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At the Front Line in the Talent Wars: Managers' Perceptions of Star Performers

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At the Front Line in the Talent Wars: Managers' Perceptions of Star Performers

Attracting and keeping talented people, the 'stars', is an on-going struggle. Our theoretical understanding of the nature of star performance is limited. This study aims to begin remedying this situation in order to effectively create appropriate HR practices. This study explored the utility of the contextual and task performance framework for understanding stars using managers (N=174) from a large government agency. We also sought out additional elements that may need to be included to accurately conceptualise stars. Results suggest that contextual and task performance are determinants of star ratings, and that other dimensions such as being self-directed, having a big picture viewpoint, and a willingness to lead also contribute. Implications for research and responsive HR practices are discussed.

Keywords :star performance, contextual performance, task performance, HR practices

The search for ways to attract, develop and retain star performers is a top of mind issue for managers. In a recent survey in the Asia-Pacific region, HR managers reported that their companies' ability to attract and retain talent was the most important problem they faced (Hewitt Associates, 2001). However, in order to offer sound advice to managers about star performers we need to better understand what goes into the making of a star.

Thus a necessary first step in improving our management of star performers, or simply 'stars' is to investigate how managers understand the basic construct of stars. While it is intuitively obvious that stars somehow demonstrate superior performance to non-stars, as organisational psychologists have demonstrated over a considerable period, performance is in itself a complex, multifaceted construct (eg Campbell, 1990; Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Murphy, 1990; Porter & Lawler, 1968; Schmidt & Hunter, 1992). We base our exploration in existing models of performance in work settings from the fields of OB and I/O psychology, while allowing that there may also be other elements that are necessary to describing stars. Specifically the present study is interested in knowing the extent to which the contextual and task performance framework (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993) is useful in unravelling the concept of stars.

CONTEXTUAL PERFORMANCE AND STAR PERFORMERS

There is ample evidence that job performance involves more than just task performance, more than simply applying a set of skills and knowledge. We have known for some time that cooperative and helpful behaviours, beyond formal role descriptions, are important for effective organisational functioning (Katz, 1964). A number of different names have been suggested for this construct of discretionary, “helpful behaviours” that do not relate directly to task performance including organisational citizenship behaviour (Organ, 1988; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman & Fetter, 1990; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine & Bachrach, 2000), in-role and extra-role behaviour (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), and more recently contextual performance.

Borman and Motowidlo (1993) argue that contextual performance involves behaviours that support the organisational, psychological and social context in which tasks are performed. Contextual performance includes: (a) volunteering for extra activities, (b) persisting with enthusiasm when needed to complete important job requirements, (c) helping and cooperating with others, (d) following rules and prescribed procedures even when personally inconvenient, and (e) openly endorsing, defending, and supporting organisational objectives (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Studies show that: people readily distinguish between task performance and contextual performance; both types of behaviour contribute independently to the effectiveness of an individual, and the organisation (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Organ & Paine, 1999; Van Scotter, Motowidlo & Cross, 2000); managers reward both task and contextual performance (Kiker & Motowidlo, 1999); contextual performance influences whether persons obtain career development opportunities and rewards (Van Scotter, et al., 2000), and being rewarded with career development opportunities for exhibiting these behaviours is perceived as fair by others (Bish, Bradley & Sargent, 2004).

Thus our first proposition is that star performers are likely to be those who combine high levels of task performance with high levels of contextual performance. That is a person who is technically competent, and who *also* demonstrates high levels (or a wide range of) contextual performance is

more likely to be considered a star than a person who scores highly on only one of these dimensions, or on neither dimension. Our second proposition is that it may also be the case that while *necessary* for describing star performers, these two dimensions are *not sufficient* for capturing all of the elements that go to make up a star since stars may need to demonstrate other vital behaviours.

