By Phyllis G. Doloff

"C" Players in an "A" World

What to do about people who are good—but not good enough.

Remember when every staff comprised a sprinkling of stars and a handful of "strong righthands" at the very top, a solid center of average performers, and a scattering of problems at the bottom? If that simple configuration conjures up memories of sweeter times in your corporate life, you're not alone. There was a time when the "average" performer was openly acknowledged to be the organization's backbone.

In fact, "average" was an umbrella term describing the entire spectrum of employee performance across the organization's considerable middle expanse. It spanned every level of performance from genuinely good, to pretty good, to just *OK*, to "died but forgot to lie down."

But there was room enough for everyone in that broad bell curve, because organizations were able to accept and absorb the full spectrum of average performance. An employee might have been consigned to the same desk until retirement, but rarely to the

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVE KLUG

PHYLLIS G. DOLOFF is a Westfield, N.J.-based HR professional and freelance writer. She recently completed The Monday Morning Curmudgeon, *a handbook of corporate personality types.*

unemployment line. Who were the average performers? They fell—and still fall—into a number of informal categories you know well:

"I know all I need to know." This is the employee who firmly believes his education was whole and complete for life the day he graduated school (or, at the latest, when he finished training for his current position). For him, learning is like a dead language—a wonderful discipline acquired in your youth and forgotten after the final exam. Predictably, his skills haven't kept pace with the job, the industry, or the rest of the world.

"*That* thing? I don't need a computer." By now every park ranger and his pet raccoon have a computer. Although the Luddites are becoming fewer and farther between, they're holding out to the bitter end, resisting the irresistible force of technology as long as possible. Whenever possible, he still resorts to his electric typewriter, and he eschews e-mail—despite repeated verbal clubbings by the boss. When forced to face e-mail, this employee prevails upon a sympathetic soul to print a hard copy for him, scrawls a response on the paper, and returns it to sender via interoffice mail. The bottom line: Technology is meant for someone else. Not me.

"It's a five o'clock world when the whistle blows." *Su* deadline is not necessarily *mi* deadline. Your deadline is your own problem: This employee leaves promptly and cheerfully at the close of the workday—no matter how loudly the winds of change are howling around him.

"I do my job. Not *your* job. Just *my* job." This employee may do her job meticulously and well. But if time stops for no man, neither does she when an associate needs assistance. Teamwork is not her strong suit; the last thing she volunteered for was a second helping at the company picnic.

"One step ahead of myself." This employee has probably landed a job for which he is simply not prepared. He's not so poor a fit that he falls to the bottom of the bell curve (which would classify as "unsatisfactory" performance). Rather, he is perpetually a little behind his peers. Mastery of the job is always just beyond his grasp. It's like asking the employee to wear a pair of shoes that are half a size too big; the job was never quite the right fit or it has stretched and expanded over time and the employee's skills haven't kept pace with the new requirements.

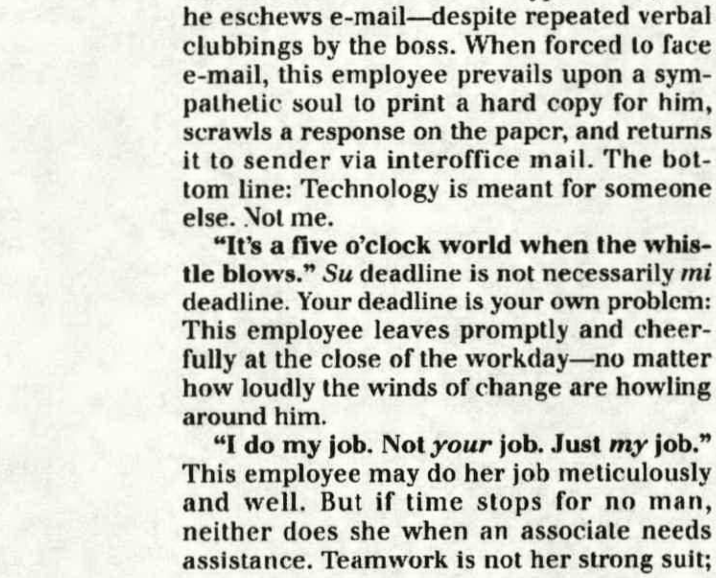
"When she was good, she was very, very good . . ." But when she was bad! The inconsistent performer veers from accuracy and acumen to botch and bobble. No one's perfect (or even right, for that matter) all the time. But relatively consistent performance is what distinguishes us from toddlers and household pets. If you can't count on her performance to be consistently good, average, or even lame, then you can't set her loose to operate without continuous scrutiny and monitoring.

