

## **What's the Difference?** **Bill Gilbert**

How is it that two people with the same skills, similar work experience and comparable education perform so differently? One may excel in the workplace while the other is an average or, worse yet, a poor performer.

Skills are important, but in many cases can be taught or learned. Experience and academic achievement are indicators that knowledge and skills have been learned, yet are often similar in both Top Performers and the poor/average performing employee.

Top Performers not only have the *knowledge* to do the work; they *want* to do the work and they "*fit*" the specific position and organization in which they work.

Top performing employees also need to have the right combination, for your organization, of:

- ✓ Thinking/learning styles and mental abilities
- ✓ Behavioural traits
- ✓ Motivation
- ✓ Desire for the working conditions and work environment, etc.
- ✓ Match with the workplace culture

For example, a fast learner or one who processes information quickly may thrive in an environment where change is constant and one must quickly adapt. However, the same individual would soon get bored and lazy in a position where the duties require repetition and tasks are routine.

Similarly, a person who is decisive may be a Top Performer in a position where such power is delegated, but not one where many checks and balances are in place.

In the same way, if one thrives in a people environment but has an isolated work location they will likely perform poorly. It has little to do with skills or experience, but rather, for them, a motivating environment.

These personal characteristics cannot be taught. They can only be adapted some of the time. Therefore, if you want to build an organization of Top Performers it is important to examine mental abilities, core behaviours and interests of each individual against the requirements of the position.

"Fit" with the job and the organization also makes the difference between a Top Performing employee and a poor or average performing one.

For example, independent people may perform well with incentives such as commission or rewards but be failures where team contribution is needed. Some people will become top performers in a family

focussed environment whereas others, who like to separate home and work, will be unhappy and less productive.

The challenge if you want more Top Performers, therefore, is how to know what type of individual will perform best in a specific position at your workplace.

There are three basic steps

1. Examine the knowledge and skill requirements of the specific position. Reviewing the job description (if you have one!) is not enough. Interview others who interact with people in the position. Talk with incumbents. Check out web sites such as <http://online.onecenter.org> and [www23.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca](http://www23.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca) for details on skill, experience and other characteristics required to do each job.
2. Assess the differences in core characteristics between top performing people in the position and poor performing incumbents. The challenge here is to be impartial. First, use objective measurements in separating top from poor performers (number of customers processed, files completed, products constructed, sales made, etc.). Secondly, determine what personal characteristics are different. Interviews can provide some insights, but there are also a variety of objective survey and assessment tools in the marketplace to help. Some are great; others are, well, not so good. (Contact the author, [bill@gilbertassociates.ca](mailto:bill@gilbertassociates.ca), for a complementary checklist to use in evaluating different employee assessments.)
3. Verify/confirm your findings. Measure all employees against the criteria. Use the findings to help screen/select new employees. Confirm they become Top Performers. Revisit and refine the criteria regularly – certainly when there are changes to the work, the management or the people with whom the position interacts.

In a comprehensive review of employee selection methods by Frank Schmidt and John Hunter, the authors suggest:

- Top performing unskilled/semiskilled workers perform **38% better** than poor performers.
- Top performing skilled employees perform **64% better** than their poor performing colleagues.
- Top performing managers perform **96% better** than poor managers.

Organizations cannot afford to accept mediocrity. They must have as many Top Performers in their business as possible. In order to attract, hire and keep Top Performers, they must know what makes a Top Performer different from their average and poor colleagues. Initially it may take time to do the analysis, but rewards follow – in productivity, in lower turnover and in a happier workplace.

-30-

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