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## **Modeling Top Performers**

*A systems approach to interventions*

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*Top performers have skills and capabilities which remain an untapped resource in terms of developing organizational effectiveness and productivity. The problem has been getting at these resources. It is now possible, using Management Communication Systems' modeling technique, to discover how top performers produce their outstanding results. Custom-designed training programs can teach these effective strategies to average performers, improving their productivity, and enriching their organizations.*

The science of ethnology is the study of animals in their natural settings. When observing animal behavior, scientists look for automatic patterns of behavior that can provide insights into the animal and its environment. Research on turkeys has shown that turkey mothers spend a significant amount of their time caring for their young. They huddle, protect, and warm their chicks. All of this activity is automatically triggered by the "cheep-cheep" sound of young turkey chicks. If a young turkey chick makes the "cheep-cheep" noise, its mother will care for it; if not, the mother will ignore or sometimes kill it.

The dependency of turkey mothers upon this one sound was shown in studies involving a mother turkey and a stuffed polecat. For the mother turkey, a polecat is a predator whose approach is usually greeted with pecking, clawing and rage. The experimenters found that even a stuffed model of a polecat, when drawn by a string to a mother turkey, received an immediate and vicious attack. When, however, the same stuffed polecat carried inside it a small recorder that played the "cheep-cheep" sound of young turkeys, the mother not only accepted the encroaching polecat but gathered it beneath her. When the recorder was turned off, the stuffed polecat was again aggressively attacked. This seems like unusual behavior, yet ethnologists

tell us that this sort of thing is far from unique to the turkey. They have begun to identify regular, blindly mechanical patterns of behavior in a wide variety of species.

These automatic patterns involve intricate sequences of behavior, such as entire courtship or mating rituals. A fundamental characteristic of these patterns is that the behaviors comprising them occur in virtually the same fashion and in the same order every time. It is almost as if the patterns were recorded on tapes within the animals. When a situation calls for mating, a mating tape gets played; when a maternal tape is needed, a maternal tape gets played. The trigger feature, or anchor, sets in motion the automatic behavior.

Before we start to think that these automatic patterns exist only in animals, we need to understand that we, too, have our own preprogrammed tapes. Although our automatic programs can work to our advantage, the trigger features or anchors that activate them can have us playing certain programs at the wrong times.

Take for example a retailer who had the foresight to ask, "Why it that some of our sales staff perform at a high level while others do not?". As behavioral researchers, like the ethnologists, we had to go to

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the environment to see what the top performers were doing that was different from the other sales people. In essence, our research aimed to distinguish the best attributes of the company's most talented employees, and to replicate that knowledge and behavior in the rest of the sales staff.

One discovery was how the average performers greet customers entering the store. We found that the standard "May I help you?" triggers an automatic response mechanism that is as predictable as a preprogrammed tape: "No thanks, I'm just looking." The opportunity to build rapport is lost in the very first interaction with the customer.

Meanwhile top performers were asking, "Is this your first visit to our store?" If the customer responds "yes," the top performer has the opportunity to further engage the customer by showing them around. If the customer replies "no," the top salesperson can further engage the customer by asking what they found interesting previously. Either way, they break the automatic pattern and have the opportunity to establish rapport with the customer.

The previous example is a simplified version of what we call modeling. The modeling of behaviors requires special types of surveys, and asking questions that elicit the core competencies and key behaviors that create the foundation of a top performer's success. Advanced modeling is used to uncover the thinking behind the behaviors and involves observing, listening, and asking questions that elicit the unconscious strategies. The Management Communication Systems consultants are all expert modelers. They have addressed themselves, with great success, to uncovering the thought patterns and behavioral strategies of top performers in many different fields, and to translating these strategies into teachable formats.

Organizations today understand the importance of hiring the best available talent. But, after someone is hired the question remains: how do you most effectively develop that individual. The beginning of any effective training or intervention process starts with evaluating outstanding individuals. The idea of modeling top performers is central to the building of an effective intervention. Modeling is the process used to specifically identify and detail learnable behavior so that others can also excel.

