

# SAVE THAT JOB: TRANSFORMING THE POOR PERFORMER

Steven Darter

*Understanding a person's pattern of motivations can help you to aid good performers who suddenly become ineffective, as well to better match prospective technical people and jobs.*

● *A brilliant scientist worked successfully for many years as one of several highly regarded technical problem solvers in a matrix organization. He then switched employers and joined a smaller organization as their senior scientist. He was asked to wear many technical hats and to work independently as a reviewer of technical questions. Within six months of being hired, the organization concluded that he lacked the technical expertise and breadth necessary to perform the job. Not only did he not come up with ideas and suggestions as expected, but he was viewed as lacking breadth and being uninterested. In actuality he was technically superb. What happened?*

● *A vice president of research consistently avoided most administrative responsibilities in his area until deadline pressure forced him to complete the work. His own employees viewed him as an interested technical adviser, but were frustrated by his failure to follow through on administrative details such as budget and staffing requests. His style was to move around the lab, listen to his workers, and provide ideas which often initiated new thrusts.*

*He felt his role was not to push paper but to keep the technical ideas and developments flowing by being actively involved with his scientists. His scientists liked his involvement, but also needed a manager who would shield them from organizational and administrative frustrations.*

*After being repeatedly told that his performance was not acceptable, he attempted to focus more on administration. He walked the floor less, stayed in his office more and grew unhappy and frustrated. As he moved further away from the technology he lost interest. In time he grew less confident in his own abilities. Despite an attempt to be successful in administration, he felt he was second rate. His performance deteriorated to a point where he was ineffective in all aspects of his work; physical problems developed. Why?*

What causes a solid performer or star player to drift into the ranks of the ineffective? What makes a mind float to what are seemingly far more interesting activities? Is this something we all experience—a stage or series of stages that eventually forces us to drift about for awhile?

Part of the answer is found in a common thread I have

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Steven Darter is a senior associate with People Management, Inc. in Simsbury, Connecticut. He has ten years' experience in outplacement and executive counseling and currently is director of PMI's Executive Search and Selection Division. Darter specializes in retainer searches, identifying technical managers; assisting organizations with selection and promotion decisions; and providing help in diagnosing and resolving performance problems. Prior to joining PMI, he worked in higher education and held positions in sales and management. He holds an MS in education and an Ed.S. in counseling and personnel services from the State University of New York at Albany.

seen in people who have risen to the top. They step onto a success track and are propelled upward, few having the opportunity or taking the time to stop and reflect on what they have to offer an organization, and what is truly of personal importance. They push and punish their minds and bodies until one day their careers stop or life crashes in about them. There is a need to help these individuals before they reach the point where they hurt themselves and their careers.

Having counseled many people who have involuntarily left their positions, I am intrigued by the great number of terminated managers and professionals who state that their first reaction to being told they are fired is relief. Relief from a role they felt they were playing; relief from the pressures; relief from whatever it was that was causing so much anxiety. Usually after a few seconds of this initial sense of relief, fear of the unknown and the impact of being terminated takes over. The truth of those first few moments is often quite revealing.

## Non-Destructive Counseling

When attempting to help the troubled employee, it is important to avoid the assumption that something is wrong with the individual that needs to be corrected. Probing to identify "wrongness" is harmful and usually generates resistance and hostility on the part of the person being examined. What is needed is a form of non-destructive counseling; counseling that may resolve the situation but does not blame or harm the person. This does not mean confrontation is avoided or change unnecessary. It means following some basic beliefs about people and work situations:

- Each person is unique, possessing natural talents and gifts.
- A person's uniqueness is so pervasive that an individual will attempt to bend and distort his perceptions of what a job requires in order to utilize his natural gifts and talents.
- An individual is not usually aware of how his perceptions distort his assumptions of what a job requires.
- A person feels most productive and satisfied when working in areas that make use of his natural talents. Likewise he will be unproductive and unsatisfied when working in areas that do not make use of his natural talents.

- Most executives experience early success, primarily in play and work which make great use of their natural talents. These successes condition executives to have high expectations regarding their performance in any activity they undertake—whether it involves their natural talents or not.

- A significant problem emerges when an executive assumes high level work for which he does not have a natural talent (poor job fit)—because he cannot perform to the high standards he expects from his own performance.

- Poor job fit causes great anxiety and stress—which usually results in the person blaming himself (sometimes unmercifully), blaming others, or blaming the organization.

- A manager in a poor job fit is probably having a negative impact on the organization.

In order to be of help to the individual, the organization should assist the employee in acquiring a valid picture of himself and his natural talents. This picture should then be compared to the job the person is currently occupying. Comparing the two often sheds enormous light on the reasons for poor performance or restlessness.

For example, the brilliant scientist in my first example needed to be involved in a team where he could bounce ideas off others as he pursued answers to technical problems. Having him work from outside a group, reviewing technical questions and solutions as the “expert” cut the heart out of the work for him. Having him concentrate on a variety of technical issues dissipated his natural talent to focus on one problem/project at a time.

