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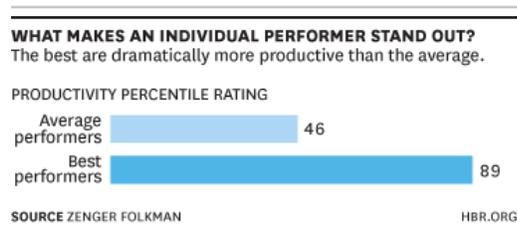
The Behaviors that Define A-Players

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Individual contributors sometimes ask themselves, “What will it take for others to recognize my potential?” They may simply want acknowledgement of the importance of the work they do. Or they may aspire to move into management. In some cases, they’ve been told that they’re doing fine and have been advised, “Just keep doing what you are doing.” Yet they see others being promoted ahead of them.

To see what separates the competent from the exceptional individual performers, we collected 50,286 360-degree evaluations conducted over the last five years on 4,158 individual contributors. We compared the “good” performers (those rated at the 40th to the 70th percentile) to the “best” performers (those rated at the 90th percentile and above). The first thing that struck us was the dramatic difference in productivity, as the graph below makes vividly clear.



Which leadership skills distinguished the best from the merely good? Here they are, ranked in order of which made the most difference. Exceptional individual contributors:

Set stretch goals and adopt high standards for themselves. This was the single most powerful differentiator. The best individual contributors set – and met – stretch goals that went beyond what

others thought were possible. They also encouraged others to achieve exceptional results. And yet when we asked raters to select the four skills they thought were most important for an individual contributor to have, less than one in 10 chose high goals. It appears that setting stretch goals, since it's not necessarily expected, is a behavior that separates top performers from average.

The less effective individual contributors are excellent “sandbaggers,” having concluded that the biggest consequence of producing great work and doing it quickly is more work. They fear their managers will keep piling on tasks until they reach a point where they can't accomplish all that's assigned. That's a problem for them, surely — but also for organizations that don't want to penalize valuable people for making extra effort.

Work collaboratively. When we asked people in the survey to tell us what they thought were the most important attributes for any individual contributor, they responded first with “the ability to solve problems” and second with “the possession of technical or professional expertise.” So it's probably not surprising that these fundamental characteristics were shared by average and exceptional contributors alike. Third on the list, though, was “the ability to work collaboratively and foster teamwork.” And this trait *did* distinguish the great from the merely competent.

Many individual contributors strive to work independently. Some believe that if they remain solo performers, their contributions will be more likely to be noticed. They may be thinking of some educational experience where they stood out because their effort was acknowledged with high grades and test scores. If so, they fail to see that the main purpose of an organization is to create more value by working together than everyone can produce by working outside the company on their own.

Volunteer to represent the group. The best individual contributors were highly effective at representing their groups to other departments or units within the organization. If you want to stand out, have the courage to raise your hand and offer to take on the extra work of representing your group. In this way you will gain recognition, networking opportunities, and valuable learning experiences.

Embrace change, rather than resisting it. One of our clients describes her organization as having a “frozen middle” filled with people who resist and fear change. Change is difficult for everyone, but is necessary for organizational survival. The best individual contributors are quick to embrace change in both tactics and strategy.

Take initiative. Often individual contributors, by the very nature of their role in the organization, slip into a pattern of waiting to be told what to do. Great contributors develop a habit of volunteering their unique perspective and providing a helping hand. Think for a moment about the projects or programs going on in your own company. Which of them have your fingerprints all over them? Initiative requires more than doing your current job well.

Walk the talk. It's easy for some people to casually agree to do something and then let it slip their minds. Most people would say that this is mere forgetfulness. We disagree. We believe it is dishonest behavior. If you commit to doing something, barring some event truly beyond your control, you should follow through. The best individual contributors are careful not to say one thing and do another. They are excellent role models for others. This is the competency for which the collective group of 4,158 individuals we studied received highest scores. That means, essentially, that following through on commitments is table stakes. But exceptional individual contributors go far beyond the others in their scrupulous practice of always doing what they say they will do.

Use good judgment. When in doubt about a technical issue or the practicality of a proposed decision, the very best individual contributors research it carefully rather than relying on their expertise to just wing it. Making decisions takes up a relatively small portion of the day for this group, but the consequences of the decisions they do make can be enormous. Outstanding contributors are open to a wide range of solutions and careful to consider what, and who, will be affected if something goes wrong.

Display personal resilience. No one is always right. Everyone suffers disappointments, failures, and disruptions. If they make a mistake, the best individual contributors acknowledge it quickly and move on. They don't brood on other people's mistakes. They ignore slights and hurtful comments. They realize that what undermines your reputation is not making mistakes but failing to own up to and learn from them.

Give honest feedback. We tend to think of feedback as a manager's responsibility. And it is. Since this is not a formal role or usual expectation of individual contributors, it's one of the behaviors that can make them stand out. Even done imperfectly, feedback from peers can be valuable because it's so rare. If done with kind intent, demonstrations of how you might approach some task, gently raising questions a coworker may not have considered, or perhaps pointing out some specific things a colleague did that was particularly helpful to you or somewhat distracting, can be highly prized. The best individual contributors were able to provide feedback in a way that was perceived not as criticism but as a gesture of good will.

If you want to stand out from the pack, excelling at any of these nine behaviors can make a substantial impact on the way others perceive you. So we recommend selecting the one or two that might matter most to your effectiveness in your current assignment to work on improving. In making your selection, consider asking your manager and peers for feedback on how effective you are in all of these areas. Not only will they give you additional insight, but sharing your plans to improve will increase the likelihood that you will follow through. What's more, if managers know of your improvement goals they may find development assignments that will help.

If you are a manager with individual contributors reporting to you, consider periodic coaching to encourage them to adopt more of the behaviors that will help them stand out from the crowd. It will

strengthen their careers and will also help them to benefit your organization even more than they already do.

Jack Zenger is the CEO of Zenger/Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. He is a coauthor of the October 2011 HBR article “[Making Yourself Indispensable](#)” and the book *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution* (McGraw Hill, 2016). Connect with Jack at twitter.com/jhzenger.

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