METHOD

Participants and Measures

The participants were 174 supervisor and subordinate dyads from a large Australian Government department. The business employs over 25 000 people to provide a 'one stop shop' for services delivered on behalf of ten government departments to over 6.5 million customers. Of the 174 supervisors 120 were females and 54 males, with a mean age of 41 years. The subordinates they rated (125 females and 49 males) also had a mean age of 41 years and had reported to them for an average of two years. The majority of subordinates were in customer service officer roles in call centres and walk-in service centres.

Contextual performance

We used fifteen items from the scales developed by Van Scooter and Motowidlo (1996). Of the fifteen items, seven assess interpersonal facilitation, and eight assess job dedication. Supervisors responded to statements such as: When performing his or her job, how likely is it that this person would: "Praise co-workers when they are successful", "Talk to others before taking actions that might affect them", using a scale from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 5 (*extremely likely*).

Task performance

Five items from the scale developed by Williams and Anderson (1991) were used. Supervisors responded to statements such as: Compared to other people that you supervise, doing the same type of work, how likely is it that this person would: "Adequately complete assigned duties" and "Meet the formal requirements of their job", using a scale from 1 (*very unlikely*) to 5 (*very likely*).

Defining a star performer

Supervisors were asked to indicate using a simple “Yes”/ “No” response whether they considered the person they were rating to be a star. We also asked supervisors to consider a high performer within their area— a ‘real star’ who could be the current person if he/she was described as a star. They were asked to briefly describe what behaviours someone would have to demonstrate to make them a ‘star’ in the organisation, and what distinguished a star’s performance from an average performer.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables. The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach’s coefficient alpha. All three scales were determined to be reliable (task performance $\alpha = .93$, interpersonal facilitation $\alpha = .84$, job dedication $\alpha = .90$).

A hierarchical logistic regression analysis was performed to evaluate how well the two contextual and single task performance variables predict whether a person has been classified by their supervisor as a star (1) or not a star (0). Ratings from 174 supervisors were available for analysis and these had nominated 73 persons as stars and 101 as non stars.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations for Study Variables

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Task Performance	4.33	.65			
2. Interpersonal Facilitation	3.85	.57	.49**		
3. Job Dedication	3.86	.70	.72**	.66**	
4. A star?	.42	.50	.43**	.38**	.52**

Note: N = 174. ** p < .01.

A test of the full model with all three predictors produced a highly significant result, $\chi^2(3, N = 174) = 59.60, p = .000$, indicating that the predictors, as a set, distinguished between stars and non stars (Table 2), however it is evident that one variable – Job Dedication has the most influence. Given the strong correlations between the three individual predictors (Table 1) it would be inappropriate to

conclude that either Task Performance or Interpersonal Facilitation are unimportant, but in a statistical sense Job Dedication clearly has the strongest, independent influence and “soaks up” the influence of the other two. The model correctly predicted the status of 74% of subordinates though it was somewhat more accurate in predicting non-stars (79%) than stars (67%).

TABLE 2
Results of Logistic Regression Predicting Stars

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald test (z-ratio)	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
(Constant)	.572	.197	8.442	1	.004	1.772
Task performance	-.366	.287	1.627	1	.202	.693
Interpersonal Facilitation	-.160	.254	.398	1	.528	.852
Job dedication	-1.249	.374	11.148	1	.001	.287
Model Chi-square [df]	59.604 [3]		% Correct Predictions Overall 74% Star 67% Non-star 79%		-2 Log likelihood	177.086

N= 174, $p = .000$

The interaction among predictors was also tested since our first research proposition suggested that in order to be classed as a star a person has to score highly on both Task and Contextual performance. Following the procedure outlined by Aiken and West (1991) for analysing interactions, the variables were standardised to manage the correlations between the predictors and the interaction terms. The interaction effects were not significant, nevertheless Figure 1, that plots subordinates' status (star /non-star) against their standardised scores on Task Performance and Job Dedication reveals several interesting patterns. First it is evident that virtually no subordinate who scored below the mean on either of these dimensions is classified as a star (Area A in Figure 1). This indicates, as we have already concluded, that both dimensions contribute to whether a person is rated as a star.

