

Keep Your Best People Doing What They Do Best

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When principals of marketing communications firms meet behind closed doors, wait long enough and their topic of conversation inevitably turns to underperforming employees. The question is, are their employees really underperforming, or are they just in the wrong job? Research by The Gallup Organization shows that the vast majority of employees feel miscast in their jobs. That's because they're usually cast in roles that don't allow them to make the most of their strengths.

Focusing on strengths means accepting that people, just like companies, can't be good at everything. It simply isn't realistic to expect an employee to be both creative and organized, a good idea person and a good people person, or have other sometimes mutually contradictory qualities.

The fact is that if you have people with exceptional talents, chances are they will also have exceptional weaknesses. (In fact, these weaknesses are likely to be mirror images of their strengths.) The sooner you accept that fact, the happier you'll be as a manager.

Why do managers tend to characterize employees by their weaknesses instead of their strengths? Because chances are that's how managers treated you as you were coming up through the ranks. But you can stop the cycle and transform your firm's approach to employee development into something better.

Make weaknesses irrelevant

Effective managers don't waste their emotional energy complaining about how their people don't do their jobs. Instead, they place them in positions where they can succeed and focus their efforts on building their personal strengths, not "correcting" their personal weaknesses.

When you think about it, most marketing communications firms have two kinds of account executives:

1. The account executive with a track record for getting jobs produced on time and on budget, but no real talent for thinking strategically.
2. The account executive that writes brilliant strategies and creative briefs, but falls down on logistics, administration, and keeping the client happy.

There are also usually two different kinds of copywriters:

1. The writer that develops outstanding concepts, but stumbles when it comes to body copy or long-form writing.

2. The writer that turns out excellent text, but doesn't contribute much to the development of concepts.

Every person brings awareness, ability and aptitude to the job. Awareness and ability can be improved through training and coaching. But when it comes to aptitude—a person's natural talents—that's where management must make sure each person has a job description that makes the most of strengths and neutralizes weaknesses. If a talented art director just can't keep track of timesheets, get him the help of an assistant who can. If a gifted account planner does a great job of gathering consumer insights but a poor job of turning them into a client presentation, pair her up with a writer who can. Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Concentrate on your best people, not your worst

Do you find it a bit paradoxical that you give more attention to your underperforming employees than you do to your top performers? The rationale is convincing: good people can work on their own, but weak people need help. But ask yourself, which kinds of employees have the most potential to contribute to the success of the organization? Answer: the ones with the most talent.

It's counterintuitive, but the more time you spend with your best people (instead of your worst) the more you can work to leverage their exceptional talents to the benefit of the firm. But there's an even more important reason. Great managers study their best people. If you can identify the characteristics of the top performers in your organization, then you'll know what kinds of people to hire in the future.

Focus on what you can do, not what you can't

It may sound trite to say that successful people are opportunity-minded, not problem-minded, but it's true. It's also true for successful marketing communications firms. The countless hours principals spend obsessing about problems with their people and clients could be spent much more productively talking about *opportunities* with their people and clients.

Consider the fact that it's what your employees do well that adds value to the organization. As Peter Drucker preaches, strengths contribute everything; weaknesses contribute nothing. So focus on developing people's strong points, and try to make their weak points immaterial.

Your time and energy is much better spent inspiring your troops, not scolding them. Being optimistic rather than fatalistic. You can do this by developing opportunities, not fretting about weaknesses.

Focusing on strengths can also dramatically change the tone of the dreaded "performance review." The reason supervisors and employees alike have a distaste for performance reviews is because they are based on job descriptions that make perfect performance virtually impossible. Not only do staffers vary widely in God-given abilities like attention to detail and interpersonal communication skills, they would have to be super-human to score a "10" on things like "demonstrates a complete understanding of all facets of a client's business." (We all know nobody is that good.) Rather than rating employees on mundane qualities like office cleanliness, focus on what the employee can contribute to the organization.

Every single person in the firm—including the principals—has notable strengths and weaknesses. Weak spots that can be addressed by education or practice can and should be dealt with immediately. Weaknesses that are as inherent as our natural strengths are a different matter. Instead of trying to change what probably can't be changed, think instead about what can be done to change people's roles or responsibilities to allow them to do what they do best.

If you have an employee that's an exceptionally-talented designer but a disastrous presenter, create a career path that allows him to continue to earn a good salary without being promoted into a "management" position that puts him in front of clients.

Creating a career path for exceptional people who wouldn't make good managers is key to managing based on strengths. The problem in the traditional staffing scenario is that as people advance through their careers, once they reach a certain level in their functions they have nowhere to go but into a management position. You can give more money and more prestige to your best performers without making them managers. It's a revolutionary thought, but the people who are excellent in their discipline should have the ability to earn as much as their manager. In some very progressive firms, star performers can even earn more than the people who manage them. To confer public prestige (which most good people crave and deserve), you can use a system of titles that connotes the level of expertise an individual has reached in their discipline. Don't make ascension to management an automatic career path. Keep your best people happy doing what they do best.

Treat your people like your best clients

When it comes to making the most of your people, consider that in the end your employees don't work for you; you work for them. They're the reason you're successful. They keep the jobs going, the income flowing and the business growing. Sought-after firms treat their employees with courtesy, encouragement and respect.

This is crucial in a business that employs artists—writers, art directors, creative directors, etc. While artists like money just like everyone else, it's not the reason they come into work every day. They come for psychological rewards. The currency of their trade is acknowledgment, appreciation and admiration. When you start each business day, ask yourself what you can do to help your employees do what they do best.

Concentrate on helping your people do what they do best, and you'll develop a culture that is focused on opportunities and makes the most of its strengths.