"It took me 20 years to get where I am today." Good for you. But if you've retired on the job, it'll take you another 20 to get this far again. This employee is experiencing that heady sense of entitlement that some Americans feel about Social Security and Medicare: He's worked hard to get this far, and now the sense of urgency that propelled him forward is a pleasant memory on which heroic tales are based.

"The times they are a-changin'." For many years there were multiple incentives for managers to tolerate so-so performance, suggests Martha Glantz, president of the New York-based MJGlantz Consulting. "In an era in which the size of your staff was a reflection of the size of your own job, there was little incentive to trim deadwood," she says.

In addition, managers would have to hold painfully candid conversations with employees about difficult performance issues. And if there was little incentive, there was less documentation. The employee's reputation may have been average, but you would never know it from the stack of glowing performance appraisals neatly tucked in his file. There was no basis for an honest discussion about meeting job standards if the appraisals already portrayed the employee as a veritable standard-bearer for the organization.

Laughing Matters



At the Middle of the Bell Curve

The past decade of downsizing, belt-tightening, and outsourcing has changed organizations' willingness and ability to absorb average performance. Managers once had the luxury of assigning the more challenging, nonstandard work to stars and the more basic material to average performers. There was usually sufficient elbow room to absorb overflow and peak periods, and to use both high- and low-end performers to everyone's advantage: The stars had ample opportunity to shine, prove themselves worth their salt (and their salaries), and eventually be rewarded with promotions and staffs of their own.

The slower members of the group patiently brought up the rear, pounding out the more mundane work, accepting the mixed blessings of average wage increases and relative job security.

Nowadays everyone must be able to field—effectively and fluidly—whatever the organization pitches at them. For managers, leaner staffing has meant fewer hands to absorb the same or greater workload. Their definition and tolerance of acceptable performance has necessarily changed as they've faced the realization that they can barely cover their routine workload, much less accommodate less capable, less cooperative, and more idiosyncratic members of the group.

"In general, the performance bar is being raised everywhere," observes Karl Gimber, senior vice president of New York-based Right Management Consultants. "Companies don't have the bench strength—the sheer numbers of employees—they once had." Gimber has watched companies determinedly redefine acceptable performance levels and act on those changed standards. What is considered fully acceptable performance is being inched upward from the middle toward the high end of the bell curve.

In one instance, a large company communicated to a segment of its population that a performance-appraisal rating of "average" was no longer the acceptable standard. Those with an "average" rating were presented with a choice: Stay and meet the new and higher performance standards within a stipulated time period, or opt for an immediate severance package and outplacement services. If they stayed and still failed to meet the new performance standards, they would face progressive disciplinary action and termination—without benefit of the severance package.

"More companies see the employee's career as his own responsibility," says Gimber. "They'll provide the basic tools—job posting, tuition refund, and some core training. But the employee has to be willing to take risks and make lateral moves. The message is, 'Don't expect the corporation to do this for you.'" For employees who have failed to learn the first lesson of the much ballyhooed "new covenant"—that they are responsible for managing and maintaining their own professional skills—Gimber sees corporations passing on the job of re-educating them to outplacement firms.

The era of "organizational guilt" is over for now, and companies are much less reluctant to let employees go if they don't catch on to the organization's signals and changes. Many employees only learn about this new employment paradigm as part and parcel of their severance package.

Push usually comes to shove when a new boss—who has no history or bond with a longtime employee—arrives, when the workload grows heavy enough that the boss can't work around the organization's less-flexible members, or when changes redefine the skills the company considers desirable. The ability to deal well with people (both inside and outside the company) has become de rigueur, and teamwork and customer service have become required job skills.

