What Makes a ‘Star’ Performer

Most every company has ‘star’ performers. However, those same companies typically have even more average performers. If an organization is satisfied with average results, then average performers are sufficient. If, however, a company expects to achieve stellar results, it must cultivate star performers. This white paper explores specific competencies that distinguish high performance individuals and how those competencies are exhibited in the workplace.

1. Introduction

Decades of research have now provided clear evidence that star performers don’t necessarily have more technical or cognitive intelligence than their average counterparts. What distinguishes star performers is the level ‘Emotional Intelligence’ (EI) that they possess.

This data continues to builds informally, as organizations worldwide do internal studies to identify the competencies that distinguish star from average performers, and formally, as academic researchers continue to focus studies on competencies exhibited by top performers.

In a 2009 Pinnacle Management Group whitepaper, A Case for Emotional Intelligence, we outlined the findings of a study performed by Dr. David McClelland. This study reviewed data from more than thirty organizations and from executive positions in many professions, from banking to mining, sales, and health care. Dr. McClelland’s research determined that a wide range of EI competencies (and a narrow range of cognitive ones) distinguished top performers from average ones. Those EI competencies that distinguished most powerfully are:

- Achievement Drive
- Developing Others
- Adaptability, Influence
- Self-Confidence, and
- Leadership.

The one cognitive competence that distinguished as strongly was Analytic Thinking.

The purpose of this whitepaper is to:

- Briefly describe EI and its importance to your company;
- Explore the six competencies from the McClelland study in more detail to understand the specifics of the traits that stars exhibit and execute on a daily basis
- Outline research performed that demonstrates the ability to build/improve an individual’s emotional competencies
2. Emotional Intelligence

2.1 Emotional Intelligence Defined
For decades researchers have held that there are two types of intelligence – intellectual and emotional. The most commonly understood type of intelligence is intellectual, academic intelligence - the cognitive capacities as measured by IQ. EI refers to the capacity to recognize our emotions and those of others. EI assists us to motivate and manage emotions, and to better understand our relationships with others. We need EI to manage stressful situations well, and to drive us to a higher level of accomplishment.

Why is EI important? Findings from studies over the past few decades have established that emotionally intelligent individuals are better performers than their counterparts. Results have also demonstrated that those with higher levels of EI are better performers than those who have higher IQ’s but with lower levels of EI.

The focus on EI isn’t a passing fad or the management approach of the moment. The data for taking this seriously is grounded in dozens of studies conducted over the last several decades. These studies included tens of thousands of workers, in countries across the globe, in all types of jobs. The research defines with great precision the qualities that mark a star performer in the workplace at different levels of job complexity, and at different levels in the organization’s hierarchy.

For example, in an analysis of 181 competence models, 67 percent of the abilities found to distinguish the best performers were emotional competencies. Compared to IQ and expertise, emotional competencies clearly impacted results twice as much. These results apply to all categories of jobs, and in all types of organizations (Goleman: Working With Emotional Intelligence, 1998).

For other study results, see Pinnacle Management Group’s white paper ‘The Case for Emotional Intelligence’ (2009).

2.2 Emotional Intelligence Framework
In his book Working with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, Co-chairman of The Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations, set forth a framework of EI that reflects how an individual’s potential for mastering the skills of Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, and Relationship Management translates into on-the-job success. The model is based on EI competencies that have been identified in research at hundreds of corporations and organizations as distinguishing outstanding performers.

A competency is defined as any individual characteristic that:

- Can be measured reliably
- Distinguishes superior from average performers, and/or
• Distinguishes effective from ineffective performers

Figure 1 presents Goleman’s EI framework - twenty competencies nest in four areas of general EI abilities.

**Figure 1 – A Framework of Emotional Competencies**

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<tr>
<th>Recognition</th>
<th>Self-Awareness</th>
<th>Social Awareness</th>
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<td>• Emotional Self-awareness</td>
<td>• Empathy</td>
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<td>• Accurate self-assessment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Self-confidence</strong></td>
<td>• Organizational awareness</td>
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<th>Regulation</th>
<th>Self-Management</th>
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<td>• Self-control</td>
<td>• <strong>Developing others</strong></td>
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<td>• Trustworthiness</td>
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<td>• <strong>Adaptability</strong></td>
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<td>• <strong>Achievement drive</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>Leadership</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Initiative</td>
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An interesting point to note is that the six competencies which have been identified as the best predictors of success are spread across three of the four areas (and with a symbiotic relationship to the fourth). This effect is called ‘clustering’ and numerous studies confirm that competencies come in clusters. For top performance, a person must master a mix of competencies, not just one or two. David McClelland found that stars are talented in competencies across the board.