Outstanding human achievement is often regarded with superstitious reverence, and special skills and abilities are often explained away in terms of genetics, luck, or, "I could never do that." Some put it all down to beliefs, rehearsing, or commitment. Unfortunately, the workplace is teeming with disciplined, determined people who seem to put a lot more effort into their ordinary performance than excellent people seem to expend on their success. In fact, one of the features of high performance is that it seems so easy and natural. Knowing what behaviors to choose and the thought processes that goes behind those behaviors, rather than grueling effort, is what distinguishes top performers.

Results-based interventions are key organizational development issue in any corporation. Increased competition and complexity of markets makes training and organizational development an ever more critical issue; especially if market share is to be grown and expanded. However, effective interventions in sales, marketing, and management which have a positive effect on bottom line are rare. What makes Management Communication Systems training unique and effective is the concept of modeling. We feel that it is imperative to understand the relationship between modeling and effective interventions.

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In the past, training and development specialists have fulfilled the need for training by seeking out the highest quality consultants, preferably those specializing in their industry. These selection processes vary widely. A consultant may be chosen based on a referral or a recommendation. Many companies hire trainers who are certified at various levels of expertise to deliver "off-the-shelf" training. Interestingly, there is one rich source of high quality training that nearly every major corporation underutilizes: its own talent pool of top performers. These stars include highly respected service people, high production salespeople, managers who are effective in getting large group of people to work better together. These top performers can be found in every large company.

Scores of companies have attempted to develop effective internal training programs by trying to take advantage of in-house expertise. However, results of in-house training programs that attempt to use home-grown talent have not met expectations. Although the idea is sound, the vast majority of training programs that make use of internal expertise face two significant problems.

The first problem involves preference of activities. Generally speaking, top performers do what they do so well in large part because they enjoy it. But while performing their skill may be enjoyable, teaching it is usually not. As a result, top performers are rarely motivated enough to become skillful teachers. Second, top performers who do things well are seldom effective teachers of what they do well. There are several factors that account for this. Performing well largely resides in unconscious thinking strategies that usually requires little conscious thought. The sequence of internal thought strategies that must occur for peak performance are largely unavailable to the conscious mind. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the top performer to articulate

her specific skills. The enigma is that this is the very information needed by the less capable employee

Many companies now have a system of mentoring whereby members of staff, as a part of their development, are assigned to a more senior or a more experienced employee in order to learn from them. All too often the success of this system hinges on the experienced employee's ability to impart the skills they have. Often they don't know their most powerful skills or how they use them. They don't know the key behaviors needed to be successful in a given position.

The primary objective of modeling is to take a skill inherent in one person's behavior and transfer that skill to another person. For the skill transfer to be effective, the second person must be able to replicate the results of the first person. The idea of modeling is not new. The apprenticeship programs of European trade guilds have used this concept for centuries to produce skilled craftsmen. Twentieth century American trade unions have also learned these practices. The typical apprentice would spend many hours each day with an experienced craftsman learning the inside secrets of the trade. This arrangement would go on for many months, and sometimes years, as the apprentice learned the skills of his mentor. Critical to the acquisition of these new skills was the fact the apprentice would not only watch, listen, and practice under the craftsman's tutelage, but would actually begin to think like the craftsman. This is the "critical mass" of skill acquisition: Learning how to think like a top performer is a fundamental requirement for talent to be transferred from one individual to another.

Modeling can take many forms. Some of your most fundamental skills have been learned by modeling others. Babies and young children are expert modelers. Only when they start learning by more tradi-

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tional methods do they begin to lose this skill. Learning by example is the method by which many employees are taught to do their work. This only works well if the workers they are learning from are a model of excellence or if the new employee was smart enough to know what worked and what didn't. Unfortunately, if you think of the partecio principle, which states that 20% of the workforce produce 80% of the results, then new employees are often learning to reproduce ineffective behavior.

In the case of top performers, this way of thinking about what they do occurs largely beyond their awareness, and therein lies its elusiveness. In other words, they exhibit unconscious competence. By discovering specific strategies through modeling procedures, the "secrets" of how top performers succeed can be identified. This is also possible for those strategies that top performers are not even aware of themselves. From our understanding of how the brain works it is now clear that most of its operation is unconscious, so we need to tap into that hidden part of mental strategies.