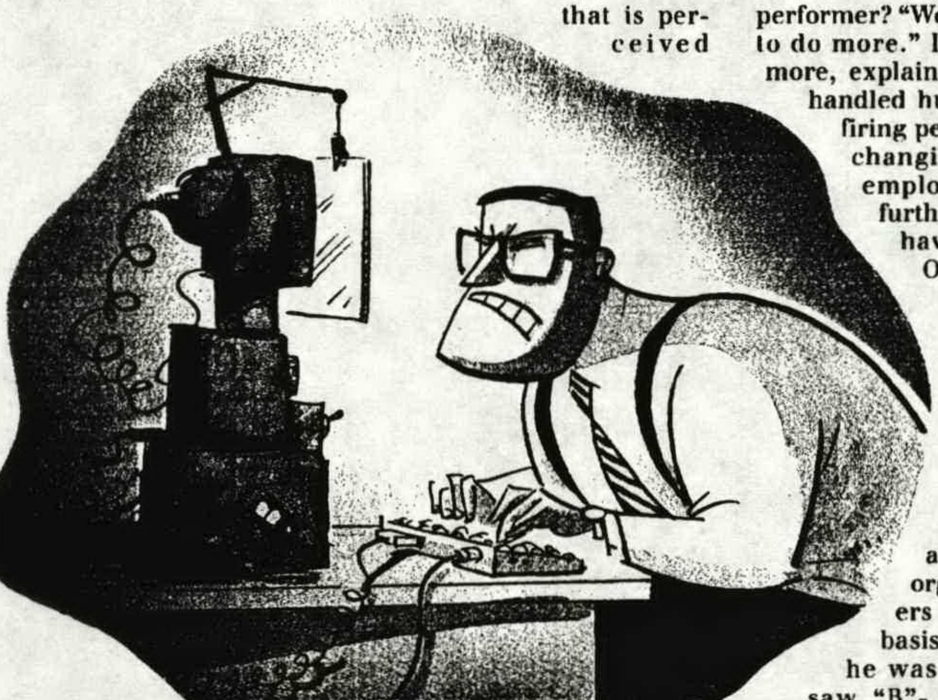
Too much of a good thing is not necessarily good: An overabundance of stars will crank up turnover among the very population you want to keep.

Inflexibility or curmudgeonly behavior may have been tolerated in an organization where everyone knew each other for years. ("Oh, don't mind Bob. He's really got a heart of gold under all that.") But they are the kiss of death in a setting where there has been rapid turnover or where all of the players are being asked to take on new skills and responsibilities. The old "family"—tolerant of such eccentricities—is gone or is, itself, under pressure to perform. What had once been an endearing part of the culture is now perceived by newcomers as bizarre behavior and a roadblock to change.

There is general agreement about the high and low ends of the performance-scale bell curve. At the low end of the spectrum, "D"-level employees are being swept away completely; companies can't afford—and won't tolerate—them at all. At the high end of the scale, superstars (although highly desirable in small doses) pose their own problems for employers. "The trend is for companies to want only superstars," says Susan Palé, a principal in the HR consulting firm Polaris Associates, of Syracuse, N.Y. "We're seeing the beginning of competition for superstars as skilled labor shortages start to emerge. But some of the work will always be mundane. These people will be bored and will want to move on."

Along with the need to keep them intellectually challenged, stars can also beget the twin issues of ego and ambition. "Stars are not always team players, precisely because of their need to shine," says Glantz. "And in a world of fast turnover, they see little benefit to learning the less interesting work in any organization. They're asking themselves, 'Why bother to learn this company's minutiae if it doesn't teach me something I can use in my next job?'" In short, too much of a good thing is not necessarily so good: An overabundance of stars will probably crank up turnover among the very population you want to keep.

But it's the average "C" performer's role and fate that is perceived



differently by the consulting and corporate communities. Consultants see corporations as inclined to jettison employees who no longer make—or even recognize—the cut. Corporations aver a broader and longer-term perspective on the role and performance of the average employee, and claim they don't view performance management as a summarily "up or out" mandate.

But from any perspective, employees are being prompted—either implicitly or explicitly—to change their level of self-awareness and performance. Undeniably, the bar is being raised.

For Mike Keating, vice president of HR and administration at Suburban Propane of Whippany, N.J., there is still a place for the average employee. He sees employees as falling into three broad categories. "There are the employees who come in faithfully every day, do their jobs, and keep the place afloat," he says. "Next are the strong performers who are not quite sure if they want to be completely immersed in the fray. And then there are the key employees who really move the organization along."

Keating sees that first group as having made a conscious decision to be where they are; the organization, he says, should make it clear that they are welcome to stay, to be compensated appropriately, and to be treated ethically by the organization.

But change is coming. "If Suburban grows leaner over time, it would probably be by attrition rather than downsizing." What would that mean for the average performer? "We would ask these employees to do more." If they couldn't learn to do more, explains Keating, people would be handled humanely. He doesn't foresee firing people who can't keep up with changing expectations. But such employees wouldn't receive any further raises. And, he adds, "You have to be honest with people. Of course, they may choose to move on if the company is no longer a comfortable place for them."