Along with competency clusters comes the notion of a tipping point—the point at which strength in a competence makes a significant impact on performance. Each competence can be viewed along a continuum of mastery; at a certain point along each continuum there is a major leap in performance impact. In McClelland’s analysis (1998) of the competencies that distinguish star performers from their average counterparts, he found a tipping point effect when an individual exhibited excellence in six or
more competencies. McClelland argued that a critical mass of competencies above the tipping point distinguishes top from average performers. The typical pattern is that stars are above the tipping point on at least six EI competencies and demonstrate strengths in at least one competency from each of the four clusters (The Emotionally Intelligent Workplace, 2001, Edited by: Cary Cherniss and Daniel Goleman).

3. Six Key Competencies
The six key competencies Dr. David McClelland’s study showed to distinguish stars from average performers are discussed in detail below. For each of the six competencies, Goleman’s definition from his EI framework is provided (in bold), along with additional information and commentary.

After you have reviewed the referenced six competencies, think about how many star performers are currently in your organization. How do you rate at building stars in your company? How would having more star performers impact your business?

3.1 Self-Confidence
Many individuals believe that Self-Confidence is the single most important component of superior performance. Without it, an individual may lack the conviction that is essential for taking on tough challenges. Additionally, Self-confidence provides the necessary assurance for moving forward or stepping in as a leader.

**Self-Confidence: Sureness about one’s self-worth and capabilities.**

**Individuals with this competence:**

- **Present themselves with self-assurance; have presence**
  Individuals with strong Self-Confidence project a presence. They exude charisma and inspire confidence in those around them.

  Among supervisors, managers, and executives, higher levels of self-confidence set the best performers apart from those who are average (Boyatzis, The Competent Manager).

- **Can voice views that are unpopular and go out on a limb for what is right**
  In any type of a job, in any organization, individuals with Self-Confidence show a willingness to take the risk of speaking up and pointing out problems or injustices in contrast to others who only grumble or quit. Self-Confident individuals make things happen.

- **Are decisive, able to make sound decisions despite uncertainties and pressures**
  Self-confidence gives a person the strength to make a tough decision or to follow a course of action one believes in despite opposition, disagreement, or even disapproval from those in authority. Individuals with strong Self-Confidence are decisive – but very importantly, decisive without being arrogant or defensive.
While some individuals are born with a natural Self-Confidence, even those who are shy and timid can become more self-confident with practice (Jerome Galen, Galen's Prophecy, 1994).

In a decades-long study of managers at AT&T, Self-Confidence exhibited early in a person’s career predicted promotions and success in higher management years later (Ann Howard & Douglas W. Bray, Managerial Lives in Transition, 1988). Among 112 entry-level accountants, those with the highest sense of Self-Efficacy, a form of Self-Confidence, were rated by their supervisors ten months later as having superior job performance. The level of Self-Confidence was in fact a stronger predictor of performance than the level of skill or previous training (Saks, 1995). In a sixty-year study of more than one thousand high-IQ men and women tracked from early childhood to retirement, those who possessed Self-Confidence during their early years were most successful in their careers (Holahan & Sears, 1995).

Individuals with Self-Confidence typically see themselves as able to take on challenges and master new jobs or skills. They believe themselves to be catalysts, movers, and initiators, and feel their abilities stack up favorably in comparison to others. From such a position of inner strength, they are able to better justify their decisions or actions, staying unfazed by opposition.

One of the more common traits in individuals who lack self-confidence is the paralyzing fear of seeming inept. Another is too easily giving up on their own opinions and judgments – even their good ideas – when challenged (Goleman, 1998).

3.2 Adaptability
If there is any competence these times call for it is Adaptability. Stars in this competence relish change and find exhilaration in innovation (Boyatzis, The Competent Manager).

Adaptability: Flexibility in handling change.

Individuals with this competence:

- **Smoothly handle multiple demands, shifting priorities, and rapid change**
  Business today is fast-paced and ever-changing. Individuals that are strong in the Adaptability competence stay calm in the face of a high pace of activity and the change that comes with an evolving business environment. They look upon the multiple demands of their work, shifting priorities, and change as a challenge, and are confident enough in their abilities to meet these challenges.

