

# Play Well in the Sandbox To Excel in the Sandbox

*The Differentiating Factor of High Performance*

By Tom Stevens (c) 2009

## Question...

So why care about playing well with others?

Hands down, people competency is the most distinguishing feature of top performers.

By 'people competency' I mean emotional intelligence, interpersonal effectiveness, and team related skills - in short, playing well with others.

Technical competence is a threshold requirement for excellence, but typically won't differentiate top from average performers.

A study at Bell Labs found all their engineers performed their engineering functions the same way. What differentiated top engineers from the average? Top performers created relationships that measurably contributed to effectiveness, e.g. top performers had telephone calls returned in an average of 20 minutes, compared to 4 hours for less stellar peers. A long term study tracking the career achievements of 80 PhD students from the 1950's until 1994, and concluded that emotional intelligence abilities were 4 times more important than IQ in determining long-term professional success. CFO's take note; top performers return significantly more economic value than average or poor performers. In a study analyzing thousands of people, top performers in complex jobs (salespeople, account managers, lawyers, physicians) were 127% more valuable than average performers.

Enterprises increasingly depend on knowledge workers and transfer of knowledge between people in differing roles within and without the organization. It's human nature that people don't readily share knowledge unless the environment in which they operate is open, collaborative, and supportive. It doesn't take many who 'don't play well with others' to damage what could be a productive environment.

Skill in emotional competence, interpersonal effectiveness, and working in teams is learnable, and in fact continues to improve throughout one's working life with the addition of appropriate experience - which means you can impact playing well with others in your own life and in an organization. For the best return on investment of time, money, and energy, remember that meaningful interpersonal competency is learned through experience that is repeated over time and based on real-life situations.

I continue to hear a theme from clients, business leaders, and other colleagues, that as the world becomes more high tech, there will be a corresponding need for high touch. Many executives fear that high touch environments get in the way of goals, or else they simply waste resources and time. The evidence is compelling, however, that high touch environments accelerate success and add value. However high touch environments require more advanced and developed leadership talent to bring out that value.

So here's the bottom line - if you want to excel, learn to play well.

## What can savvy leaders do to cultivate playing well?

- ✔ **Ensure development opportunities for people competencies are readily available.** They are as important technical and professional skills and information. However make sure development efforts are relevant to your organization and industry.
- ✔ **Build in playing well into performance management system.** Make people accountable for cultivating a high performance culture as well as performing professional tasks.
- ✔ **Leadership sets the example.** If the top executives don't take people competencies seriously, it's going to be difficult for anyone else to do so.
- ✔ **Celebrate milestones, create rituals for transitions, and debrief significant events.** Honoring or discussing major transitions can prevent disruptions in morale and productivity. This is especially important for high growth organizations as well as those experiencing significant change.
- ✔ **Help people use inherent talents and interests.** Connect interests to enterprise objectives, de-emphasize moving up the promotion ladder as the only means of achievement. Yes, people want advancement, but increasingly what people will DEMAND is that their work be meaningful and interesting. Helping people find the right fit is a great move to increase productivity and employee retention.
- ✔ **Don't let people get away with toxic behavior.** Avoid rewarding results that are obtained leaving a wake of human destruction - ultimately you will strip mine the value of the company, good people will leave, and the remaining are as likely to sabotage efforts as work toward organizational goals. Consider for your organization a formal policy of civility.
- ✔ **Seek and support opportunities for people to find fun and humor in their work.** Playing well involves at least some element of ...well, play.



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