Understanding natural talents can point a person in a productive and more satisfying direction. The solution might be changing one’s work role, redesigning one’s job or merely helping people be more realistic regarding personal performance in work in which one does not have natural abilities. In this case the scientist eventually changed positions where he became part of a team that focused on a specific technical advance. The key here was obtaining reliable data on himself.

### Identifying “Motivated Abilities”

One method for doing this involves a detailed examination of an individual’s achievement experiences from childhood on and identifying consistent, recurring themes of motivated behavior. (Achievements would be situations in which the person did something he enjoyed doing and felt he did well; not by someone else’s standard, but by his own.) When integrated, these themes reveal a pattern of motivated abilities that serve as a reliable predictor of how the person will perceive (and likely perform) in a given situation.

My company collects this data through an exhaustive interview in which a trained interviewer has the interviewee describe in detail specifically how that person accomplished each mentioned achievement. A

trained analyst/observer then pours through a transcript of that interview and identifies what we call a Motivated Abilities Pattern.

This Motivated Abilities Pattern can be organized according to five dimensions which, when fitted together, describe what kinds of activities the individual gets excited about, what he or she gets satisfaction from—in essence, the types of situations in which the person will be most motivated. The five components are:

- Abilities the individual is motivated to use (e.g., analyze, organize, persuade);

- Specific subject matter that brings out the best in the individual (e.g., details, people, concepts);

- Certain circumstances or conditions within which the individual is motivated to work (e.g., stress, structure, novelty, difficulty);

- A certain relationship the individual strives to establish with others (e.g., spark plug, loner, team member, facilitator);

- The result the individual is looking to accomplish (e.g., serve others, build things, control things).

Because this is an inborn pattern the individual brings to any activity, the person will attempt to use that pattern of behavior whenever possible. Only under pressure and at great expense will a person go against his pattern, as in my case of the vice president of research.

A Motivational Pattern is different from what is commonly referred to as skill analysis. The intent of the latter is to demonstrate the breadth of one’s experience and capability. A Motivational Pattern is a description of the gold nuggets—elements that must be present in an individual’s work in order for that work to have a meaningful value for the individual. Each pattern is different, capturing a person’s uniqueness.

Understanding one’s pattern of motivations provides the hurting employee and perhaps his or her manager with accurate information on why performance is poor or why the person is experiencing restlessness, and in predicting what types of work would make best use of one’s natural talents. This information can then be used to correct the situation or minimize the problem. For example:

The vice president of research in my example learned to accept his natural pattern, to recognize his strengths, and conversely his weaknesses. He was able to hire an assistant whose responsibilities were to handle much of the administrative work. Critical to him was selecting the right technical person with an administrative bent. Once hired, the new person freed the vice president to take advantage of his natural gifts. Also, the vice president learned to respect the importance and value of administrative issues, even though he delegated most of them.

In another example, an operations manager was promoted to the position of general manager. His strengths lay in organizing resources, making pragmatic

decisions and marching toward objectives. His track record showed good profitability wherever he went. Within a few years as general manager, the division's sales dropped significantly. The position as market leader was lost as competition passed them by.

The general manager's motivational pattern demonstrated an individual who lacked a natural ability to plan and to anticipate trends. He was also a person who established a course and stuck to it. Compounding the problem was the resignation of the marketing manager, whose position was not yet filled as an expense control move.

Because of his value in manufacturing and cost control, senior management didn't want to lose his expertise. Yet they viewed him as a liability in his general management role. Several realistic discussions resulted, and a probation period established. A new marketing director with anticipatory abilities was hired. The division is now on the right track and the general manager's operational skills are needed. As long as he remains receptive to others more talented in planning and anticipating market directions he will remain effective. He understands his natural desire to lock onto a course with blinders, its value and also its destructive nature if not applied in the right situation.

### **Hiring**

In trying to avoid these kinds of problems, the place to begin is with proper selection and promotion. The cornerstone is to understand critical elements of the position to be filled and the motivational qualities of the candidate being considered.

Start by developing critical requirements for the job. Ask yourself or have someone probe to define clearly what this person has to accomplish and how it should be accomplished. Questions to ask might be: What obstacles will he face? Who will he interact with? And how? What did the incumbent do and not do?

Probe to determine the management style this person should possess. What communication style? Should he be subtle? Or direct? Will he need to handle sensitive situations? How? Solve problems? What kind? How? How will his performance be measured? What should his area look like after he has had a chance to impact? Questions to ask are endless, but must add to a clearer picture of the right person for the job.

In any hiring situation, there are two major factors to evaluate. One is technical experience and competence. Has he paid his dues and does he know his stuff? The other is how the person puts that technical experience and competence to use: his style. Technical competence is easy to assess by people who know the technology. The individual's style is far more difficult to determine.

It is important to keep in mind that people rarely fail in a job because of technical inadequacy. It is almost always a result of one's style (motivational pattern).

