

STAR PERFORMERS: WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO

Everyone seemingly wants to employ star performers. And there are few workers who would not want to consider themselves to be stars, or at least on their way to that designation. In the summer 2014 issue of *Personnel Psychology*, the article “Star Performers in Twenty-First-Century Organizations,” by Herman Aguinis of Indiana University and Ernest O’Boyle Jr., of the University of Iowa, tackles this subject comprehensively. They point out that what significantly moves companies in this era of knowledge work relates “to the emergence of star performers—a few individuals who contribute a disproportionate share amount of output.” Their article describes not the attributes of these people, but their results and what they produce.

Because the idea is that a relative few people are so clearly above everyone else and thus exceptionally valuable, is it possible that we need new terminology in the sense that we are talking about superstars, given their relative rarity, rather than stars? Aguinis believes that “the important issue is that the identification of these high performers is crucial for the success of all firms and in all industries. We can call them star performers, superstar performers, hyperperformers, or use other labels. The point is that we need to think about ways to attract, motivate, retain, and clone these individuals whose levels of performance make or break an organization’s success.”

The article addresses a variety of specific examples of star performance, including sports (basketball’s Michael Jordan and his run of championships with the Chicago Bulls), CEOs (Howard Schultz of Starbucks and the outsized profits and market capitalization of his company since his return to the CEO role in 2008), and even video games (the saving of the

Japanese company Nintendo by the games created by the young programmer Shigeru Miyamoto). In the article, the authors write that “In spite of their central role for organizational success, we do not have a good understanding of star performers.” So what does this really mean to an organization, and how can it profit from employing these stars? “The first step,” Aguinis contends, “is to define what ‘success’ is within any given firm or industry. The second step is to identify those individuals who contribute to such success. Then, the next steps involve getting to know these individuals—their needs, aspirations, ambitions—and give them the resources they need to continue to perform at that high level and motivate them to help others do the same.”

It is necessary to consider how difficult is it to determine and quantify meaningful results. For instance, in the case of Michael Jordan and other sports figures, should we also be considering measures beyond championships and exemplary won/loss records, such as perhaps monetary value of a franchise, that help determine a star’s worth? “Almost every manager,” Aguinis says, “in every industry I talk to says to me: ‘My industry is different because XYZ factors and, hence we cannot measure performance well.’ But, I have found that to be an easy way out. We measure firm performance, right? So, why can’t we measure individual performance? There are measures of behaviors (e.g., how people do work) as well as results (i.e., the output of such work). We can collect data from supervisors, peers, subordinates, and customers. We can collect data on quality, quantity, speed, accuracy, errors, and many other important criteria. The point is: If we don’t measure performance, we will not be able to identify and take advantage of stars.”

There has long been an emphasis on teamwork in the workplace and related behaviors such as emotional intelligence. Further considerations might be whether or not the cultivation (and outsized compensation) of select employees somewhat devalues the concept of teamwork. Or, as in the sports example, we can consider the ramifications of whether the star performer needs a team to fulfill his or her talents.

Aguinis says that “the nature of work in the 21st-century is such that performance is not an individual endeavor. We don’t work alone. Could Michael Jordan have been so great without Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman and coach Phil Jackson? The key issue is to create a performance management system that does not pit ‘me’ against ‘we.’ We described how to do this in an article published in *Business Horizons* in 2013. Our research-based recommendations include using measures of individual and team performance, measures of process and outcomes, developing measures using input from inside and outside of the team, gathering performance information using sources from inside and outside of the team, fostering team learning and development, and rewarding both individual and team performance.”

In the conclusion of their *Personnel Psychology* article, Aguinis and O’Boyle point out that work in the 21st century is different from the previous century, as it is “dominated by organizational settings based on a knowledge-intensive economy and the service industry.” Anything we can do to better understand how to cultivate star performers, and thus increase and improve the output of our organizations, is not only welcome but a requirement for a thriving enterprise in a time of ultraintensive competition.

PASSION FOR WORK: WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

We often hear how important it is for people to be passionate about their work. Knowledge workers routinely describe themselves as being passionate about what they do. This sounds good, but what does it really mean for individuals and organizations? In the May 2014 article “Developing a Passion for Work Passion:

Future Directions on an Emerging Construct” (*Journal of Organizational Behavior*), Pamela L. Perrewé, a management professor at Florida State University, and her coauthors tackle the subject of why passion for work is important and what needs to be done to more fully understand this construct. The authors write that this concept is not only not well understood, it is also not cultivated well. In writing their article, they hope to stimulate further research and discussion so the full, positive effects can be expressed at work for the benefit of all.

“Work passion,” Perrewé says, “is often desired by leaders in organizations as leaders want their employees to ‘be passionate’ about their work. Organizational leaders are encouraged to seek out passionate employees, cultivate their workplace passion, and enjoy the benefits of having a passionate, intrinsically motivated workforce.”

The authors note that passion for work has certainly been studied by others and is a topic of keen, ongoing interest. They delineate some of the previous scholarship on the topic and also note that passion can lead to negative as well as positive effects and results. Some people can be so passionate about their work that they can employ questionable tactics, and “their performance can vary wildly,” they write. Yet it is plain that passion can be a powerful force in a wide variety of occupations, including sales, public relations, politics, as well as teaching and the practice of the law.

There are smart, strategic ways that managers and leaders can begin to think about passion and its importance. According to Perrewé, “the benefits associated with having passionate employees include initiative, persistence, and high levels of work performance. Of course, these benefits can only be realized if the employees have the necessary tools and resources to be successful. Without resources (e.g., good equipment, computers, organizational support), passion can become stifled. Leaders should try hard to provide the needed resources for employees to act upon their passion in the workplace. Further, leaders who are passionate are often able to inspire workers by setting an example for them.”