Craig Saline, senior vice president of HR at the Wayne, N.J.-based consumer-products manufacturer Reckitt & Colman Inc., defines average performers as the "heart and soul of the organization. They're the keepers of the culture on a sustained basis." Saline explains that, when he was with General Electric, he saw "B"- and "C"-level employees eventually make valuable contributions to the company. That experience has made him sanguine about inheriting "C" employees in new organizations. For him, "It's not a matter of eliminating the middle, but of managing and leading the middle. It's a matter of getting the 'B's to 'A's, and the 'C's to 'B's."

Saline is enthusiastic about "finding the average performers and firing them up." But he's also pragmatic in his assessment of what's happening in many companies. "The middle ranks of employees often move into survivor mode. They're enduring death by a thousand cuts." They hunker down and get by. No one is talking to them. No one is giving them help or direction in changing.

Reckitt & Colman is undergoing its own changes. Having acquired another company almost three years ago, the combined headquarters' entities are moving into common office space. The new location is being designed to signal to the merged workforces that a fundamental cultural shift is under way. Senior management has moved to entirely open-office landscaping to facilitate better information, interaction, and innovation.

As in other organizations, the company is conveying—both directly and indirectly—that performance expectations are being raised, and that rewards and recognition are being redefined. The new physical and cultural model will drive management to work more closely as a team, and management's example will pull the rest of the organization along to mirror its behavior.

Jan Folta, vice president of HR at NYLCare Health Plans Inc., defines average employees in optimistic terms: "They're fully functional, and capable of doing 90 percent of the full range of the job. Of course, this assumes a basic match between your job needs and their skills."

And, while she agrees that a manager may not be able to delegate the toughest projects to them, Folta demurs, "There's a tremendous value to these employees. They may not always be the most innovative or creative people on your staff. But—in today's world of customer orientation—teamwork, cooperation, willingness to pitch in before being asked, and the ability to work well with others are valuable. These are the skills that convey your company's message of service and caring to your customers—and they cannot necessarily be taught."

Moreover, if the predictions of a coming labor and skills shortage are realized in the

. . . And What of Those "Difficult" Employees?

Besides "C" or average employees, every company has its share of "difficult" employees. What's the difference? Difficult people may be "A" in terms of output, but they play hell with their managers and co-workers. "People who alienate the people they need to work with are not performing their job effectively," says Deborah Snow Walsh, president of the Northbrook, Ill.-based executive-recruiting firm of the same name.

Of the different types of problem employees, here are a few of the most prevalent, and some expert tips on how you should deal with them:

Crabs. Anna Marie Buchmann, managing director of the Chicago-based consulting firm RHR International, suggests you "appeal to the crabby person's self-interest. The hook is their own career sometimes. A bright crab might get away with that attitude at a lower-level position, but if he's interested in advancing his career, he'd better change the way he deals with his frustration."

Dick Grote, president of the Dallas-based Grote Consulting and author of *Discipline Without Punishment: A New Way to Resolve Employee Performance Problems* (AMACOM), notes that "you can actually say in a job description that the employee must maintain a cheerful, positive attitude. That is not discriminatory. Unfortunately, I see very few descriptions that say that."

Whiners. "You have to separate what they're whining about," says Chuck Peck, senior vice president of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants' marketing, product and organizational development group. "It's like that joke, 'How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time.' When you separate the problems, that takes some of the drama out of what they're whining about. Then you take action on each problem: Apply logic and reason, and get them to accept responsibility."

Jeannine Sandstrom, psychologist and CEO of the Dallas-based Coachworks International, suggests, "If co-workers complain that someone is whining, point out that they just don't have to socialize with a whiner, as long as the work is getting done."

People Who Don't (Won't) Follow Instructions. "First, ask why," says Buchmann. "Are these unimportant details the maverick's not following? Maybe there are other ways of doing things. That's not to say the instructions aren't important, but you have to see if *you're* too fixed on your own approach." Sandstrom suggests you "get them to talk about what the consequences will be if they don't follow instructions."

Know-It-Alls. Sandstrom sees this "fault" as a potential strength. "Make them put their money where their mouth is," she says. Peck explains, "Ask them to demonstrate ways we could be more efficient, to go beyond what's being done now. Things can always be improved: If it ain't broke, break it."

Rabble-Rousers. "Turn what they're rabble-rousing about into something constructive," Peck says. "For instance, I'd ask them to train a group of people or give a presentation at a meeting." Sandstrom agrees but adds, "I'd hate to have all employees who are *yes* people. Give them a platform and form what we call a positive conspiracy. Make them the troubleshooter rather than troublemaker."