Persons who scored highly on just one dimension, either Task or Job Dedication (Areas B & C in Figure 1) are not necessarily classed as stars. However it is also evident that not all persons who have high scores on both dimensions (Area D) are classed as stars.

FIGURE 1

Scatterplot of the Relationship between Job Dedication, Task Performance Ratings and Designation as a Star

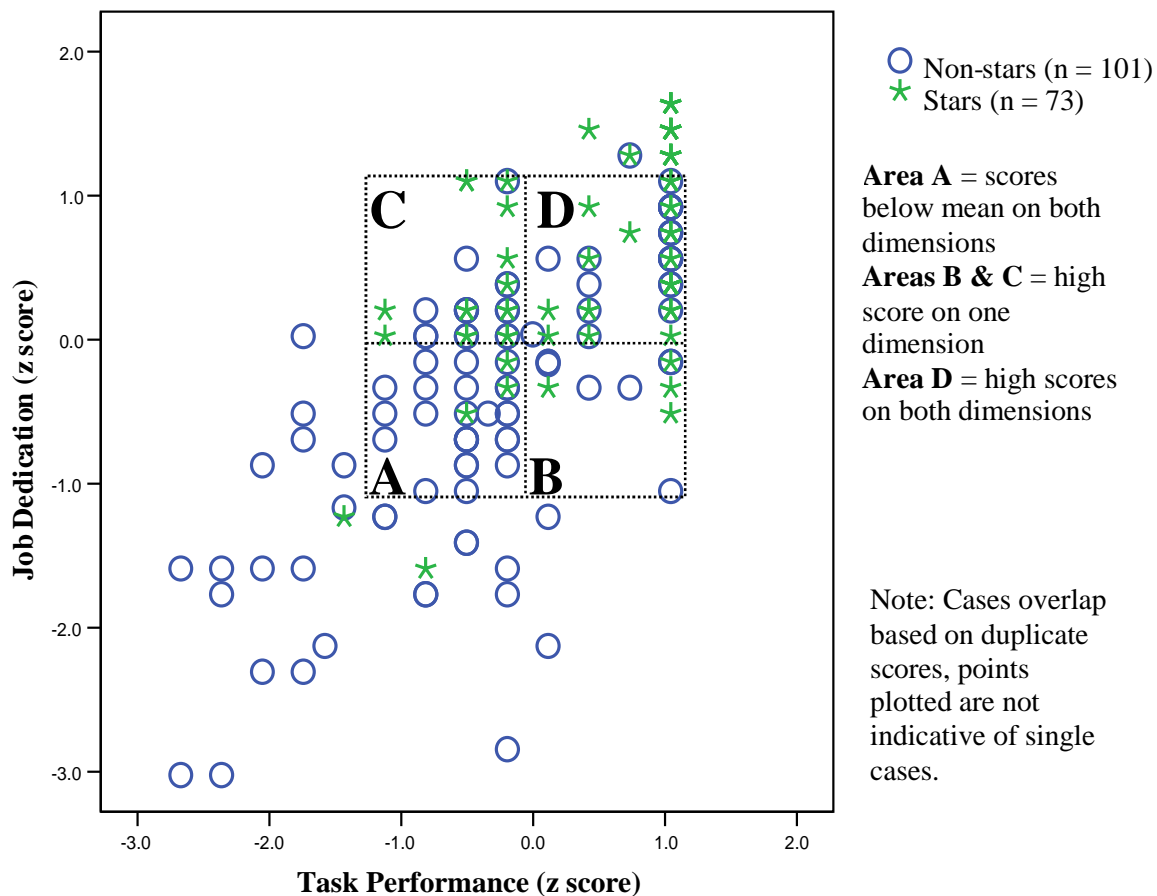


Figure 1 also suggests a ceiling effect on the Task Performance measure, with no one scoring above the first standard deviation. This is an issue to which we return later.

