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The Performance Leap: Unlocking Hidden Potential Through Alignment

By Rick Smith

Every high-performance organization is characterized by dual actions: aiding employees in the acquisition of new skills and competencies and putting people in the right roles. Proactive attempts to develop employees, to "change them for the better," is an alluring, yet often expensive and elusive endeavor. Leading employees to a guided discovery of the roles they are most suited for, alternatively, can quickly result in greater individual engagement, contribution, and retention.

It is time to focus on unlocking the hidden potential of our people, not by changing who they are, but by helping them become more of who they are. It is possible for professionals to shake a lifetime trajectory of average performance and achieve extraordinary things, simply by migrating toward activities they are most suited to perform. I should know. It happened to me.

At the age of 35, I was stuck in a career rut. Then, unexpectedly, my life turned on a dime in an extraordinary new direction. My performance, my impact, my leadership all reached levels neither I, nor anyone who knew me, would ever have expected.

As all of this unfolded, I kept wondering how in the heck this had happened to, of all people, me—the perennial average performer. I quickly discovered I was not alone. The woods are full of ordinary professionals, everyday Joes and Janes, who broke free from average performance and achieved extraordinary things for themselves and their companies. In nearly every extraordinary leap I studied, it all began with the individual finding their way to a job in which their unique strengths were consistently called on, and their passions were fully engaged. Most (including myself) stumbled into these positions. But it is one of the organization's most important roles to help guide them there.

Evidently, few companies are having much success at this. According to my research, only about 5 percent of professionals say they are currently in a role that leverages their strengths and passions every day. This represents an ocean of unfulfilled workers, and incredible amounts of untapped organizational potential.

To address this chronic issue, I worked with leading psychologists to create the Primary Color Assessment tool. Everyone has a "Primary Color," that point on the spectrum that represents the intersection of your greatest strengths and passions. Few people ever find it, or even know it's there. But it is, and it's magic. This tool was built to help professionals discover their own unique primary color.

The assessment tool is currently offered as a free resource at PrimaryColorAssessment.com. There, professionals can identify where their strengths and passions intersect—the color that is unique to them (I am a Purple Heart, my wife an Electric Lime). This is where they acquire new skills and achieve new heights of performance the fastest. Next, participants can compare the location of their Primary Color to the area on the spectrum represented by their current role. Are they aligned, or far apart (and drifting farther)? Use this actionable information to direct those you influence toward activities uniquely suited for them.

Help employees migrate their careers toward their primary color

For employees whose current work doesn't align strongly with their primary color, it is possible for them to increase their alignment. Here are some specific actions you can take to lead them in the right direction:

- Encourage them to talk with their supervisors about small changes that will enable them to engage in more activities evoking their primary color. For example, suppose James has unique strengths and passions in the area of strategic leadership but currently has no opportunity to exercise these traits. Perhaps his manager could put him in charge of a task force responsible for formulating and executing a plan for solving a particular business problem. With a little creativity, managers partnering with employees can identify numerous strategies to leverage unique Primary Colors, while simultaneously achieving (or exceeding) the business goals.

- Assist employees in researching other roles and career paths available to them within the organization. Often, there is only one or two "logical" paths for promotion within a given role—but there are most certainly roles within any company that represent a great fit for every individual. Point out that there isn't just one "right" path for each person.
- Help employees find mentors who can brainstorm ideas for fine-tuning their job responsibilities. Mentors can also put protégés in touch with people inside or outside the organization who might shed additional light on possible new professional paths.
- Identify areas where employees might volunteer to gain exposure and experience in new roles. For instance, someone whose primary color test results suggest a passion for innovation might volunteer at a community organization that needs to develop new services for constituents—further developing these skills and positively representing your organization in the community.
- Show employees how to conduct low-risk experiments to test possible new job activities. For example, let's say Johann's primary color suggests an appetite for inspirational leadership. He might try assembling and leading a small team committed to finding new cost-saving measures for the company. Even informal roles that team members are assigned can impact their development, and demonstrate the organization's commitment to their career.

Leading employees towards roles that leverage their unique strengths and passions requires time and investment. But the rewards are well worth it. By helping employees discover their "primary color," and then guiding them towards roles and career paths that are uniquely suited to their strengths and passions, your organization will benefit tremendously, and your employees will thank you for making it happen.

Rick A. Smith is author of "The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career from Good to Great," is co-author of the Wall Street Journal and Business Week *bestseller*, "The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers," and is the founder of World 50, a global executive networking company.