

Boosting Your Own Performance

How can you become a star performer at work? By setting goals, becoming empowered, managing time wisely, limiting your commitments, and knowing your options.

BY NEAL WHITTEN

As work environments rapidly change, people also must change their thinking. Of course, no employee is indispensable. But you can make yourself more valuable.

As you perform your job each day, you have to make many choices. You can make them more confidently and consistently if you apply this simple yet powerful concept: Behave as if you own the business. Whether you work for a company with five employees or 5,000, you must make decisions with the conviction that your contributions count. That's called "ownership."

One aspect of ownership is setting goals. Choose goals that are important to you, not to someone else. Remember that achieving them will take your effort and sacrifices.

Don't let the following scenario apply to you:

Co-worker 1: "So, what are your goals?"

Co-worker 2: "I'm not sure. But I'd

like to take on more responsibility and be promoted."

Co-worker 1: "Do you think you're headed in the right direction?"

Co-worker 2: "Well, I'm keeping busy. I figure that I'll know what I want to do when I see it."

Co-worker 1: "Have you seen it?"

Co-worker 2: "I don't think so."

Unfortunately, a lot of employees put as little effort into career planning as the second worker in that example. If you don't know where you're headed, don't be surprised—and don't blame others—if you never get there.

Why do so many people fail to set work and career goals? Typically, they say that they're too busy with current assignments, that they're too old, that their managers will look after them, or that there's too much competition. And people tend to progress to the next highest job level anyway, without having set goals.

If you haven't set goals because

you don't want more responsibility, beware. It's likely that you will have to take on more responsibility just to keep your current job. In a competitive marketplace, employers tend to raise their standards for acceptable performance.

If you're hoping that your boss will look out for you, don't. Managers have too many problems and pressures to spend time mapping roads to success for their staff. There are exceptions, but most people don't work for exceptions.

Once you've established your goals, develop them into a vision by identifying the decisions and tasks that will get you where you want to go. Describe your vision in one or two sentences, both verbally and in writing. Write in the present tense. Say, "I am"—not "I want to become."

Here are some examples:

▶ "I'm a full professor at a prestigious university and a recognized author of a best-selling book on family economics. I'm in high demand as a speaker and consultant" (from an undergraduate student).

▶ "I'm a successful project manager of the most profitable products in the company. My organization consistently has the highest morale and productivity in the industry, and the biggest breakthroughs" (from a junior engineer).

▶ "I'm the training director of a highly respected and progressive consulting company" (from an assistant trainer).

Display your vision where you can see it often. List the steps that will help you attain it, including the time frames, the milestones by which to measure your progress, and the promotions or lateral career moves you hope to achieve in the next two to five years. Last, make your vision known to people around you so that they can help you if possible. It also might inspire them to perceive you in a new light. Revisit your vision every six months to decide whether it's still desirable.

It's possible that you may never reach your ultimate goals, despite your determination and good intentions. So, you should also try to enjoy the pursuit. Along the way, you may find that you gain knowledge and experience, and that you have many accomplishments.

Time is of the essence

There is usually a direct relationship between how well people manage their time and how successful they are in achieving their dreams and goals and meeting day-to-day commitments.

Heed the words of Denis Waitley in his book, *The Joy of Working*: "Time is an equal-opportunity employer. Each human being has exactly the same number of hours and minutes every day. Rich people can't buy more hours; scientists can't invent new minutes. And you can't save time to spend it on another day. Success depends upon using time wisely, by planning and setting priorities."

One way to use your time more productively is to apply the 80/20 rule: Spend 80 percent of your time on the 20 percent of your workload that is most important.

Make a list of the things you need or want to do, one item to a line. Include both short-term and long-term objectives. Each week, create a separate mini-list of the activities you must begin or complete by the next week. Designate the day that you plan to work on each activity.

Each morning, review the items to be taken care of that day. Do the important ones first. Many people do the least important tasks first to get them out of the way. But it's usually better to be late on several low-priori-

ty tasks than to be late on one high-priority item. As you complete each activity, draw a line through it. You can add any new items that arise to your main list or to a mini-list.

