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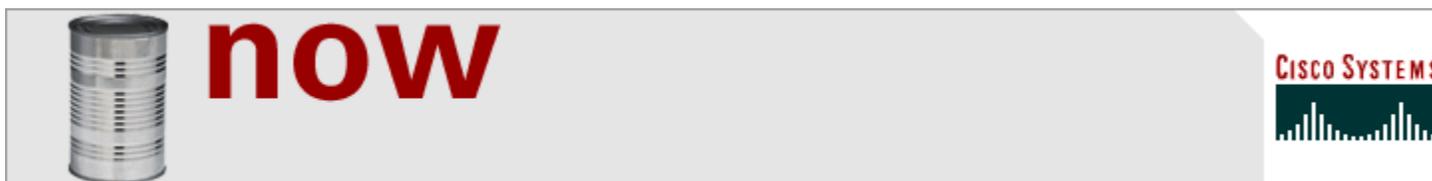
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Muddled Middle

Good or bad, slackers and stars are stealing attention from everyone in between.

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By Chris Penttila

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Marx Acosta-Rubio, founder and CEO of computer broker One Stop Shop in Chatsworth, California, spends a lot of time developing star performers, and he's "fast and furious" about getting rid of low performers. He does more for his top salesperson than anyone else.

"You just have to, even though they don't need it," says Acosta-Rubio, 32. "When they set the bar higher, they set it higher for the entire company."

When you're running a business, it's easy to focus on employees who stand out the most, either in a good or a bad way. Just 20 years ago, employers scoured their work forces for the bottom 15 percent who were dragging down productivity. With the tight labor markets of the late 1990s, all the attention switched to recruiting and retaining the top 20 percent of any work force, a trend that will only heat up again along with the economy, says consultant Carol Kinsey Goman, owner of Kinsey Consulting Services in Berkeley, California. But that leaves about 65 percent of your workers overlooked while you develop your stars and prod underperformers.

"We probably take [regular performers] for granted," says Arlene Vernon, an HR consultant and founder of HRx Inc. in Eden Prairie, Minnesota. "These

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are the people who need more attention. Without them, we're in trouble."

Stuck in the Middle

"The people in the middle get lost, and they're the ones with the capability and perhaps the desire [to do more]," says Joseph R. Weintraub, a management professor at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and co-author of *The Coaching Manager: Developing Top Talent in Business* (Sage Publications).

Workers playing supporting roles—assistants, administrative personnel, part-timers—also lose out on growth opportunities. "Employees can be seen as average because their contribution isn't seen as key," Kinsey Goman says.

Ignore these employees at your peril. Like middle child Jan Brady whining "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia," your middle performers will get frustrated when they feel forgotten. Eventually they'll quit, or worse, they'll stay but just quit trying.

Your solution is to use some good, old-fashioned management by walking around. When was the last time you thanked a middle performer for a job well-done? Acosta-Rubio looks constantly for ways to single out the middle performers among his 17 employees. Recently, he sent a letter and a \$100 gift certificate to the mother of a mid-level performer just to let her know how much everyone values her son. "You can't put a value on the feeling I gave him by doing that," Acosta-Rubio says.

At the same time, he keeps this salesperson motivated by allowing him to train new salespeople. "Selling may not be his hot button, but contributing and feeling a part of it is," he says. "For a lot of employees, it's not the money, it's the recognition, the ability to contribute."

Acosta-Rubio's efforts certainly aren't hurting the company's bottom line: Sales have tripled yearly to \$6 million.

Find Some Middle Ground

These types of rewards are crucial to motivating middle performers, Vernon says, but keep your expectations reasonable. Not every employee has the skills to be a top performer. Instead of grooming a star, develop a happy employee who consistently performs well and inspires co-workers to do their best—not a bad compromise.

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Acosta-Rubio is realistic. "Am I always going to want my [top] 70 percenters to be [top] 20 percenters? Of course. Am I always going to cajole and motivate them? Of course. Is it going to make a difference? Maybe," he says. "If an employee continues to improve even just a little bit, it doesn't matter whether they're in the top 20 percent or 70 percent, you've got a great employee."

Consider the benefits of shedding your bottom 10 percent, too. Jack Welch did it, and so can you. You'll be able to spend more time developing top performers and solid middle people. If you have managers, they should be developing employees even more than you.

"Think, 'How do I design my work force so I have all No. 2s and 3s--all good, steady employees--and then I have my shining stars who will drive me forward?'" Vernon says.

Acosta-Rubio has learned some lessons about managing the middle performer. "Your company isn't built on the rock 'n' roll superstars. It's led by them, but it's built by the 70 percent," he says. "Reward and acknowledge their strengths." You may find that it keeps you from always going to extremes.

Chris Penttila is a freelance journalist in the Chapel Hill, North Carolina, area.

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