We interpret this pattern as follows: in order to be classed as a star it is necessary for a person to perform at least moderately highly on both task and contextual performance dimensions. However, it is not sufficient to perform at high levels on both dimensions in order to be seen as a star – some persons who score highly on both dimensions are still not classified as stars, while others with moderately high scores on both dimensions are considered stars. We suggest this is because some people who score highly on both dimensions lack some other attributes of stars while the moderate

scorers who are rated as stars possess these other attributes. Put simply, it seems that a high level of both task and contextual performance is generally necessary but not sufficient for a person to be classed as a star.

Consistent with this interpretation is our finding reported earlier that the contextual and task performance framework is somewhat better at predicting non-stars than stars. This is similar to Kelley and Caplan's (1993) findings that individuals who scored highly on a particular factor which was believed to lead to star performance, (eg., cognitive ability, risk taking, company loyalty) were not labelled as stars – there were other factors involved. In sum, these results broadly support our first proposition: the existing framework of contextual and task performance provides a significant degree of insight into the nature of star performance. To address our second proposition, whether there are any additional factors involved, we analysed the open-ended questions regarding stars.

Additional Factors Contributing to Star Performance

We followed analytic procedures described by Marshall and Rossman (1999) to analyse the qualitative data by forming clusters of emerging themes and identifying categories which reflect the data. Each stage was designed to be as data driven as possible, using an iterative, exploratory process to allow categories to emerge from the data itself and to ensure that each category was internally consistent and distinct from others (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

This iterative process resulted in the identification of five major categories of behavioural dimensions of stars. The first category, 'Team Development' refers to a person's support and development of other team members which enables the team as whole to perform at a higher level. The second category, 'Self-Direction' describes a person's capacity for 'self-directed' work; including descriptions such as "proactively solves problems", "without a lot of direction from management", and "low-maintenance". The third category, 'Knowledge and Skills', captures the importance of having

”excellent” levels of technical skills and job knowledge and to “possess a comprehensive knowledge of the business”. The fourth category represents ‘Goal Achievement’ - the person’s ability to consistently achieve goals including statements such as “consistently meets targets”, “demonstrates persistence”, and a “willingness to do more than they are formally required to do”. The final category is that of ‘Leadership’ which includes “being able to take a strategic viewpoint”, “sees the job in holistic way”, and “engages in lateral thinking”.

Relating Behavioural Dimensions to Task and Contextual Ratings

The results thus far suggest that there are additional dimensions other than contextual and task performance related to managers’ star ratings. These dimensions while not conceptually identical with task and contextual performance may overlap sufficiently, both conceptually and empirically, with these two dimensions that they add very little to a person’s classification as a star. Since we did not obtain managers’ descriptions of ‘non-stars’ we are unable to test the extent to which these dimensions contribute to star ratings. However, a more limited analysis is possible in which we examine the correlation between stars’ ratings on task and contextual performance and the qualitative descriptions by their managers. Among the stars there are no range restrictions in category ratings, therefore there is adequate variation to proceed with a correlational analysis. Each person’s score on the behavioural dimensions was scored as a simple bivariate (1/0) variable that reflected whether this category was mentioned in the description provided by the supervisor (1=Mentioned; 0= Not Mentioned).

Table 4 shows the correlations among the behavioural dimensions and with the ratings of contextual and task performance, for stars only. A positive aspect of the lack of correlations is that it suggests that the categories are mutually exclusive, and they do not simply replicate task and contextual performance. Arguably they are tapping into behaviours which are not entirely captured by these performance dimensions, and as such deserve further exploration as potentially significant characteristics of stars.

TABLE 4
Correlations between Behavioural Dimensions of Star Rating and Contextual and Task Performance for Stars Only

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Team Development	.53	.50							
2. Self-Direction	.62	.49	.11						
3. Knowledge & Skills	.49	.50	-.03	-.08					
4. Goal Achievement	.79	.41	.15	-.03	.01				
5. Leadership	.51	.50	-.07	.05	-.10	.02			
6. Task Performance	4.33	.65	-.22	-.01	-.03	-.19	-.04		
7. Interpersonal Facilitation	3.85	.57	-.10	.13	.05	-.14	.16	.21	
8. Job Dedication	3.86	.70	-.12	.05	-.11	-.06	.11	.55**	.51**

