

Who's Minding the Middle?

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There are articles, books, CDs, training sessions, in fact whole libraries devoted to "How to Stoke Your Superstars!" and "How to Deal with Your Problem Employees!" But what about those employees in the middle? The 70% - 80% of your work force who get the work done day in and day out? The middle managers, the technicians, specialist and the support personnel who provide the foundation of the organization on which superstars perform and pick up the slack from the non-performers? According to a report from Harvard Business School titled "Let's Hear It for B Players", it is the B Players who "bring depth and stability to the companies they work for, slowly but surely improving both corporate performance and organizational resilience."¹

Research by Bersin & Associates found managers spend about 80% of their time on high and low performers. That does not leave much time for "Malcolm (or Marsha) in the Middle." An organization that consists of entirely Superstars will find itself with high turnover and overly competitive staff as they vie for the limited number of upward positions. The interest and drive to perform necessary but often routine tasks will be limited if all employees are turning their efforts to high profile projects.

What do Malcolm and Marsha want? Just like all employees, they want to expand their knowledge, try new things, perform better, and hopefully earn some recognition from their managers and the company. And not just once a year on their performance review when they are told "You're meeting our expectations. Keep it up!"

How, with all the competition for resources and management time do you fit Malcolm's needs into the picture? Technology has made this easier and less expensive. There are on-line programs, seminars, classes, conferences and university studies. Many vendors offer on-line Lunch and Learn programs as a marketing tool.

Development plans are not just for the top performers or those you are trying to move out of the organization. And everything in a development plan does not need to come from outside the organization. Creating parallel career paths for technical experts, support staff, or non-management personnel enables people to see a future that focuses on what they do best. Assignments outside of an employee's normal area can be very rewarding, by allowing employees to learn what is being done well in areas, and to explore lateral career opportunities. Barry Salzberg, CEO of DeloitteLLP describes his organization as having "career lattice" not a "career ladder."

Formal recognition programs can be tailored to include acknowledgment of steady, dependable service as well as the outstanding. Programs can be developed that encourage the superstars to recognize the folks that enable them to shine.

Keeping Malcolm and Marsha content, challenged, energized and recognized will help ensure your reorganization retain the solid foundation for superstar performance.

¹-Delong, Thomas J. and Vijayaraghaven, Vineeta. Let's Hear It for B Players. Harvard Business School 2003