In the modern workforce apprenticeships are no longer an economically viable method for transferring skills. Modeling of top performer excellence must be accomplished in a dramatically shorter time. Management Communication Systems has developed a program for effective modeling. Modeling is the process of coding talent. When you step into someone else's shoes and reproduce the way they do what they do and the results that they achieve, then you are modeling. Modeling involves reproducing the same sequence of thinking, language and behavior patterns as your top performer. To do this, you may also need to discover their core capabilities, behaviors, thinking strategies and beliefs. In effect, to use a computer metaphor, you are eliciting the program code needed to demonstrate

effective performance and you are running the program as ever and whenever you want it.

The purpose of modeling talent in business is to reproduce excellence. If you want to reproduce the success of an outstanding salesperson, manager or presenter, modeling enables you to do this. These top performers will run mental and physical programs of which they are unaware, and which will almost certainly not be in any book on standard selling techniques, management models or presentation skills. The programs that they run may be specific to the industry, the client or even to the place and occasion. Excellence, as such, is context specific. You may discover that parts of their program add little or no value and yet other parts can be developed, resulting in an enhancement of the talent under study.

Our process is a way of coding excellence. Top performers achieve the results they do through the programs they run. Just as computer programs are a sequence of codes, so personal programs are a sequence of mental and behavioral codes. When you walk, talk, drive, read, laugh, it is unlikely that you think consciously about how you do these things. The programs that make them happen are managed on your behalf by your unconscious mind. These programs are known as strategies.

When our consultants ask someone the question, "How do you do that?", it is unlikely that we ever get a suitable answer. They may either say, "I don't know," or they will tell you what they think they do. This is rarely the same as what they actually do. To elicit a strategy, the person you are modeling needs to be doing or reliving the experience that you wish to model.

***Modeling is concerned with differences, what is the person doing differently that results in their behavior and success, or failure? In other words, what is the difference that makes the difference?***

Traditionally, companies have used standard training program's to teach standard skills. More often than not, trainees were left to their own devices to adapt these skills to their unique environment. There are unique patterns that work in one company, one department, one market segment and that will not work in another. Modeling enables you to elicit these context specific patterns in order to reproduce excellence in your own unique environment. By choosing the people who excel within your organization, not only will you be able to reproduce their levels of success but you will also be able to help your models of excellence achieve a greater consistency in their own performance. The modeling process involves observing and listening to the exemplars in action in the relevant context to identify what they do and how they do it.

When interviewing your subject, watch and listen carefully rather than relying on what your subject tells you. Their eye movements, their use of language and the subtle changes in their non-verbal behavior carry a wealth of information. The effectiveness of modeling is that you can refine the model by testing which elements add to the excellence and which detract or make no difference. By taking away one element at a time you can determine how this affects the overall result. This enables you to generate the most effective model, which you can use to teach others, even the subject themselves. This process applies when modeling anything, whether it be an individual or a team or a complete organization. The skills it takes to sell a luxury car are quite different from the skills it takes to sell a software package. The skill required to motivate a group of production line workers is quite different from the skill needed to motivate advertising account executives. Modeling enables you to uncover the uniqueness of the model, the quality of the inborn talent and the natural skill.

Effective behavior is linked to specific mental strategies, which are essentially brain software. Synaptic connections in the brain, of which there are many billions, and infinitely more potentially, happen when we use the brain, whether to think or control our behavior. These 'strategies' are formed naturally as part of the modeling tendency. You only need to watch a child growing up in a home where the family loves to ski to see the natural tendency of the child to model behavior. A similar effect is seen if the child is surrounded by camping, fine art, music, or basketball. Management Te3am Consultants simply makes it possible to model in a positive, conscious way, so the uncertainty and mystique are taken out of the process.

Modeling is concerned with differences: what is the person doing differently that results in their behavior and success, or failure? In other words, what is the difference that makes the difference? It does not attempt to answer the question why, but rather how. In this sense the modeling process is most pragmatic.

