



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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How to Be a Superstar in Your Own Company

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Will 2003 be filled with downsizing, consolidations, mergers and acquisitions? What can you do to insure having a position in your own company during times like this? How can you stand out among your peers, insure you get that promotion or the job you want in your own company? Here are some important strategies to help you differentiate yourself from your peers, and insure your own marketability and advancement within your own company.

One way to set yourself apart is to become more productive by not only adding value to your company's bottom line, but also by adding value to your community of co-workers as well. This will insure your marketability and mobility within your own organization.

Think about your fellow employees right now... who are the superstars, the young rising stars and the more seasoned actuaries? They are not necessarily brighter than you. They do not have extra brainpower. They just work differently than the average actuary and use work strategies that lead to higher productivity. Increasing your own productivity can make the difference between getting a promotion, being stuck in a dead end job or having no job at all.

Achieving lower productivity is not because you are necessarily less capable. It may be because you were never taught the work strategies that lead to higher productivity. Being more productive doesn't necessarily mean more hours of work, it means getting more out of the hours you work. We are looking for ways to become more productive while still being able to spend quality time outside of work with

family, friends or on hobbies. Superstars often work fewer hours than average performers because they get so much critical work done in less time. How do they do it?

Mastering "star performer" skills and work strategies is simply a matter of learning these techniques and practicing. But first, you have to be aware of what they are, so let us discuss them now.

The first, and most important technique, is taking the initiative. Taking initiative is very powerful, yet also easily misunderstood. Average performers, who account for 60 to 80 percent of the work force, view taking initiative as going beyond their job description, learning something extra so that they are seen as very smart technically or getting stuck doing someone else's work or taking on work not part of your job description. Average performers are cynical and see this as "kissing up" to the boss or colleagues.

Star performers also seek out responsibility above and beyond their expected job description. The difference, however, is that their extra efforts are for the benefit of their company and co-workers, and not self-serving. True initiative, as practiced by star performers, always ends up benefiting someone else: co-workers, the department or the entire company. While it is true that exemplary performance does indeed benefit the star, the primary emphasis is always on the greater group, and not on individual recognition.

An initiative must also be implemented. Star performers stick tenaciously to an idea or project and follow it through to its successful completion. Don't just send your boss a memo about your great idea

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and think that you are taking the initiative. That falls short. Too often average performers assume their responsibility ends with presenting the idea and it is the boss' responsibility to make it happen. Implementation is the acid test of any initiative, but doesn't necessarily mean that every initiative you undertake will be successful. No one expects that. However, nothing will happen unless you try. And while trying can be hard at times, it is often what people expect.

Another important element of taking initiative involves the risk in choosing the right initiatives to undertake. To minimize these risks, make sure you take the following steps:

1. Do your current assignments well. Your first obligation is to do your assigned job. Avoid over-committing.
2. Make sure the initiative has some payoff for someone other than yourself—if there is nothing in it for someone other than yourself, do not call it an initiative.
3. Initiatives that can be related to the bottom line in terms of increased profitability or decreased costs are generally more significant than, for example, improving the company's food service.

In becoming adept at taking initiatives, one learns quickly that efforts don't need to be brilliant to have impact. Taking the first step and then finding a solution will most assuredly increase your value within your company.

The second important skill exhibited by star performers is the ability to increase productivity through networking.

Average performers think that building a communications grapevine insures that they are "in the loop" on the latest office gossip and that socializing with other people in their field and executive recruiters

can help in future job hunting. While this may be true, here networking is referred to as a tool to increase your value within your own company.

Star performers know that in this age of knowledge-intensive jobs, without a good network supporting them, they are on their own. They also know that to be on their own in this mind-boggling universe of technical knowledge is to be lost, and working in a vacuum.

What percentage of knowledge is stored in your own mind? Can you quantify how much information you need to know to perform your job? In the 80's, most technical people would have said 75 percent of knowledge is stored in their brain. Today that figure has dropped 20 points or more.

Knowledge-based networks are one way that star performers overcome their deficiencies. Networks are high-speed infrastructures upon which knowledge is sent and received by those who need it. Without these networks, professionals cannot do their jobs properly. Star producers proactively develop dependable pathways to knowledgeable experts who can assist them with critical business tasks. When called upon, these "experts" share their knowledge with those who need it. The goal is to minimize the knowledge deficiencies that are inherent in every brain-powered job.

Another facet of the economy contributing to knowledge deficiencies is downsizing. Those who survive in companies that have undergone significant cuts in their workforce are expected to do more with less manpower. They assimilate jobs that were once the full time responsibility of others. Sometimes the increased workload is juggled by teams of workers. Even those downsized from one workplace are expected to work longer hours with a heavier workload in their next job.

