

Stuck in the middle

The performance bell curve will result in a lag at either end of the spectrum, and it's the high achievers and underperformers who seem to receive all the attention. But how about those in the middle? Is it time to give them some TLC?

In the family unit it's known as middle child syndrome. The first child is spoilt, much loved, prepared and positioned to be the trail blazer. The final child is the baby, also spoilt, positioned to take the world by storm – or not, according to their whim. The middle child? Well, everyone knows the middle child is left to their own devices – sink or swim, excel or flounder.

In the corporate world the same rules apply to the 'B' performers – those who do their job well, are engaged and prepared to go the extra mile as required. They are not the 'stars' and they are by no means underperformers. Yet in the rush to cater to those two extremes they are often forgotten.

"A' players often benefit from formalised development programs, whereas the development of B players can be far less structured with the responsibility sitting mainly with line managers. Due to this, development of B performers is likely to be more unstructured and can be hit or miss depending on individual manager effectiveness," confirms Emma Engel, senior consultant – human capital at Aon Hewitt.

If Andrew Horsfield, director of Thrive Group, had his way, it would be this group – which he classifies in his employee engagement model as 'the improvers' (see p24) – which would receive the most attention. In an ideal world, he says, this is the quadrant where organisations would position all staff. "Improvers are inspired and consequently focused on delivering the best possible results," he says. "That means they work on improving themselves, the teams and environments in which they operate, the relationships they have within the company, and the overall performance being delivered."

Engel agrees, and notes that every organisation needs solid B performers; a company made up purely of A players would not function effectively. "B players typically spend more time than As in both a role and an organisation, offering both business and client account continuity. They offer a stability that can be hard to achieve with As," she says.

From good to great

All the experts *Human Capital* spoke to agreed that it is possible for good performers to become great, and similarly for great performers to slip down. With effective leadership, and strategies to develop and engage, a B performer can certainly rise to a B+ or an A performer. However, an effective leader and supporting company framework is just half of the battle. "The aspirations of the professional in question, in addition to their career lifecycle, career anchors and motivations, can either restrict or allow for excellence," says Engel.

How do you treat your 'B' players?

"We encourage everyone to be a rock star. By the nature of organisations and people you will always have some that are better than others. You must be careful that your top talent isn't seen as elitist and that you are providing equal opportunities for everyone to develop. Sometimes for our 'meets expectations' performers, which is the bulk of people doing a really good job, we spend as much time with them in terms of coaching, mentoring and developing, as we do with our top talent, because our ultimate goal is to make them the top talent. As many organisations know, your top talent today could drop back to your meeting expectations talent, and vice versa. If you're not providing the right attention to all talent, they will leave you."

**Alec Bashinsky, national partner,
people & performance, Deloitte
Touche Tohmatsu**



Before embarking on performance improvement strategies for B players, it must be remembered that not all B players are As in waiting; quite often Bs will be happy being just that.

Stephen Hickey, senior consultant – human capital at Aon Hewitt, says it’s important to find what strategy is right for the specific individual. “Effective career development strategies always segment and apply effort to different groups. To develop, motivate and engage your workforce you need to know your people and their career anchors. This allows you to create effective development and engagement strategies based on a sound platform of knowledge,” he says.

An A-list mindset

On the theme of ‘knowing your employees’, rogenSi has set out to research, from a mindset perspective, what makes high performers tick. From there, it’s possible to replicate that mindset in others. Pete Clark, director, rogenSi, says there is a natural aspect to the mindset of high performers – part of their DNA – but there is also a replicable aspect. Knowing more about that replicable aspect means it’s now possible to inform, measure and develop the knowledge, skill process and mindsets of the B players, and actually improve their potential so that it shows up in performance.



“If we put our performance against what is better, what does that look like?”

– Pete Clark

Clark believes one of the reasons B players are often forgotten is managers sometimes don’t know how to ‘up’ them – they don’t know how to either motivate them or get them performing to their potential. The rogenSi approach looks to remedy this by looking at performance through a lens of four specific ingredients – the right knowledge, demonstrable skill, and consistent processes all multiplied by the most resourceful mindset.

“When we have conversations with managers around performance they’re all locked into just the knowledge, skill and process piece, not thinking that in fact you could teach 100 people in your organisation the same skill but still see different levels of performance showing up four weeks later – why is that? It can’t be because they don’t have the skill. It must have something to do with the resourceful mindset at the time: how you think about things, how you perceive things that allows that skill to show up,” he says.

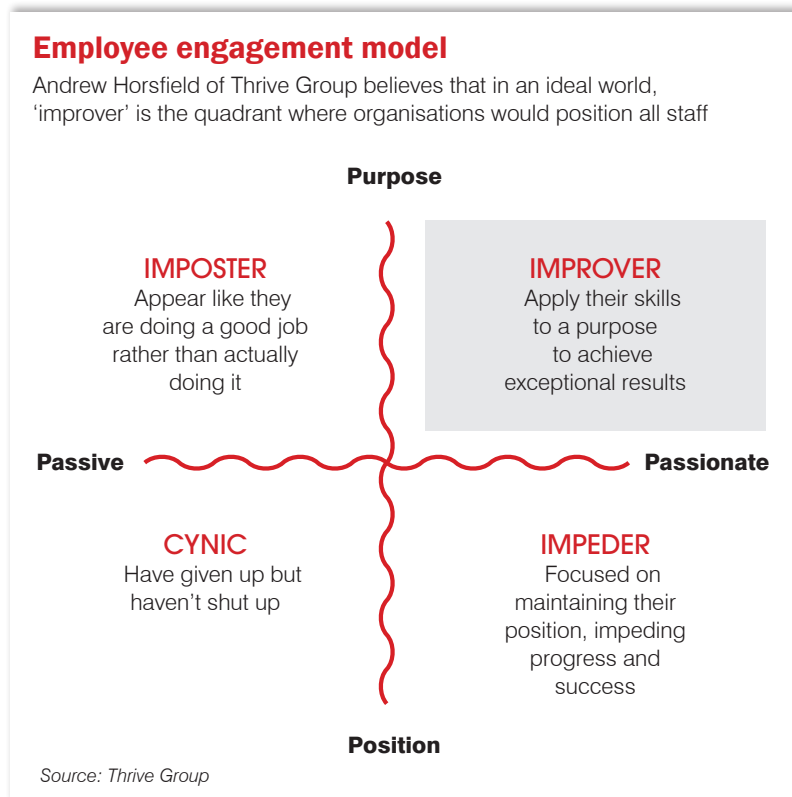
The scientifically based Mindset program was developed following studies of world class athletes, business leaders and individuals who had displayed strength of mind and succeeded against the odds. Mindset is a confidential assessment where people can provide accurate indications of what they feel about themselves and their pattern of thinking, so they can understand it and look to strengthen it. It’s essentially a training and development tool.