  In high stress situations, they show an openness to new thoughts, ideas and ways of doing things; they show flexibility and a willingness to adapt.

- **Adapt their responses and tactics to fit fluid circumstances**
Adaptability requires the flexibility to take into account multiple perspectives on a given situation. This flexibility depends, in turn, on an emotional strength – the ability to stay comfortable with ambiguity and remain calm in the face of the unexpected (Goleman 1998).

- **Are flexible in how they see events**
  Individuals high in the Adaptability competence are open to new information and can let go of old assumptions, and so they adapt how they operate. They are not constrained by paradigms, but rather look for ways to continually improve on their performance and the performance of their group as a whole - displaying on-the-job creativity and applying new ideas to achieve results.

Adaptability is a key competence that star performers regularly demonstrate and which makes them stand out from others. They remain calm, rational, and reasoned when things get tough. Their ability to adapt moves them into leadership positions when situations with multiple demands, shifting priorities, and/or rapid change occur. They stand out whether they are in a leadership position or not. Conversely, those who are uncomfortable with change become naysayers and are easily flustered – they too can stand out, but in a counter-productive manner.

### 3.3 Achievement Drive

In its most general sense, Goleman refers this competence - Achievement Drive - as an optimistic striving to continually improve performance.

**Achievement Drive: Striving to improve or meet a standard of excellence.**

Individuals with this competence:

- **Are results-oriented, with a high drive to meet their objectives and standards**
  Individuals with Achievement Drive look for ways to be measured, want feedback, and are continually looking to improve themselves. High achievers – those willing to commit to something new – are restless in positions that stifle their ability to achieve, contribute and grow.

  By contrast, when it comes to setting goals or standards for themselves, individuals low in Achievement competence are lackadaisical or unrealistic, seeking work that is too easy or unrealistically ambitious. Likewise supervisors who lack this skill create a work climate where goals are fuzzy and employees are unsure about their own responsibilities, the limits of their authority, and even their job objectives. They don’t give employees feedback on how they are doing or what is expected of them (Goleman, 1998).

- **Set challenging goals and take calculated risks**
  Success demands a drive to achieve. Studies that compare stars to average performers find that the stars show the following signs of achievement competence:
    - They talk about and take more calculated risks
They urge and support innovations and set challenging goals for themselves. They throw their support behind others’ innovative ideas.

The need to achieve is the single strongest competence that sets apart stars from average executives (Spencer and Spencer, Competence at Work).

- **Pursue information to reduce uncertainty and find ways to do better**
  Individuals high in Achievement Drive look for ways to measure their progress, especially against their goals. They look to set up information gathering mechanisms (formal and informal) to get information that tracks progress. Such information gathering and measuring minimizes unpleasant surprises and increases the likelihood of capitalizing on opportunities to do things better.

- **Learn how to improve their performance**
  Individuals with strong Achievement Drive actively seek out new ideas and information, reaching out to others to get their perspective, looking for continuous improvement – they are not a party to the ‘not invented here’ syndrome.

  These individuals are confident enough in themselves that they desire feedback and constantly challenge themselves to do better. Because getting feedback is sometimes difficult (due to the non-quantifiable nature of their work, or a superior that is not high in EI competencies), they have a strong self-critical sense, providing honest feedback to themselves.

### 3.4 Developing Others

Competence in Developing Others is a hallmark of superior leaders; it typifies those at the top of the field (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Although this ability is crucial for those managing front-line work, it has also emerged as a vital skill for effective leadership at high levels (Goleman, 2000).

**Developing others: Sensing what others need in order to develop, and bolstering their abilities.**

**Individuals with this competence:**

- **Acknowledge and reward strengths, accomplishments, and development**
  Individuals that are strong in Developing Others are aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the individuals they are developing. They know and understand what skills are needed to perform the assigned work, and how individuals match up against these requirements. They acknowledge team members’ accomplishments through effective feedback, offer appropriate rewards, and point out how accomplishments in current work fits into the person’s growth path.

- **Offer useful feedback and identify development needs**
  While acknowledging and rewarding team members’ strengths, accomplishments, and development is part of this competence, so to is offering insights on areas where individuals need to develop. This is usually the harder of the two.
Individuals who are strong in the Developing Others competence provide useful feedback – specific information (not generalities) about what needs to be strengthened, combined with information on how performance can be improved as well as a positive expectation of the person’s ability to improve.

