

## Clone Your Top Performers? ...sort of

By Louise Anderson

Do you have a handful of superstars who bring in so much business you wish you could clone them? I bet you do. Every team has its stars, the people who continuously produce and seem to know intuitively what they need to do in order to succeed. These are the people you'll move heaven and earth to keep on your team. Problem is, these superstars tend to be thin on the ground.

You can't clone your top performers, but you can clone the behaviors and activities they're doing to be successful. What if companies stopped wishing for more superstars and instead focused on helping the middle-performing 80 percent improve their performance? Even a small improvement would have a big impact.

Unfortunately, the traditional approach to performance improvement is not very effective. Every producer wants to earn more, yet beyond a certain point, commissions aren't effective in improving performance. The next step for many firms is to try to move the needle by holding contests that reward the top performers with cash awards, vacations, and the like. The problem is that, oftentimes, the same people happily take the prizes every month, leaving the "80 Percent Club" without any increased motivation or, sometimes, any clear idea of what they would need to do to achieve superstar-level results.

### Incenting Your Middle-Performing 80%

An incentive program you can use to make improvements across the board will take a little bit of planning, but if designed properly, you'll see results as soon as it is put into motion.

**First, identify your top performers.** You know who they are.

**Next, figure out what they are doing and how they are doing it.** Ask questions like: How's it going? What contributes to your success? What are your obstacles? And if you could wave a magic wand, what would you change?

Use the answers to identify the Best Practices at work. Is there some basic product information your top performers know better than anyone else? A technique for building rapport with a prospect? An open-ended question they rely upon to help them identify the buyer's need?

Once you've determined what makes the top performers so successful, you can boil it down into specific behaviors that can be taught to others—your middle-performing 80 percent.

**Third, define what you need in terms of behaviors and results.** To make it simple, I often set out a program of two best-practice behaviors and one result. That way, you're rewarding the behaviors that lead to success, while keeping your program grounded in reality so people don't spend endless hours executing the behaviors perfectly.

Spell out the program clearly, then market it to your people just like you would market a product. Have a party to launch it, find ways to keep it in front of people, and make sure it pays for them to follow it.

**Fourth, reward people on the spot for achieving the behaviors.** Most incentive programs dole out rewards when the bottom-line results are in—typically at the end of the quarter or fiscal year. I call this "rewarding an autopsy," because by the time you've diagnosed the problem and prescribed a solution, the "patient"—your current accounts, prospects, and leads—is dead. Months down the road will be too late to identify what was done right or wrong and correct course. Instead, reward your people every time they take one of the actions (or achieve the result) in your program.

### Recognize Performance, but Not with Cash

How are you going to reward people? Cash is obvious and easy to account for. It is also proven in numerous studies to be the worst incentive there is for changing behavior. I won't go into all the reasons here, but some are fairly intuitive. When you reward cash, people feel obligated to spend it on something responsible, like bills, or they put it in their checking accounts where it disappears from sight and memory. They may also perceive a pay cut if it is taken away. Far better to reward people tangible items of their choice, which feel like a well-

earned treat and are likely to be remembered and displayed for years. Some firms use a professionally produced incentives catalog. This can work well as long as the items offered are high quality and genuinely appealing to your producers. Choice is a powerful motivator.

**Make it short.** Usually a few days is enough to see if the program is working; if it is not working, make adjustments as necessary. When 60-80 percent of participants are achieving the desired behaviors, stop. This program has done all it can. Publicly recognize the people who improved the most and the Best Practices that were highlighted.

The total length of a program might be as short as one month or as long as one year. It may even be an ongoing program focusing on tougher issues such as culture, learning, and other corporate objectives.

This brings up a question you may have: Won't this program breed resentment among the superstars? It will not if you make a point of publicly recognizing and rewarding the people who are bringing these Best Practices to light. Since the top performers are already exhibiting these behaviors and Best Practices, they will continue to be rewarded throughout the program

### **What's Next?**

Then, start a new program. You can continuously improve your practices and results if you once again identify your superstars—and there are bound to be some new ones—and of course, what they are doing that can be replicated and rewarded.

By the way, you can use this rewards system to encourage almost any new behavior, including the skills new people learn in their initial training or procedures required. The key is rewarding the behaviors that produce the results you want.

### **Results Plus...**

In addition to achieving bottom-line results, this approach has the advantage of building morale and retention. The reason is simple. People want to be successful in their careers, and a performance improvement program gives them a way to achieve better results, month after month. They also appreciate the rewards and recognition built into such a program. Don't underestimate the power of recognition, whether it comes in the form of a company-wide award or a simple "Great Job." A recent Robert Half study found that "lack of recognition" was the third-most frequent reason cited by good employees who were leaving their jobs.

Change happens through people. Give your people the right tools and the right motivation, and you can achieve dramatic change—not next year or next quarter, but right now.

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