If a precise definition of critical requirements is developed before a candidate is evaluated, then a more

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reliable assessment can be made. For example, in one assignment, a single critical requirement was to spark a conservative industry to support high technology research and applications by developing relationships with key engineering decision makers. Through this one critical requirement alone, it was apparent that any candidate would have great difficulty in this position if he lacked a motivation (natural talent) to spark others, overcome resistance, build relationships and perceive needs and applications.

### **The Interviewing Process**

In any job there are many such critical requirements to be identified. Once clarified, the interview is ready to begin.

The interview process for determining a Motivational Pattern is different from a normal job interview or conversation. Done correctly, it is pure research that requires enormous discipline in the interviewer's ability to listen and focus. The interviewer's role is that of a catalyst helping the interviewee's motivational data to emerge.

Have the interviewee list and describe achievements—situations where the person has done something he enjoyed doing and felt he did well, not by someone else's standards, but by his own. Two variables are key: satisfaction (enjoyed doing) and success (did well). The interview process is designed to uncover behavior the person used that gave him a sense of satisfaction and success.

Achievements can emerge out of work or leisure, recent or long past. Don't make the mistake of limiting someone to topics related to paid work. We find many people stymied at work pour their gifts into non-work activities. Like a river, natural talent seeks its course.

Normally interviewers control the interview by deciding what subjects are to be discussed. In this case, this is opposite of what should happen. Once personal curiosity comes into play, the interviewee is signaled. This likely generates answers slanted to what the interviewee thinks you want to hear, coloring the data you are seeking.

Ask the interviewee to describe, in detail, how he accomplished each achievement. Keep asking how. Go after details. Use the person's own words to peel away the layers of data; not your insightful questions or logical conclusions. Let his style unfold as he talks.

Listen! Listen! Listen! Don't probe *your* interest areas. Exploit in depth how *he* accomplished what he says he did; e.g., how did you build the bicycle, install the machinery, develop the process? How did you write the article, make the presentation, rally the staff, plan, etc.? Ask how and listen.

Interview the person on achievements that range across his lifetime and you will hear consistency of behavior.

Taking this data and synthesizing it into a meaningful whole takes training. However, insights gained through the interview can be extremely beneficial when making hiring decisions or in helping a poor performer.

If reliable and accurate data on a poor performer that is acceptable to both the individual and his manager can be developed, then poor performance can be put in a clearer perspective.

Discussion should start with an examination of fit with the current position. Is there a major gap between the job to be done and what motivates the person, resulting in a severe case of poor job fit? If yes, then radical change may be in order. If no, then perhaps

restructuring the position is the solution. Poor performers will benefit greatly by mutually exploring roles that make maximum use of their motivational strengths. Be creative, not limiting. Brainstorm ideas. Work with the person to save his job.

Helping an employee to understand the advantages and disadvantages of one's natural talent causes less anxiety to the individual than relying on a performance appraisal to point out areas of weakness. Although most people prefer candidness, it is not always effective in producing the hoped-for improvements—principally because dumping the problem on a poor performer without any mechanism to resolve it can intensify the situation and result in the person's performance getting worse, not better.

The organization gains because it may not need to fire a once-valued employee or prematurely pay an outplacement fee. Finding out what really motivates a solid performer or star player is critical. As Peter Drucker has rightfully said, "effective management is the productive use of strengths." □

#### **Poor Management Performance Spells Trouble**

The manager who is performing poorly is likely to be developing negative feelings about his job, the organization, and perhaps himself. Specifically this might manifest itself in any one of several destructive behaviors like: "be cautious, don't rock the boat," or an over-concern for personal power, status or money; or a highly negative and critical outlook; or damming productivity by frequently being busy and unavailable. Critical work is often ignored while an overabundance

of energy is poured into "pet projects" or more satisfying non-work activities. Any of these eventually have a negative impact on subordinates as well as peers and clients with whom this person interacts.

Perhaps worse is the demoralizing effect on the people reporting to him and on down the line, particularly if it is obvious to these employees that their boss's superior is not facing the problem. "If they don't care, why should I?" Productivity drops and carelessness and lack of concern emerge.

#### **Some Typical Mistakes Research Organizations Make In Managing Employees**

- Researchers motivated to meet standards or fulfill expectations—working in free-floating jobs with no parameters.
- People motivated to improve what exists—put into jobs requiring them to work from scratch.
- Scientists motivated to operate independently of authority—working for "hands-on" managers.
- A scientist motivated to master knowledge and conduct exhaustive research—in a position requiring him to turn his efforts off and on in response to economic potential.
- Designers motivated to perfect—working for bosses

who want quick, sketchy work, or assigned to rushed projects that cannot be refined and polished.

- People motivated to meet the test/face the challenge—kept in jobs where they had achieved these goals years earlier.
- Project engineers not motivated to achieve dollar, time or performance results.
- An innovator/promoter who desires to gain recognition and is motivated to conceive new ideas, create support for projects, work up presentations—promoted after many such successes to manage a large organization in which others below him now do what he did before.
- Managers who like to be involved in the action—promoted to a level of management where they can only hand down directions.