Using this approach helps you remember your objectives and gives you a sense of accomplishment when you complete each task.

Timely tips

Here are some tips to help you boost your daily work performance:

Focus on one task. Once you begin an activity, try to complete it before jumping to another one. Each time you interrupt a task, you lose productivity when you start it again and have to get back up-to-speed.

Procrastinate on projects. Procrastination can be a powerful time saver. It's efficient to complete activities just before they're due, as long as you have a built-in contingency plan for unexpected occurrences. This tip is especially effective for people who are more creative and productive under the gun. Remember Parkinson's Law: Work expands to fill the time available for its completion.

Retrieve information quickly. Make sure you use an information-storage system (electronic or other) that allows you to retrieve information quickly. Keep reference materials and frequently called phone numbers close at hand. Your work environment should be arranged for productivity first and appearance last.

Discard irrelevant items. Don't be a pack rat. Get rid of materials that you don't use or that are easily accessible elsewhere. The lack of clutter can help you concentrate. But don't make yourself anxious by tossing out something that you think you may miss later on.

Combine tasks. Make the best use of time away from your work environment. For instance, try to pick up your mail, check the company bulletin board, get a cup of coffee, and confer with co-workers all in one trip.

Review once. Once a day, set aside some time to review your mail, preferably soon after it arrives so that you can react quickly to urgent matters.

Organize your mail. Divide your mail into three stacks: essential, interesting, and unnecessary. Essential mail is mail that you must act on. Add it to your to-do list. Interesting, but not es-

sential, mail includes such "extracurricular" reading as trade journals. Unnecessary mail can go directly into the recycling bin.

Return calls efficiently. Set aside some time near the end of the day to return phone calls. Or, return calls when you have a few minutes between meetings.

Set aside private time. If you're concentrating on a project, close your office door except for about six inches. That sends the message that you're too busy to be interrupted for unimportant things but that you're still available if necessary. If you don't want any interruptions, close the door all the way and post a note.

Save time in new ways. Every workplace has its own ways to manage time. Create a personal list of time-saving tips and ask co-workers to add their ideas.

Enlightened empowerment

Many managers say that the reason for dwindling profits is that employees resist being empowered. Perhaps. But the other side of the coin is that many companies don't provide training on empowerment so that employees understand it or know how to implement it.

Typically, employees who don't practice empowerment give these reasons:

- ▶ "I don't understand my job."
- ▶ "I don't understand what empowerment means."
- ▶ "I don't feel that my manager has empowered me."
- ▶ "I think that my manager would feel threatened."
- ▶ "I'm afraid to make decisions and take risks. I might be fired."
- ▶ "I don't think I can make a difference."

Most people play it safe. They don't stretch themselves. They don't create opportunities for themselves or for their companies. When was the last time your manager reprimanded you for exceeding your authority? If you haven't caused management to take note of your actions, you probably aren't empowered.

Empowerment means understanding your job, taking ownership of your job, and doing what is necessary to accomplish your job, within legal and ethical parameters.

Understand your job. Communicate with your manager about your job. You must understand it before you can succeed at it. It's also important to know where your manager draws the line between empowerment and insubordination. Don't assume that you know. A dialogue between you and your manager can strengthen your relationship and gain his or her support for your empowerment.

Take ownership. Managers should be responsible for creating and supporting a productive, safe work environment; nonmanagers should make most of the technical and business decisions. Nonmanagers should have the opportunity, responsibility, and accountability for implementing the day-to-day tasks that move the business forward. It isn't your manager's responsibility to develop your career. But he or she can offer guidance and help you find the time to improve your skills and your value to the company.

Make a difference. If you don't believe that you can make a difference, you probably won't. Empowerment shifts responsibility and accountability to individuals, no matter what their position in the organization's hierarchy.

