

## It's the need to achieve that drives top performers

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Your company has a fast track and you want to get on it.

"It's reserved for top performers" your boss tells you.

"I'm reliable and hardworking," you reply. "Doesn't that make me a top performer?"

"There's more to it than that," she says.

"What more?" you ask. "What do I need to do to earn that label?"

Look for a simple answer to this question and you'll be disappointed. As noted in this column on Oct. 7, "Getting the 'best' from employees," individual performance doesn't happen in a vacuum. In myriad interrelated ways, your boss, your job, your organization's culture and the people with whom you work, directly affect the quality of your own performance.

Still, if "top-performer" status is important to you, there are things you can do to move in that direction. Three performance specialists, based in Toronto, offer the following counsel. Be warned, it's not for the faint-of-heart.

Build self-management skills. Few people have put a finer point on the relationship between self-management and performance than Dr. John Marshall, chair of The Self -Management Group, a company specializing in the selection, development and retention of top performers (and in the spirit of full disclosure, a business associate of mine).

"No matter what position you are in," Marshall says, "to look at your own performance you've got to look at your internal environment; how you manage your energy, how you manage yourself, your own personal resources. That's self-management and it's the Number 1 key competency of top performers."

Self-managers are savvy people, self-aware and alert. "They get up in the morning, set goals, set activities, commit to the activities," he says. "They evaluate the results, seek resources to get better and then start that whole process the next day."

"Three things interact," Marshall observes. "There are your goals - that's the strategic target that you want to go after. There are results - that's what happens. In the middle is the self-management piece; it's 80 per cent of the process and the only thing you can really manage, your effort and your commitment."

Align your goals with your employer's goals. In today's busy workplace, goals aren't necessarily top-of-mind, says Bob Angel, founder of the Gilford Group Limited.

"People are very busy trying to just get their work done for tomorrow morning," he explains. "And they don't find it easy to articulate what their work goals really mean over the long haul. Even if

they can identify them, they have great difficulty in putting together an actual plan."

"Fuzzy thinking" of this kind is complicated by the fact that there are at least two sets of performance objectives in most organizations, he adds. And the organizational goals that cascade down from senior management (often couched in terms of revenues, profits and share price) are quite different from the goals of individuals, taxed as they are keeping chaos at bay in their particular corner of the workplace while juggling the demands of busy, complex lives.

Top performers find a way to align the two. It's a lengthy career management process, Angel acknowledges, "an exercise of thinking about the things you need to do to make yourself successful, your job successful, and the organization successful both in the short-term and the long-term."

Engage your boss in performance discussions. You may get help from your employer's performance management process, or you may not. It depends on your boss. There's a strong likelihood that despite the best of intentions he may not be up to coaching you.

"People are busy; they've got a million things on their plate," says Janet Hardy, founding partner of The Chrysalis Group. "And frankly at the end of the day, a lot of people don't want to talk about performance. They aren't comfortable appreciating and acknowledging it positively, and when there's a performance problem, it's the last conversation they want to have.

"Very few organizations," she says, "are moving forward aggressively to train and coach managers about what great performance looks like, about how to make smart decisions around who to pay, who to reward, who to recognize, who to have difficult conversations with."

Top performers find a way around this, actively seeking out feedback. "Individuals who manage themselves well, who aren't afraid to ask questions, aren't afraid to say 'How can I be better? How can you help me be better? Talk to me about how well I'm doing,' are the ones who distinguish themselves," Hardy says.

Present your own business case. When looking at a new job or at your next opportunity, adopt "a pragmatic, practical, business focus," she advises. "Prepare to state what you've accomplished and what impact that has had, whether in a leadership position, in school or at a past job. Demonstrate the progress you've made to a certain set of goals.

"Establish that you clearly understand your role in the overall business plan and that you can deliver your piece very effectively, even if it's just a tiny piece of the organization," Hardy adds. "Convince employers that you have what it will take to make them more successful moving forward."

In Marshall's view, one overriding characteristic sets top performers apart - an internal "achievement motivation."

"Successful people, top performers, continue to get better and continue to perform at a high level not because of the external results they're getting," he says. "That's just a scorecard. The real drive is a need to achieve."

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