By contrast, individuals weak in this competence provide feedback that attacks a person’s character, or is not specific enough to provide any basis for the person to know/understand how to improve. Also in this class are individuals that will only provide feedback when a person does something right, or provide no feedback at all. Individuals hunger for feedback, but it must be balanced (strengths/areas for development) and presented in a constructive manner.

- **Mentor, give timely coaching, and offer assignments that challenge and grow an individual’s skills.**

  Coaching is at the heart of Developing Others. Strong coaching or mentoring assists employees to perform better, enhances loyalty, job satisfaction and retention, and leads to promotions and pay increases (Christopher Orpren, The Effect of Mentoring on Employees’ Career Success, Journal of Social Psychology, 1995).

  The best coaches exhibit a genuine personal interest in those they guide, and have empathy for, and an understanding of, their employees (Goleman, 1998). They realize that an investment in people will not only help them to grow, but will make their own jobs easier as well.

  They are active in mentoring and coaching. They welcome opportunities to give constructive feedback. If they see, or become aware of a situation, positive or negative, they provide detailed, timely feedback.

  Individuals that are strong in Developing Others arrange for successful ‘stretch’ experiences for people they are developing, experiences that will increase a person’s capability and confidence, and provide them these challenges with a vote of confidence.

Developing Others is a key competence in star performers, particularly in positions of leadership. Individuals that are strong in Developing Others realize that by providing timely, constructive feedback, by having a plan to assist individuals to grow, they will create other star performers. They also realize that the more star performers they have working with them, the more they themselves will have an opportunity to shine.

**3.5 Influence**

This emotional competence emerges over and over again as a hallmark of star performers, particularly among supervisors, managers, and executives (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).
Influence: Wielding effective tactics for persuasion.

Individuals with this competence:

- **Are skilled at persuasion (winning people over)**
  Establishing a bond or commonality with the people with whom we work is an essential step understood by those strong in the Influence competency. An individual with strong persuasion skills is able to arouse specific emotions in the other person, based on bonds/commonalities they have with the person(s) – whether that is passion for a project, enthusiasm for outperforming a competitor, appropriate outrage over some unfairness, or respect for a position. They know, understand, and are able to connect with their audience.

  No matter how intellectually brilliant we may be, that brilliance will fail to shine if we are not persuasive (Goleman, 1998).

- **Fine-tune presentations to appeal to the listener**
  Individuals that score high in Influence have also shown an ability to sense/anticipate their audience’s reaction to what they are saying. This may be while a discussion/presentation is occurring or during the preparation stage – they shape the discussion so that their audience understands the content and emotion that will get the desired result.

- **Build consensus and support**
  Another key aspect of Influence is the ability to build consensus. Individuals who are strong in the Influence competency realize that imposing their ideas on people will not get the buy-in, trust and confidence needed to achieve the desired results. They build a supporting consensus, understanding that if they involve people in at least some of the steps of the process, they will get the buy-in, trust and confidence of those with whom they are working.

- **Orchestrate dramatic events to effectively make a point**
  An offshoot of the ability to ‘appeal to the listeners’ described above, individuals strong in Influence are also able to notice when logical arguments are not working and when appeals that are more emotional may add the additional impact needed to influence others.

It should be noted that charm and polish do not add up to competence at Influence; self-serving social skills that are to the detriment of the group as a whole are sooner or later recognized as a charade. True Influence as a positive competence is very different from a Machiavellian drive for personal success at all costs. The power exhibited in the Influence competence is socialized and harmonious with the collective goal, rather than exclusively for selfish gain. As one analyst of Influence in nearly 300 organizations put it, “We have not found best performers pursuing their own status, prestige, or gain at the expense of others or the organization.” (Goleman, 1998)
3.6 Leadership
Those adept at the Leadership competence draw on a range of personal skills to inspire others to work together toward common goals. They are able to articulate and arouse enthusiasm for a shared vision and mission, to step forward as needed, to guide the performance of others while holding them accountable, and to lead by example (Cherniss, Goleman).

Leadership: Inspiring and guiding groups and people.

Individuals with this competence:

- **Articulate and arouse enthusiasm for a shared vision and mission**
  Typically individuals with strong Leadership skills also possess a strong emotional style. Goleman found that the most effective leaders were more positive and outgoing, more emotionally expressive and dramatic, warmer and more sociable (including smiling more), friendlier and more democratic, more likeable and fun to be with, more appreciative and trustful, and even gentler than those who were merely average.

