

Don't let strengths go to waste

BY SUE NADOR

I remember a conversation with one of my sons in kindergarten: "Jake, your teacher is concerned that if you don't spend less time in big blocks and more time at the reading centre, you will not get better at reading."

"Yes, Mom," Jake replied, "but if I don't spend more time at big blocks, I won't get really great at building."

Jake had a good point, one that raises an interesting training and development question for HR: Do we place too much emphasis on trying to improve people's areas of weakness at the expense of leveraging their strengths? Yes, we do.

Schools put their focus on improving marks in subjects where children are weak. That's because teachers try to lay the educational foundation for success in as many different areas as possible. The problem is that many workplaces use that same strategy, focusing on addressing weaknesses or "gaps" in employees' skills and abilities. Study after study, however, has confirmed that people are most effective

when they capitalize on strengths rather than improve weaknesses.

A recent Gallup study asked people: "At work do you have the opportunity to do what you do best every day?" The study found employees who answered "strongly agree" were more likely to work in business units with significantly lower turnover, higher productivity and higher cus-

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tomers satisfaction. The bad news? Only 20 per cent indicated they actually have an opportunity to do what they do best every day at work.

Luckily, there is a growing appreciation that this misplaced focus on weaknesses benefits neither the organization nor the employee. More enlightened organizations are tossing aside the dated notion of filling gaps. Instead, they are helping people achieve higher levels of performance by focusing on strengths and interests.

Effem Inc.'s talent management approach leverages strengths

Effem Inc., maker of well-known consumer products such as Mars chocolate bars, is a good example of an organization that makes the most of the strengths of its talent. With Canadian headquarters in Bolton, Ont., the firm employs about 500 people in Canada.

Its approach is built on five core principles: quality, responsibility, mutuality, efficiency and freedom.

"Freedom" refers to a philosophy that promotes individual responsibility for business results. A key theme expressed by Effem employees ("associates" in Effem parlance) in recent interviews was that Effem is a "take charge" culture. The autonomy to apply strengths to do more than is stipulated in the job description results in exceptionally high standards of performance.

"There is no standard or fixed notion of career path," says Tami Majer, a leader in Effem's personnel and organization development group. "We are very good at looking at the individual's attributes, and career development is an ongoing iterative process that comes alive in the performance management program"

At Effem it is not unusual for people to move from operations to sales if they think it is good for them, says Majer.

"We ask our associates, 'Where do you want to go?' Even at the recruitment stage, associates are not hired for The Job but assessed for their potential to transform into different roles."

Employee performance is measured equally on quantifiable results and demonstrated competencies. This promotes a longer-range assessment of potential.

"We collect lots of data and get insights. The company invests significant time and resources to understand the individual," Majer says. "We know the ability to focus is an important aspect of 'fit' in our cul-

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Accept weaknesses, improve strengths

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ture. People who have focus and can make sense of the complicated world we live in can do well in many roles.”

Performance programs a vehicle for change

Performance management programs provide a framework for managers to have in depth conversations with employees, and to make better decisions about how to leverage strengths to maximize performance.

Here are three practical tips for using a performance management program to capitalize on employee strengths.

•**Setting objectives — More than one way to accomplish goals:** Corporate objectives are typically cascaded into individual objectives but there is often room to contribute to the same objective in different ways.

For example, two employees with different aptitudes and interests can both contribute to the goal of raising customer satisfaction. One employee with an aptitude for research might develop an objective that involves conducting customer research to identify emerging customer needs. Another employee with different strengths may elect to develop a pro-active customer communication campaign.

The benefit is that a manager can use the different

talents of everyone on a team in different ways. There is open recognition that different people can play different roles. There is equal contribution through the leveraging of different talents, and people are not stretched (and stressed) in unrealistic ways.

By inviting employees to decide how they can best contribute, the organization benefits from both higher commitment and better results.

•**Evaluation — Much more than a final mark:** Traditional performance evaluation processes do not help managers have productive conversations with employees to leverage strengths.

By assigning one mark (such as a 3 out of 5 to show average performance) to summarize a whole year's performance, the opportunities for constructive dialogue are limited.

Not surprisingly, many performance evaluation discussions end up as painful negotiating exercises. Research shows that employees who disagree with their performance rating are less motivated after the appraisal — not a great start to setting ambitious goals and leveraging strengths for the next performance period.

An interesting alternative, offered by Austrian management expert Gunter Lueger in the November 2003 edition of *Organisa-*

tions & People, is to distribute ratings across the rating scale. For example, an individual may be only “average” 90 per cent of the time but “excellent” 10 per cent of the time.

While an overall rating is still possible, the discussion can focus on better understanding what drove exceptional performance 10 per cent of the time and how to leverage strengths to achieve this level of excellence more often.

•**Development plans — Less attention to gaps:** Traditional performance management often involves assessing competencies to identify where the gaps are between desired and actual performance, and developing action plans to close the gaps.

Unfortunately, it is a myth that everyone can be competent at everything. Or that a person's room for growth is in their area of weakness.

Development discussions should focus on maximizing the competencies that are already being demonstrated. Managers can ask questions such as the following to improve strengths still further:

•“You demonstrate solid project management skills. What opportunities and support can take you to the next level?”

•“What contribution do you feel most proud of this past year? What competencies do you believe helped

to achieve those results? In what other areas can these strengths be applied?”

Changing the dialogue around performance management to focus more on strengths and less on weaknesses is one place to begin to realize a higher level of employee productivity and engagement. Everyone has strengths. The challenge and opportunity of any manager is to unleash employees' potential.

“Average” just does not cut it anymore. Many employers are looking for “exceptional” because that's what it takes to succeed. And there is only one way to be exceptional. Getting better and better in areas in which people have aptitude, interest and opportunity.

So watch out for those gaps. They are a big hole that you do not want to fall into.

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