To model the behavioral strategies we first evaluate a group of top performers. The top performers are run through a variety of communication surveys to develop a behavior success template. In other words to discover what behavioral patterns provide the foundation of success for top performers in this position. Through interviews and analysis we then discover the fundamental core competencies and the key behaviors necessary for success in this position. This gives us an accurate goal for individuals employed in this position. The second process involves, in effect, 'getting into the other person's shoes', or 'under their skin' - whatever metaphor you choose. Actually thinking the way you would if you were the other person - receiving rather than giving a communication, for instance, responding to an event or circumstance, or carrying out a behavior or skill that you would like

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to be able to do yourself. We do it whenever we feel real empathy - 'I know just how you must have felt'. And it is a natural way to learn; you watch somebody, imagine yourself doing what they do, then have a go. As we mentioned before often the person we are modeling is not aware of how they are doing what they do (let alone why they have been blessed with their talents) so their strategies of thinking and behavior will have to be elicited. We elicit their mental strategies. Remember that excellence involves unconscious competence, so it should be no surprise that top performers are no more aware of just what they are doing, at least in a specific sense, than anyone else. The modeling process then extends to communicating the mental strategies to others. We use a process that defines the thinking strategies in terms of modalities (sensory representation systems) and sub modalities (their qualities and specific characteristics) which makes the process of acquiring excellent behaviors feasible and quite predictable. It makes it possible to compress into a short period the many years of trial and error experience that usually accompany excellence. Then next step is to accurately assess the population of individuals to be trained. Where are the employees starting from, from that assessment we can start to design the appropriate interventions to assist individuals to easily flex their traits to the success template.

1. Decide specifically what skill and or group of skills or group of top performers you want to reproduce and in what context you want to be able to use it. For example, you may know a top performer who can: get and hold their audience's attention within seconds of the start of a presentation; or establish rapport within the first 15 seconds of a phone conversation or you may know ten salespeople that consistently out perform other sales people. We identify the core competencies and key behaviors that the organization would want to model and reproduce.

We produce specific definitions of high performance and low performance, descriptions of that skill and the key behaviors that support it.

2. We go through an evaluation process to select from within the company the individuals who are considered to demonstrate excellence in this skill. We choose the top performers who produce excellence consistently.

3. We have the top performers fill out three surveys that address their behavioral traits, then a proactive personality scale and finally a self monitoring scale. We interview groups of top performers to collectively discover the core competencies and key behaviors.

4. We observe the models in action to identify the Thinking Strategies. We observe what specifically they do and how they do it. It is also important to observe subtle behavior patterns: watch eye movements and non verbal behavior. A wealth of information can be found in their language patterns: which filters do they use? We observe their beliefs and values they demonstrate and express.

5. Question the model to elicit thinking strategies. Specific questions such as: "What are you seeing?" and, "What are you saying to yourself?", begin to give clues as to how top performers are organizing their behavior. We check out their thinking at various logical levels of thought. Asking questions to discover what top performers are aware of in their environment. We ask what are you saying and doing which is useful to compare in what we that actually did in our previous observations. We ask specific kinds of questions to discover what the top performers are thinking (we watch eye movements, as this give us more information about their internal strategy than their conscious answer to the question). "What is important to you at this time?" (to elicit values)."What do you believe?—about

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yourself, about others, about the situation." "How would you describe yourself? (what is your identity?)" "How do you connect with others that you have to interact with?" This combination of questions for the trained modeler starts to produce the thinking strategies that support the core competencies and produces the key behaviors.

6. Once we can reproduce the thinking and behavior patterns of your top performers we then test their results. If we can teach an average performer to get the same results as the top performers with the model, we know we have got the critical differences. If we cannot, we go back and refine the model. Once the model is tested we design interventions, tasks and training so that entire population of employees in this position can start to perform with the excellence demonstrated by the models of high performance.

7. Another application of modeling is also used in recruitment for particular jobs. Basically, you model the top performers and screen for similar skill patterns in recruits. In this way you are hiring those individuals that have the highest intrinsic possibility for success in a given position.

Whichever way you evaluate skills, you are likely to find an approximately normal distribution of capabilities - most people fall into the middle range, a few are top performers and a few are at the other end of the scale. The top performers have skills and capabilities which are a potential gold mine in terms of developing organizational effectiveness and productivity. The problem has been how to get at these riches. Now it is possible to discover from top performers exactly how they produce their outstanding results using Management Communication Systems' modeling techniques. Then, custom

designed training can be built to specifically teach these effective strategies to average performers to improve their results.

As the old saying goes, "If you think training is expensive - try ignorance." The role of training and interventions in organizational development is an opportunity to grow the overall cultural of the company. Once a critical mass of core competencies and key behaviors are developed in an organization, the collective result can be extraordinary. Organizations are complex systems and by thinking systematically you can begin to develop the culture by developing the individuals in the culture.