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transitioning the middles to the top

The ‘Bell Curve’ is a Gaussian distribution chart often used to depict performance in education or at work. It has been in use for over a decade, and seems all set to stay despite the mixed opinions about it. HR managers use it as a tool to identify top performers, middle range performers, and those below expectations.

Naturally, companies invest heavily in the top performers, grooming them into leaders. There are also varied policies governing how to handle the low performers—some companies show them the doors, while others start the process with counseling and warnings. Of the lot, the biggest concern is probably the huge population sitting at the middle of the Bell Curve. Here are ways in which this large number can transition from the middle to top smoothly.

The population in the middle of the Bell Curve is a fairly mixed crowd. At one extreme of the middle are top performers who have become slotted in the middle either due to the normalization process involved in charting the curve or because of a fleeting slump in their career. Companies need to give special attention to these people, or they will leave the organization for another. Then, there are those who really have the potential to transition to the top with support, proper guidance and growth opportunities. Others

may be held back, simply because they do not have the drive to progress further. Handling this large and mixed group is a daunting challenge for any company—because they need to ensure everybody gets a fair chance and are not held back by lack of opportunities or insufficient training and guidance. The best way to do this is probably to weave it into the company’s psyche, so that employees can transition to higher levels naturally and happily—without being burdened by the activities involved.



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The transformation of an employee, from being a novice to a leader, should be enabled naturally. A company should make growth a seamless part of its culture, policies, structure and even the information technology systems implemented. It should show the right way and provide all the tools for enhancement, as part of the employee's everyday life, without making it seem like something special or out of the way. Employees should grow, as a matter of fact.

ways to get ahead

01 employee speak

Companies need to pay a lot of attention to employee speak—that is, employees' changing views about their work and progress. These changing views act as powerful inputs in crafting every employee's journey. Several operations could be redesigned with a focus on employees' opinions. For example, appraisals could attempt to capture the experiences of employees and gauge their fit into the company and their specific role, with subsequent modifications to improve the experience.

Results from their social media and gamification activities may be combined for further analysis. The most tangible of the employee speak channels, hence a perpendicular is usually the performance measurement [key performance indicator (KPI)] aspect. This, however, cannot be the only parameter through which an employee is measured. A system that relies only on KPI measurement can never explain why an employee is parked in a certain grade for prolonged periods with the same average performance. How can anyone grow if they are not

updating their skills or connecting with the outside world through professional networks is the question?

This also points to another important aspect of leadership development—locus of control. The louder the employee speak and the more aligned it is to their career aspirations, the more independent the employee.

02 method acting and talent management

Award-worthy acting performances do not happen unless one can relate to the role that one is contracted to play.

One would have to get a deep understanding of:

- the characterization of the role
- the situation that must be enacted
- the psychological state of the character in that situation, and
- their immersion into those moments in that situation to relate to other players and deliver the performance.

Therefore, companies should ensure that employees have a thorough understanding of their roles, the internal and external factors that affect their roles and how to handle various situations they might encounter while performing their role.

03 business conduct definition and training

The preceding discussion on method acting sets the context for business conduct definition and measurement. This requires a company to define engagements and model employee behavior or business conduct clearly in order to cut out ambiguity, provide a framework to regulate employee performance naturally and smoothly, and to improve their confidence while serving internal and external customers.

Measurement systems must also be put in place to ensure that employees, who follow the drill successfully, are identified and rewarded. If being to work on time is a critical business conduct, then an analysis of the time-in will reveal successful employee behavior. If employee's leave-taking pattern is analyzed, their level of engagement can be assessed to a degree. However, businesses usually choose more complex means or a combination of methods to actually evaluate business behavior.

Where possible, an audit might be conducted for conduct compliance as in the case of a records keeper maintaining a movements (people or material) register.

This audit could be a monthly or a quarterly affair, depending on the volume of transactions and the value of such an audit. *The more the transactions, the more frequent the audit*—this statement must also be tempered with the maturity of the operation.

The goal of the evaluation process is not just to bridge gaps but also to reward employees. The feeling of being recognized for doing the right thing helps motivate employees. Such behavioral modeling can be especially helpful for the middle range of the Bell Curve.

04 gamifying learning and performance

Over the past few years, gamification has arisen as a very effective technique to achieve targets in a dynamic, interesting and sustainable way. Gamification helps employees grow and improve constantly in a natural way, without making it appear like explicit training. It helps set targets in a game form. It makes talent management—and eventual business success—fun-filled and exciting. Here are some quick examples of how gamification can help to smoothly carry your employees from the middle of the Bell Curve to the top:

- When employees achieve targets consistently, win a tough deal, or complete a learning program, they might be gifted badges, which they can display on their social networking (SN) pages, for a specific period of time, thereby letting others know of their achievement.
- People may also be recognized and rewarded for collaboration on company-wide initiatives.
- A gamified platform can motivate employees to complete training programs, especially those not related directly to their work. For example, when an employee completes a certification, they might be given a gift voucher, or an SMS might be sent to the whole team to announce the employees' achievement.
- Peer recognition is a key aspect of gamification. Using an organization-wide web portal, companies may enable employees to assign points and recognition to fellow team members, or those from other teams who helped them in their work.
- There could also be feedback mechanisms that enable customers, within and outside the organization,

to appreciate the business conduct of employees, contributing to their points or rewards.

- Surprise tests might be conducted to check the behavior of employees on the job, and spot awards or gift certificates might be given. For example, a stranger could try to enter the organization posing to be a senior official, and if a security person has the conviction to stop the entrant and demand that he prove his identity however senior he might be in the corporate ladder, his sincerity could be appreciated and awarded on the spot.

05 social media and mobility

Social media can be used to identify and promote talent. Employees spend a lot of time online, and have an SN persona. So, apart from the recognition they get in the physical world, they also feel the need to radiate the same success online.

Mobility can also be tapped to help employees maximize their potential. Mobility ensures that the organization pervades beyond physical boundaries. It helps employees stay in touch with their work, and continue critical interactions even when they are not within the organization's premises. Hence, it is critical that organizations enable as much mobility as possible when designing their business processes and information systems.

massive middles > skilled and committed employees

From the above discussion, it is clear that carrying employees from the middle to the top of the Bell Curve is all about identifying the gaps between what they are and what the organization wants them to be, in terms of business conduct. The gaps can be bridged methodically if expectations are clearly set and communicated, and the methodologies are also in place for the employees to follow and verify their conduct and performance against the expectations. The whole process of bridging the gaps can also be made more effective, by making it more fun-filled. ■