People Who Won't Admit There *Is* a Problem. This is where the much-vaunted 360-degree feedback comes in handy, since it records the perceptions of others regarding the person's on-the-job behavior. "If the person continues to argue," says Buchmann, "you have to say it doesn't matter what you think: This is the perception I have, your colleagues have, and the consequences may be losing your job." Sandstrom agrees, saying the important thing is to focus not on "personality or style but on observable behaviors that do not meet standards."

—*Eve Golden*

next decade, literate and numerate employees will be at a premium, she adds. "No one will have the luxury of tossing aside satisfactory employees."

Some Words From the Wise

Both the consulting and corporate sides of the discussion offer commonsense, substantive steps to improve employee performance—at all levels of performance and at all levels of the organization. Here are some tips on dealing with your "average" employees:

Is it that they can't, or *won't*? Is it a question of basic ability or something else? Susan Palé puts it succinctly: "If you held a gun to their head, could they do the job?" If the answer is *no*, then the first solution is to provide the appropriate training—classroom, coaching, practice, or experience. If the answer is *yes, they should be able to perform the job, but they're just not doing it*, look for the other factors and influences that contribute to performance.

Look for the gleam in their eye. Everyone is galvanized by something. Turn-ons come in every shape and form. With a little patience and some diplomatic trial and error on your part, you should be able to find something that makes each employee throw off sparks. Some of the most familiar motivators include public recognition, private kudos, cash, a plum assignment, a flexed work schedule, or personalized coaching by a favorite boss. If all else fails, Folta resorts to simply asking employees what's important to them.

And there's always the "swift kick" method of motivation. Think of it as the motivational equivalent of a left-handed compliment. "Sometimes people have worked to the low expectations laid out for them," offers Glantz. If you ask little, you get little. If you ask more, you'll get more. "They will rise to the new expectations you lay out for them," she notes.

Define your expectations. Don't leave it to employees to divine what you want from them. Set clear expectations and define the actual levels of performance the organization now finds acceptable in the way of target dates, accuracy, volume, speed, etc. Tell them exactly what is required to succeed—what they're doing right, what they're doing wrong, and what they're not doing at all that they should be doing. Whenever possible, discuss and give examples of the skills and behaviors, such as leadership, teamwork, flexibility, innovation, staying current with technology or industry practices, or learning and using new knowledge quickly.

Be honest. Never mind the pile of fabulous appraisals in their file. This isn't a debate about the value and validity of those appraisals. That's history. You're talking about the future. Explain that the job's expectations have changed, outline the new expectations, and tell employees how well their current performance matches the new expectations. Be completely honest about the short- and long-term consequences of not meeting the expectations.

Do you have to be Superman to succeed at this job? If the job requires X-ray vision to read an ancient computer screen, or superhuman hearing to function in a noisy and disruptive environment, then only Clark Kent will ever perform the job satisfactorily. If the envelopes aren't available to be stuffed when the employee has a mailing deadline, or if the employee's work requires a computer with more than a thimbleful of memory. . . . You get the picture. Be sure the tools and resources support the job requirements.

Does this job make sense? Do the pieces of the job contradict each other? A job that requires the employee to devote chunks of time to research and analysis while answering a perpetually ringing 800 number is a sure-fire prescription for failure. Job parameters and duties need to be mapped out for consistency.

Don't create disincentives. This is the eternal catch-22 for both managers and employees. The routine reward for successfully shouldering a huge workload is more work to shoulder. What's the incentive to push harder? You're effectively punishing the employees who work the hardest. There will always be more work to do. But spread it around.

And speaking of incentives and rewards . . .

Use the merit budget to reward the *meritorious*. Use the merit budget to distinguish decisively between levels of performance. For once, screw your courage to the sticking-place (as Lady Macbeth counseled her nervous spouse) and give nonperformers nothing. If you give your stars and your duds the same percentage, and then blame "that danged HR" for your own cowardice—well, enough said (see "be honest," above). A discussion of consequences should cover the distinct possibility that there will be no further raises unless and until performance meets the new expectations.

Capitalize on their strengths (just like you did in the old days). "Everyone can do something very well," says Folta. Mix 'n' match still works. If you can match your business needs and the employee's skills, why not assign responsibilities to make the best use of individual talents? The company's needs will be met, and the employee's strengths will be exploited in the most positive sense of the word. ■