Note: N = 73, **p<.01

Overall our findings indicate that the contextual and task performance framework does lend itself to “unpacking” the star performer construct, and that job dedication, an aspect of contextual performance, is a key factor in managers’ perceptions of stars. In addition, additional features, including consistency in goal achievement, having high levels of knowledge and skills, self-direction, contributing to team development, and what we have called leadership that includes empowering others by taking initiative, and having a holistic view of one’s role within the organisation are required to be a star. Or they may compensate to some extent for a person’s level of task and contextual performance. The leadership aspect in particular, including the creative, lateral thinking components is not well accounted for by the contextual and task performance framework that tends to emphasise support for the status quo rather than the ability to challenge it.

DISCUSSION

Our objective was to begin to explore managers’ perceptions and judgements of star performance. We proposed that the well-known task and contextual performance framework would assist us in beginning to understand this issue. Our results support this proposition - in the absence of above average levels of both task and contextual performance a person is unlikely to be a star. Our second

proposition was also supported as there is some indication that while high levels of both task and contextual performance are necessary, they are not necessarily sufficient for a person to be described as a star. Two potential factors that our managerial respondents identified are the capacity to be self-directed and the willingness to engage in leadership behaviours - these are aspects that are not well represented by the task and contextual performance framework. These behaviours are proactive. Stars use their initiative to engage in solving problems facing the team, they do not focus simply on being helpful, and following rules and procedures (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Van Scotter, Motowidlo & Cross, 2000, Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996). So, when considered together, these three aspects of being self-directed in managing their work, being able to lead and influence others and contributing in a strategic way adds to our understanding of stars.

Our results are unable to answer the important issue of whether these behaviours are highly generalizable aspects of star performance or whether they are contingent upon situational factors. Therefore one clear limitation to the present study stems from the use of a single, organisational sample. To develop our understanding of the characteristics of stars further research needs to be done in other contexts. Despite this, an implication of these findings is that other dimensions needs to be added to the contextual - task performance framework in order to make it more useful for understanding star performance and that these other dimensions may have to do with aspects of leading self and others, creativity, and strategic or “big picture” thinking, aspects of behaviour that are largely excluded from the “the good soldier” (Organ, 1988) portrayal of the contributions made by organisational citizenship behaviours.

Future research could also usefully examine the discriminating ability of task performance measures of the form used by this study. The measure of task performance (Williams & Anderson, 1991) was not able to discriminate very well at the top end of the performance range and resulted in a ceiling effect, as we saw in Figure 1. The measure we used provided an indication that the person was

doing their job at a standard level but did not capture variations in the top performers. While it is not surprising that measures of this type have been designed to measure variations around the “average” performer, it indicates that we may need to devote more attention to developing measures that are able to discriminate at the high end of work performance. Such measures may need to incorporate some of the dimensions we have identified.

Implications for Human Resource Management

These findings have some implications for managers’ and HR professionals’ understanding of star performance. First, the elements of star performance identified in this study are behavioural – and behaviours can be learned. Future work could explore Kelley’s (1998) notion of moving solid performers into the star category through development of these specific types of behaviours.

Second, while managers in this study were able to articulate observable differences between stars and average performers we were to some extent grappling with the problem of how to measure these variations with sufficient accuracy when it came to measuring star performance (Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000). At present, the best recommendation we can make for distinguishing stars is to include the Job Dedication scale but this is clearly not a satisfactory solution. It may be time to give more consideration to the issue of how we can better measure outstanding performance.

Third, and related to this last point, we suggest that while we have seen HR evolve from an administrative and maintenance driven function to that of strategic business partner (Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook & Frink, 1999), a legacy that may still exist is a continuing emphasis upon achieving some form of “minimum compliance” on the part of all or most employees via a single set of practices. Responding to stars, being able to understand the nature and the drivers of outstanding performance, requires acknowledging that employees are not uniform in the strategic value of their contribution (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005a; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005b; Lepak & Snell, 1999). This approach demands flexibility, not a ‘one-size fits all’ approach to HR practices.

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