Recently, I was asked to moderate a review of a completed project. The objective was to learn from both the good and bad experiences, for the benefit of subsequent projects. Managers were not permitted to attend. In the first meeting, the project team identified about 100 problems and found that 85 percent were management's fault.

At the next meeting, the managers were present. We discussed the problems again and the issue of empowerment. This time, the team decided that 85 percent of the problems weren't management's fault but were the responsibility of team members. Once they were introduced to the concepts of empowerment, ownership, and accountability, the team members became enlightened.

The true meaning of commitment

Many people are quick to make commitments but slow to meet them. One reason is that we often abandon our commitments in order to gain the approval of others and to be viewed as team players. Other factors also may "decommit" us. In the beginning, we

A Performance Quiz

Mark true or false to the following statements:

T/F You should never refuse a request from a superior.

T/F You aren't empowered unless someone says that you are.

T/F You shouldn't point out a problem if you don't have any solutions.

T/F Working from a daily to-do list makes you less flexible regarding unexpected events.

T/F You should never ask higher-level managers to solve problems in the lower ranks.

T/F You should not accept that most problems are outside your responsibility; fix them.

T/F You should take on as many

commitments as possible.

T/F You should complain as soon as you encounter something at work that you don't like.

T/F Setting goals makes you inflexible with regard to future opportunities.

T/F You should never put yourself in a position in which your manager tells you that you have exceeded your authority.

If you answered "true" to any of these statements, you probably have good reasons. After all, many of the statements have become synonymous with a "good" employee. But the correct answer to all of the statements is "false."

may not understand the scope of what we're committing to. Or, we may think that there are no penalties for failing to follow through.

Make good commitments. If pay were based on how well employees meet their commitments, then making commitments and meeting them would be synonymous. Commitments are the backbone of a business. They're made to customers to deliver products and services, to shareholders to produce profits, and to employees to pay salaries and benefits. The most successful companies and the most valuable employees are those that consistently keep their commitments.

Just say no. If you suspect that you can't meet a commitment, don't make it. You may have to say no to your team leader, your supervisor, your manager, or your co-workers. But you can offer alternatives.

I recently had this conversation with a senior planner:

Planner: "I just left my director's office. He asked me to develop a new product and deliver it within 12 months."

Me: "Why do you look so concerned?"

Planner: "Because it will take 18 months."

Me: "How do you know?"

Planner: "I've been building these kinds of products for 15 years."

Me: "So, what are you going to do?"

Planner: "I'm going to put together a 12-month plan."

Me: "Why?"

Planner: "Because he's the boss."

Me: "You'll be a hero for a day—the day you commit to the 12-month schedule. But then what happens? Everyone will end up putting in overtime and taking shortcuts to meet the deadline. The schedule will expand to 18 months anyway, and quality will suffer. Everyone will lose—you, the project team, your boss, and your customers."

Planner: "What should I do?"

Me: "Say no to the 12-month schedule. Offer other recommendations, such as building a product with less function that could be delivered within 14 months. If you create a realistic time frame, you'll get the product in on schedule. And the next time your boss wants a job planned, he'll come to you because he knows that you'll do what you say you'll do."

Limit your commitments. When you're asked to meet a deadline that conflicts with your current commitments, it's your responsibility to say that you can't take on new work without jeopardizing the work you've already got. Most managers will delegate until an employee says, "Whoa."

Have contingencies. Unexpected events can throw a wrench into even the most realistic schedules. Last-minute meetings will arise, people will be out of work sick, and so forth.

It's best to pad project schedules with a 10 to 20 percent margin of time.

Don't commit blindly. You may be called on to estimate the time frame or cost of a project without having all of the information. Estimates can be good business, but they shouldn't be thought of as commitments. Buffer your estimates with contingencies. Make sure that others understand the difference between your saying, "I'll try" and your saying, "I commit."

Many people feel pressured by their commitments. If you feel that you're not in control, don't make any new commitments until you're comfortable that you can meet them. Learn to negotiate terms and reach compromises.