Clark adds that mindset is not so much personality driven as situationally driven, so a person can be put in one context and they’re very confident, while in another context they’re not confident. “We define mindset as a pattern of thinking that determines the quality of our actions. If that’s the case, if I’m faced with a customer or challenging problem, how I think will determine what I do. That resourcefulness that I bring to that situation will determine what I do, and therefore it could drive the outcomes that I get.”

Clark says that too often people are driven just by the result that they might or might not get, without thinking too much of the mindset that will take them towards it. There are a number of factors that determine one’s ability to be resourceful in any one situation.

Firstly, there’s motivation. This is not whether someone is motivated or not, but rather the type of motivation they bring to the situation. “People who have a strong mindset have a different sort of motivation. They are motivated from the inside out rather than just the outside in. It’s not that they’re not driven by money – I might still want to earn more – but day to day I’m focused on how I’m going to do that,” Clark says.

He cites an Olympic athlete who may be very focused on getting the gold medal but when they’re



training for four years and in the race, they don't focus on the gold medal. They focus on what they need to do to maximise their performance to get the gold medal.

Another example might be a sales team with a particular sales figure to aim for. Rather than pushing towards that, they would benefit more from breaking it down to mastering the way they cold call, or the way they talk about the product or close the deal.

Secondly, self-belief is crucial. "You'll find people with strong mindsets seem to have this almost unshakeable conviction in themselves, which means that when they fall over or are presented with a new situation they'll roll up their sleeves and push on through," Clark says.

Developing the mindset

If the mindset approach is taken, it's a three-step process to lifting Bs to As. Firstly, it's crucial to know from a business perspective what 'good' looks like, so in that specific business context, to achieve that specific outcome, what is the right mindset to get the results you're looking for?

Second, the current mindset needs to be measured.

The third step is to put a program together that helps develop that mindset in the right people.

Clark says that knowing what 'better' looks like is critical. "If we put our performance against what is better, what does that look like? It gives us a sense there is something more to achieve.

While Clark concedes there must be some degree of openness to assessing mindset and then improving this, he says that once people are presented with a picture of what 'good' looks like, and are then presented with 2-3 steps to get there, they are usually quite willing to take those steps. "As a consequence of taking the steps, they move out of their comfort zone, they realise, 'I'm ok, I can do this'. That then feeds upon itself. That's where the manager's role is so significant in terms of reinforcing."

Indeed, it should not be underestimated how important the manager's impact on individual performance can be. Often leaders set the tone, they commit the resources, and put in place the policies and procedures for the manager to then roll out on the ground.

The Pygmalion effect is also alive and well in organisations throughout the world. The Pygmalion effect is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy, so people with poor expectations internalise their negative label, and those with positive labels succeed accordingly.

"When you start using labels like A, B or C, which a business naturally has to do for certain reasons, it means that if you're a B player, that's how you'll be treated," says Clark. "You may never match the A

The pursuit of better, stronger, faster

The key to implementing high performance is clarity and effectiveness. It is the manager's job to provide this clarity and ensure effective implementation throughout an organisation if a high performance outcome is desired.

Based on work with more than 3,000 leading businesses on maximising people performance, SuccessFactors recommends the following four strategies:

1 Establish clarity of goals and rapidly align your workforce to execute the strategy. You cannot afford to delay and risk losing focus of high performers.

2 Focus on your core talent. Identify the talent that will be essential for your new strategic direction and invest in them.

3 Avoid the rumour mills. Transparency drives trust and employee engagement. Companies with high trust financially outperform those with low trust.

4 Compensate more strategically: pay only for performance. Avoid the mistake of spreading limited bonus resources evenly across top- and low-performers.

By Erik Berggren, senior director of customer results & global research, SuccessFactors



performer, but you will more fully maximise your performance as a consequence of me setting the bar higher in my mind for you."

A balanced approach

James Rutherford, senior consultant - human capital at Aon Hewitt, offers a final word of advice: be realistic. While there's no doubt that organisations should develop staff and work to consistently improve employee and company performance, he says that to shift all groups of performers to the right could be a very expensive exercise. "With such a large group it would be important to consider whether there would be a return on investment. It's unlikely that you'll be able to push the performance of a D player up to A performance level, no matter the resources you dedicate to the goal," he says.

However, Horsfield adds that neglecting the Bs is not an option.

Consciously and consistently recognising and rewarding the efforts of the improvers is essential. "Continually providing targets that stretch an already motivated group will keep them energised for further performance improvement, ensuring they remain in the improver category," he notes. "The more improvers you have turning up to work the greater their value. The more they can connect with others, the more people they can influence and the more likely an organisational culture of performance will be created." **HC**