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Let's look at the benefits of networking from another angle. When given an assignment which is beyond the scope of your experience, you have two choices:

1. The do-it-yourself approach. Get up to speed by taking a quick study course and cramming the information you need to get the job done yourself.
2. Work your network, gather the best ideas from your network and combine that information with your own knowledge base to get the job done.

The first option is frequently the path of choice for average performers, but it is the worst option for maximizing productivity, even though it follows the educational patterns ingrained in us from our school years. By working an established network, you can close your knowledge deficit quickly, which clearly beats out the "do-it-yourself" option in both effectiveness and efficiency.

Take the time to develop a network of experts. Remember, the worst time to build a network is when you already need the network to work for you. Star performers try and get their networks in place before they need them. Star performers want to assimilate these sought-after experts into their networks and will be proactive in offering to help to them long before they need to be on the receiving end. They build bridges to these experts in advance and use their network to get the job done effectively and efficiently.

Self-management skills are the next area of concentration. Have you noticed that star performers enjoy what they are doing? Star performers have used their self-management skills to put themselves into work that they enjoy and that complements their personalities. The result is that their careers are more satisfying. Long term, star self-managers exhibit a sense of meaning, accomplishment and

contribution. They get the job done, and they do it well.

The key to self-management is:

1. Know yourself well.
2. Know the kind of work you do best and identify the type of work you enjoy.
3. Take control of your career path by developing a plan to connect yourself to the work you enjoy most with a job that increases productivity for your company.

Seeing the "big picture" is another idea which delineates average performer from stars. The big picture involves thinking outside the box, looking at a situation from other perspectives and being creative.

Average performers have a one-dimensional perspective of seeing work from their own point of view and making sure that their point of view is the one that gets the most attention, protection and connection.

Star performers know it is the multi-dimensional perspective that allows them to see a project or problem in the larger context, whether they are customers, competitors, co-workers or bosses. Maintaining a broad perspective enables stars to evaluate the relative importance of various viewpoints so that they can improve on the product or develop better solutions to problems.

Perspective is a key work attitude. Whereas initiative speaks volumes about your motivation, self-management and ability to get the job done, perspective goes a long way in establishing your reputation for brainpower. Acquire the ability to recognize emerging patterns, to think creatively outside the box, to exercise expert judgment and to identify the changing games with their changing rules and you have acquired the essential per-

spective keys to gain entry to the ranks of the star performer.

This next work characteristic, being an exemplary follower, is one of the most challenging for star performers. Not only because it is difficult to master, but because it is so hard to accept. We have been taught at a young age that being a leader is something to aspire to, and being a follower is something that we settle for. Average performers are always surprised that star producers, whom many people label as leaders, also are adept at following others.

“Follower-ship” is the work skill that guides your interactions with others who are your leaders. It focuses on all the relationships you have with people who have organizational power and authority over you. “Follower-ship” is also different from teamwork, which is about co-worker relationships—the horizontal, and not the vertical top-down relationships associated with leadership.

“Follower-ship” means being actively engaged in helping the organization succeed while exercising independent, critical judgment of goals, tasks, potential problems and methods. Star followers have the ability to work cooperatively with a leader to accomplish the organization’s goals, even in the presence of personality and/or workplace differences. Sometimes, you get further along in your career if you are seen as a sharp, dynamic, independent thinking follower who works along with co-workers, rather than someone who competes with them to be the leader.

Team leadership is also a very important work skill associated with star performers. It is practiced among peers, most often in teams. The degree of one’s success has less to do with the power of the job title, and is related more to the power of expertise, credible reputation, influence and persuasive abilities. The skills needed here require leaders without egos, and leaders

who work quietly and unceremoniously side by side with their co-workers. In this role, they do not need direct supervisory authority. Colleagues voluntarily cooperate with these team leaders because they trust them and believe that if they work together, important things will get done to the betterment of the organization.

Team leadership changes all the time. Star producers realize that being productive team members, as well as team leaders is essential for increased productivity.

Average performers think organizational savvy is the talent for brown nosing and schmoozing in the workplace to help them get noticed by the right people, which additionally requires obsessive devotion to office politics, another corporate dead end.

Star producers know organizational savvy to be a strategy that enables them to navigate the competing interests within an organization and to promote cooperation, address conflicts and get things done. This often involves expertise in managing individual or group dynamics, knowing when to avoid conflicts and when to meet them head on, and knowing how to make allies out of potential enemies.

These comparisons between the stars and average workers will hopefully give you some insight and strategies to increase your value in your own company. Good luck. □

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Reference: Kelly, Robert E. How To Be A Star At Work. New York: Times Books, 1998.