Know your options

When you're confronted with a problem that you don't "own," you have three choices: Complain about it, accept it, or solve it.

When people discuss a problem without trying to solve it, that's complaining. Complaining consumes time and energy that could be used more constructively. Still, it's easy to complain about other people's problems—and not so easy to name the person responsible. If you decide to point out a problem and confront the "owner," be prepared to suggest some solutions. That will help establish a good working relationship and expedite the solution.

When you bring a problem to people's attention, avoid these phrases:

- ▶ Why doesn't somebody...?
- ▶ When are we ever going to...?
- ▶ Why do we always...?
- ▶ He or she doesn't even....
- ▶ Can you believe this? Here we go again....
- ▶ For a change, I'd like to see....
- ▶ How do you expect...?

In some cases, the best thing to do is accept a problem and learn to live with it. Surprised? There are an infinite number of problems, but there is a finite amount of time.

Carefully select the problems that you'll try to solve. They should meet these criteria:

- ▶ Your job performance will be evaluated based on your solving the problem.
- ▶ Your boss asked you to solve it.
- ▶ You have a personal interest in solving the problem.

Try this exercise: Make a list of the problems that you've complained about and taken care of in the past. Examine them to determine whether taking care of them resulted in valuable changes. Ask yourself whether they were worth your time and your manager's time.

The aim of the exercise is to become aware of other options when confronted with a problem. If you're not pleased with the choices you've been making, you can use your time more productively. Dedicate most of your time to pursuits that have value to your company, instead of just looking for problems.

From problem to issue

Most of the times that I'm asked to assess a project's progress, I find that the most critical problems don't receive adequate attention. Such problems, if not solved quickly, can cause significant damage—such as missed schedules, compromised quality, overrun costs, and lost customers.

Employees may neglect critical problems for these reasons:

- ▶ apathy
- ▶ a fear of conflict with others
- ▶ not wanting to alienate others
- ▶ uncertainty about what is acceptable behavior
- ▶ a reluctance to make others look bad.

Most of the time when problems with a project arise, all parties are "right," in the context of their own points of view. It takes someone with a broader responsibility for the project to weigh all sides objectively and to keep the project's overall objectives in mind.

A problem becomes critical when the parties are unable to agree on a solution and when the problem could affect the organization's success. In fact, then the problem becomes an "issue."

If the parties aren't able to reach a solution, management must step in. That's called an "escalation."

The conditions of an escalation are as follows:

- ▶ Escalate only after the parties have tried earnestly to resolve the issue.
- ▶ The dissenter (the person raising the issue) should be responsible for initiating the escalation.
- ▶ Initiate an escalation within two workdays of realizing that the parties

can't resolve the issue themselves.

▶ Escalate the problem, not the people involved. In cases in which the issue is someone's behavior, proceed cautiously.

▶ The dissenter should inform his or her manager before initiating an escalation, to gain the manager's support. Keep in mind that a manager might advise against escalating.

▶ Before escalating, the dissenter should inform all of the involved parties and make sure they understand the issue.

▶ During an escalation, the parties should continue working on the project as planned, even if some aspect is being escalated or might be affected by the escalation. It would be disastrous if they sat idle. No one can know for certain the outcome of an escalation, so everyone should keep marching together until a resolution is official.

And remember: Escalation isn't a dirty word. It's a check-and-balance mechanism. Escalations help resolve conflicts quickly, and they encourage employee participation in and ownership of problems.

Throughout an escalation, it's important that the parties behave maturely, prudently, and professionally. They will still have to work with each other after the issue is resolved. All parties should abide by the final decision. They shouldn't revisit an escalation unless significant new information becomes available.

These tips for working more effectively day-to-day can add up to an overall improvement in your performance. ■

Neal Whitten is a speaker, trainer, and consultant in employee development and project management. The article adapts some material from his book, *Becoming an Indispensable Employee in a Disposable World* (Pfeiffer and Company, 1995). Contact him at the Neal Whitten Group, Box 858, Roswell, GA 30077-0858.

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