be reacting to hypothetical conditions. In this situation, middle performers will be demotivated by what they perceive to be a lack of Tugs. Once again, this may be valuable information that should be investigated with your high performers during Shoves and Tugs conversations. If you find that the suspicions of the "benefits are too low" middle performers are not valid, you will need to reinforce the actual benefits of high performance. And if they are valid, you will need to address that factor.

Make sure that high performer benefits are things that will work to motivate all your employees. If some or all of your high performers concur that the benefits really are not all that great, it's time to consider making some changes that will retain your current high performers and induce middle performers to make the jump.