  The more positive the style of a leader, the more positive, helpful, and cooperative are those in the group (George & Bettenhausen, 1990)

- **Step forward to lead as needed, regardless of position**
  Individuals high in the Leadership competence are able to balance a people-oriented style with a decisive command role. They do not hesitate to take charge, to be assertive, focused, and persistent. They combine Leadership with other competencies to step forward, no matter what their position, but to step forward in a way that is not arrogant or abrasive – rather in a calm, collected, and businesslike manner.

- **Guide the performance of others while holding them accountable**
  While a people-oriented style is a common characteristic of someone with a strong Leadership competence, Leadership also entails knowing when to be assertive. They understand how to be assertive in a way that makes individuals aware of consequences, but is accomplished in a manner that builds future performance rather than destroys it. Those with strong Leadership provide feedback that is timely, honest, open, and direct.

  Leadership demands tough decision-making: Someone must be able to give direction, hold them to their obligations, and be explicit about consequences. Persuasion, consensus building, and all the other arts of influence do not always do the job. Sometimes it comes down to simply using the power of one’s position to get people to act (Goleman, 1998). It is how one asserts the ‘power of the position’ that separates stars from average performers.
• **Lead by example**

Leaders need to ‘walk the talk’. There can only be one set of rules, not one for the leader and another for everyone else. Leadership is quickly eroded when people see that the messages delivered are not sincere, that actions do not support words. Strong leaders have conviction in what they say and back up what they say with actions and dialog that continually and consistently support the direction they are leading.

3.7 More on ‘Clustering’

The end of Section 2.2 of this whitepaper discussed the concept of clustering - for top performance a person must master a mix of competencies, not just one or two. By examining the detail of these six competencies one can see how traits in one competency assist in building/developing other competencies, such as:

- Being strong at Leadership takes the ability to motivate and Influence
- The building of a compelling vision required for teamwork and Leadership take strong Influencing skills Organizational Awareness
- The ability to take on something new, something challenging (in Achievement Drive) takes strong Self-Confidence, and Adaptability
- The ability to Develop Others requires self-confidence, empathy and influence

Thus, an individual’s competency strengths can be leveraged to grow in those areas which are not as strong.

4. **Star Performers Can Be Developed**

Evidence clearly illustrates that EI is important to superior performance in the workplace. So, the question becomes is EI something that people naturally possess or can competencies be learned/strengthened?

Research shows that these competencies can be learned/improved. While the evidence that people can improve on EI competencies comes from a wide range of sources, perhaps the most persuasive evidence comes from longitudinal studies conducted at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University (Boyatzis, Cowan, & Kolb, 1995).

The students in this study participated in a required course on competence building. Students assessed both their EI and cognitive competencies. They then selected specific competencies they would target for enhancement, and they developed and implemented an individualized learning plan to strengthen those competencies. Objective assessment of students at the beginning of the program, upon graduation and again years later on the job provides a unique opportunity to help address the issue of whether EI competencies can be developed. **The results of this research have shown that EI competencies can be significantly improved, and, moreover, these improvements are sustainable over time.**
An important note about developing/improving an individual’s emotional competencies is that building or improving EI competencies is not an event. It is a process. Emotional learning involves deeply ingrained habits and traits rather than learning new content making emotional learning different from cognitive and technical learning. As such, it requires a different approach to development.

PINNACLE MANAGEMENT GROUP has developed an approach for building/improving emotional competencies and has experience delivering results for our clients. Insights into how to develop star performers are outlined in the 2010 PINNACLE MANAGEMENT GROUP whitepaper on ‘How to Turn Average Performers into Stars’.

5. Conclusion
The true difference between average performers and stars is not technical acumen or intelligence. The differentiator is the strength of EI competencies. Studies have provided compelling evidence regarding the importance of emotional competencies and the role that they play in determining top performers in any organization.

EI competencies can be developed and improved upon, but this take patience and practice. Thus, it doesn’t happen overnight. One must view this as a process and different from the cognitive learning experience.

6. Next Steps
If you are interested in turning average performers into stars by enhancing their EI Competencies, please contact PINNACLE MANAGEMENT GROUP. We will send you a link to a complementary diagnostic designed to provide insights into the level of EI competencies of your organization, and discuss how to implement an effective process to build your stars. For additional information, please contact us at lal@pmginternational.net.

To request copies of other EI white papers, or to be included on the mailing list for future releases, please send a request to info@pmginternational.net.

Also, please visit our website at www.pmginternational.net to learn about our diagnostics, workshops, and services. If you have any questions, please contact us at 573-747-1951.