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Got Growth?

Generalist or specialist: Know difference to help workers succeed

Play to employees' strengths by tailoring duties to work philosophy

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When it's time to move that high-performing member of your team into a new role or assign new responsibilities, know whether they tend to be a specialist or a generalist. Ignoring the differences between these two is like trying to mix oil and water.

If you have ever been frustrated over untimely reporting from a bookkeeper or incomplete expense reports from a salesperson, you have a sense of how difficult it can be to try to make a generalist a specialist and vice versa. One of the most effective ways to stifle growth in your organization is to ask one to do the work of the other.

To simply categorize anyone as one or the other implies that we don't have emotions or change as individuals.

The truth is we get enjoyment from both roles from time to time even though we tend toward one or the other when no outside pressure or influence is present. We can fill either role depending on the effort we are willing to exert. The question is where do we prefer to spend the majority of our time, as a specialist or generalist?

Recognizing the Difference

There are many assessment tools such as the Predictive Index (performancepi.com) and Elevations (www.elevateyourcareer.com) to objectively measure individual preference. In the real world, we often have to make those assessments subjectively, on the fly and without the aid of tools or measurement instruments. The question is how.

Look at your employee's desk. The specialist will typically have a picture of a piece of new equipment, operating or how-to manuals, technical magazines and certificates and awards signifying technical proficiency. The generalist will have a picture from a favorite vacation, a news magazine or fiction novel and awards proclaiming "I am successful!"

To the specialist, there is always a right way and a wrong way. "Just give me the instructions," she is likely to say. To the generalist there is always another way to get the job done.

One starts by reading assembly instructions for a carrot peeler; the other starts by gluing pieces together.

A specialist cannot imagine turning in an expense report that is less than perfect -- every blank filled in, every amount in the appropriate spot, no mistakes in addition and ALL documentation.

The generalist is the person who can't be bothered to turn in an expense report, and when he does, it's late, covers multiple periods of time and has little or no detail.

The tendency toward one style or the other is not an indicator of ability or success. The difference is in how the types work and how well they fit into your culture. Is someone disruptive or a positive influence on others inside and outside the organization? There is no right or wrong way, only differences.

Switching Roles

Once you understand a person's tendency, it is important to provide some of what that person yearns for.

If you are going to put specialists into roles that are new and not clearly defined, find specific details you can give them to hold on to. Help them create objective milestones and measures of success. Help them find ways to create detail and clarity for themselves. Never ask a specialist to "just get the job done any way you can."

For generalists, be flexible with rules and procedures. Instead of mandating something be done a certain way, explain why maintaining the process is important and give them the freedom to explore new ways of achieving the same goal. Let them explore a bit and look for ways to break out of the mold, to be creative and to feel some freedom in the detailed work they are now being asked to do.

In my experience, it is more common for specialists to move into generalist roles than the other way around. Specialists tend to develop technical proficiency and are often highly visible when promotions or new positions become available. For example, the chemist who

becomes a research team manager or the top salesperson who becomes the sales manager. Often these initial attempts at generalist roles fail due to lack of preparation for the employee and staff.

One effective strategy is to have employees of each style share, in a team setting, their approach to different situations and why it works for them. Have them include stories that highlight their approach and create a sense of value and credibility for styles that may be poorly understood. Make it fun, offer rewards, turn it into a competition. Have them alternate between specialist and generalist for each meeting.

A business can either thrive or struggle based on how you utilize talent. Keeping a balance of specialists and generalists allows your organization to explore multiple styles and approaches to solving problems and creating desired results. Learn how to leverage it to your benefit.

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