

Recognizing Average Associates¹

Allen Wysocki, Karl Kepner, Derek Farnsworth, and Jennifer L. Clark²

Introduction

Managers, consciously or subconsciously, often classify their workers into one of three categories: problem, average/typical, or excellent. What percentage of your total organizational workforce would you place into each category? Research at the University of Florida indicates that, within $\pm 5\%$ points, most managers indicate the answer to this question to be: problem (10%), average/typical (75%), or excellent (15%)

Four Important Questions

Four important questions exist regarding this research result and the effective management of human resources:

1. Which group of associates (problem, average/typical, or excellent) gets the most recognition and attention in today's organizations?
2. Which group of associates are responsible for the greatest total amount of output?
3. What are the reasons for this situation?
4. Does this management action create an optimum positive motivational work environment? For what reasons?



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Answers

Managers generally agree that the problem associates, though only about 10% of the total workforce, receive the most management recognition and attention. This situation exists because in an effort to correct the inappropriate behavior or performance, these associates require management's attention and focus. Furthermore, it is often suggested that the excellent associates receive the next greatest amount of management recognition and attention. After all, managers often recognize the contributions that this group makes to organizational success and "enjoys their company." This situation needs to be contrasted with the group of associates that does the most work, the average associates.

1. This document is HR006, one of a series of the Food and Resource Economics Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date May 2001. Revised October 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Allen Wysocki, associate dean and professor; Karl Kepner, emeritus professor; Derek Farnsworth, assistant professor; Jennifer L. Clark, senior lecturer, Department of Food and Resource Economics Department; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Because this group represents 75% of an organization's total workforce, these associates (as a group) greatly out-produce both the problem and excellent associate groups. In essence, the average associate group might be viewed as the "forgotten majority." Yet, it is this majority that forms the backbone of the organization and, in the final analysis, is most likely responsible for an organization's success or failure.

There is a long history of management training and development that indicates that the manager's job is to watch over associates and to quickly step-in to correct the performance problems of the problem associates. Managers often get their sense of worth by being able to demonstrate their superior knowledge and their power of control. Contrast this to the more mundane task of providing recognition and positive feedback to the average/typical workers for doing the things they have been hired and paid to do.

The logical conclusion of this scenario, however, is that these actions most assuredly do not provide an optimally motivational work environment. The effectiveness of providing regular, and repetitive, corrective action feedback is being questioned more and more by management experts. Most assuredly, it is recognized that ignoring the good things that the average/typical associates do because that is what they are hired and paid to do is not conducive to optimum work productivity. In fact, it has been proven that managers who ignore good performance make it less likely that good performance will be repeated in the future. Furthermore, behavioral science research indicates that for optimal performance the manager's ratio of positive to negative feedback should be four to one (4:1).

Managerial Action

Are you and the managers in your organization guilty of ignoring the good performance of your average/typical associates? As an effective manager, precisely what is your program for recognizing the largely ignored average/typical associates and the good things that they do? A recommended managerial process that, when utilized, assures that average/typical associates will no longer be the forgotten majority is outlined below. This process (when effectively implemented for average/typical associate performance) has proven to pay positive dividends. Also, the process can be effectively applied to specific work tasks that may be performed effectively by problem associates. Please note that the word "associate" is used in this process rather than "employee" or "worker."

1. Immediately put the associate at ease. Say, "I have something good (positive) I would like to share with you." This is not the time for small talk because the associate is likely to be apprehensive about the possibility of this being a negative or corrective action discussion. Within five seconds, it should be obvious to the associate that this is to be a positive associate/manager interface.
2. Express your personal appreciation to the associate. Use the personal pronoun "I." Avoid collective terms like we, company, organization, they, managers, etc. This process is most powerful when associates recognize that you personally are appreciative of their individual performances and that you, as a manager, care about them.
3. Clearly state to the associate specifically what performance is deserving of the positive recognition. Use examples (quantify, if possible). Avoid general performance observations such as good job. Specific positive performance feedback communicates that as a manager, you notice positive actions and that they are important to you. It can result in associates seeking out other specific job duties to accomplish at the desired performance level. Perhaps most importantly, being specific communicates that the manager is sincere in his praise.
4. Indicate why the recognized good performance is important to you. This action legitimizes positive feedback. [Examples: makes my job easier, reduces costs, reduces waste, saves time, pleases customers, etc.] It might be wise to avoid belittling other associates by saying such things as "I wish everyone was like you."
5. Ask the associates if there is anything that you can do to make their jobs easier or to help improve performance. Listen and respond appropriately. You might learn something unexpected that inhibits productivity or increases associate dissatisfaction levels. Use the "what else?" question until the associate has no other input. Often the first response to this question is not as important or significant to associates as the second or third response. This step also increases the legitimacy of the positive feedback process and helps establish the manager as someone who is truly concerned about both organizational performance and individual associate well-being.
6. Commit to following up on the associate input provided in #5 above by a specific date and then do it. Again, this action verifies the importance of the associates and their positive actions in the eyes of the manager.

Conclusions

Feedback from managers who have effectively implemented the Recognizing Average Associates process has been overwhelmingly positive. It places managerial attention on the group of associates that have historically been ignored but are responsible for the majority of the organization's output. It results in heretofore unrecognized good performance receiving its earned positive feedback. This increases the probability that more good performance will follow.

When implementing this process, it is critical that the specific work performance factor being recognized is being performed at the desired level. Also, please note that this process is a 100% positive recognition program. There is no place in this managerial activity for talking about specific tasks that might need to be improved, or mixing positive feedback with any negative or corrective action feedback.