



The Psychology of Top Performers

Catalyst Strategies Group, Inc.
276 Fifth Avenue
Suite 1001
New York, NY 10001-4509
212-576-1410
www.catsg.com

The Psychology of Top Performers

Richard W. Molden, CPBA, CPVA, CAIA

Steven M. Swavely, Ph.D.

We all know who they are. Those top performers that can be found in every organization. Those people who seem to be able to rise to the top no matter what obstacles they face along the way. They are the ones who consistently meet and exceed performance goals, sales quotas, and management expectations. How do they do it? Are they more intelligent than the average person? Do they possess some mystical abilities the majority lack? Or, have they just been lucky, winning the “lottery of life” by always being in the right place at the right time. As we have worked as business consultants and performance coaches, our combined backgrounds as a psychologist and experienced business executive have provided us with a unique opportunity to examine and identify the important traits of our most successful clients. What we have discovered goes beyond just a list of “things to do” to be a top performer. Success is not an accident, and is not restricted to only those who possess exceptional intelligence. Success is the result of deciding exactly what your goals are, and then focusing your actions so that you consistently move in the direction of those goals. That seems simple enough, and it is. The problem arises in the *obstacles* one encounters as they pursue their goals. Our research of top performers shows that what they have mastered is the ability to act in a paradoxical manner; that is, they possess seemingly contradictory psychological and behavioral traits. However, the good news for anyone aspiring “to something better” is that top performers are made, not born. The psychological factors and behavioral characteristics that make up top performers, and which leads them towards their goals and on to success are all learnable. In this article we’ve summarized the most critical psychological and behavioral traits top performers possess and utilize to effectively manage the inevitable obstacles they encounter as they strive to achieve their goals. Many of these traits are interrelated and overlap to some degree. But by making an effort to incorporate all 10 psychological and behavioral traits into your own approach to your career and life goals, you will maximize your potential for success and be identified as a top performer.

1. Top performers have developed the habit of positive thinking, while at the same time retaining the capability of recognizing the limitations and reality of every challenge and opportunity. That is, they seek out and are able to identify the

positive aspects present in any challenge or problem, and focus their attention and actions around those positive aspects. At the same time they remain aware of, and investigate, those things that concern them about the problem or challenge. As a result, they are frequently able to recognize and develop opportunity *around, and in spite of*, existing problems. Where others only see and focus on the difficulties, top performers seek out the opportunity that exists in those perceived difficulties. Or, as frequently happens, they discover that the *perceived* difficulties were in fact misperceptions or grossly exaggerated.

In psychology, it is a well-established fact that the nature of your thinking will drive your perceptions and have an effect on the actions you take. This, in turn will have a profound influence on the outcomes you achieve. Quite simply, if you will make an effort to identify and focus on the positives as you confront any challenge, you will be more inclined to take positive action that results in a *full and complete* exploration of the problem and the opportunity that exists within that challenge or problem. Focus only on the negatives initially perceived, and you will never get past the point of seeing only the difficulties, and thus never see the opportunity that can be found within that problem. Many individuals miss out on excellent opportunities, or let achievable goals fall simply because they had negative preconceived ideas or perceptions that prevented them from taking a positive, proactive, approach. In the end, it is balancing the “direction” of your thinking (positive vs. negative), not your intelligence level or degree of business savvy, that is much more important in identifying and being able to take advantage of great opportunities that exist in every problem or challenge you face.

2. To be a top performer, you must be persistent in your efforts to achieve your goals, yet flexible in your thinking as you pursue these goals. Never give up on trying to achieve your primary goals. However, there is much more to this than is suggested in the old saying, “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again”. The type of persistence that top performers have mastered does not involve simple repetitive actions. It has been said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results is the true definition of insanity. Individuals who are top performers have mastered an ability to be persistent in pursuing their primary goals, but still be flexible in their thinking about what methods and vehicles can be used to reach those goals. They never stop learning – mistakes and “dead end” action plans are viewed simply as opportunities to learn what does not work or what is not right for them, and they adjust their approach accordingly. That is, if one approach or strategy that initially looked very

promising turns out to be a dead end, you must use that information as a starting point for developing a new strategy and implementing the next action plan.

An important adjunct to this trait of top performers is that they have specific, *written* goals, a specific *written* plan for achieving those goals, and a specific *written* time frame in which the goals will be completed. Their action plan and time frame may be adjusted according to results obtained, but the goals remain. From a psychological perspective, the importance of writing out goals, actions plans, and time frame seems to be, at least in part, that such action makes these things a focus of attention in the individuals mind. They become important within both the conscious and unconscious, making the identification of opportunities and initiation of actions that will help achieve the goals more probable. Further, these written goals, action plans, and time frame become the top performer's "system" for achieving their objectives. They simply follow their "system" until their objective is obtained.

Top performers genuinely accept the idea that success is a journey, not a destination. Writing down goals provides a clear road map of where they are heading. Writing down action plans provides a clear plan for getting there, and written time frames allow them to track their progress. This serves to increase the level of awareness for events, opportunities, and actions that can carry them closer to their intended goal. There is even evidence that *written* goals produce this elevated level of awareness through some very specific neuro-chemical effects on the brain. But, those details are the subject of another article.

3. Top performers take the time to get the facts, but at the same time they are action oriented. This characteristic is multifaceted. The first facet involves gathering the facts from those *who know the facts*. Top performers don't confuse "people *they know*" with "people *who know*." While it is admittedly much more difficult, it is also much more effective to find competent people and build trust with them, rather than going to people you trust, but who have no real competence or knowledge in the area you are seeking information. Many potential top performers never even get off the starting block because they gathered their facts from all the wrong people. If you want to know about a particular problem or challenge, you talk with people who have dealt with that type of problem or similar challenge in the past. Don't make the mistake of seeking advice only from within your circle of contacts, just because you trust those contacts and they happen to have been successful in some other situation or circumstance. Top performers recognize there is no better information than that which they will receive from

talking with people who have successfully dealt with the challenge, or similar challenge they are facing.

The next facet of this trait is that top performers are able to recognize when they have gathered all the relevant information possible, and they avoid “analysis paralysis.” That is, they recognize that there are *always* going to be some unknowns in confronting a challenge and making decisions. The person who waits for the perfect solution with no risk and no unknown factors will wait a lifetime. Top performers are able to recognize when the information gathering process is producing diminishing returns for the effort expended. It is then that he or she must make a decision.

The next and final facet is the most critical – to act on that decision. The top performer is someone who, once all relevant information has been gathered is able to quickly come to a decision, and then act promptly. A common trap that must be avoided at this juncture is what is called the “turning of the stones” syndrome. That is, even though all relevant data has been gathered, analyzed, and a positive decision made, the person is unable to act for fear that he has missed some detail. Rather than moving forward with their decision, they become stuck examining more options. Top performers learn to recognize and avoid this pattern.

4. Top performers must take risks, but they are not gamblers. The perception that successful people are those who have taken extraordinary gambles with their business or financial decisions is simply not true. Top performers recognize there is no opportunity where there is no risk, but they focus their efforts on eliminating all the “downside” risks possible and then ensuring they surround themselves with the right people to *manage* those risks that cannot be eliminated. Risk management in combination with reasonable risk tolerance is the hallmark of top performers. Top performers accomplish risk management by having a thorough understanding of their own strengths, weaknesses, skills, values, attitudes, personality traits, and interests. This information is then used to help make decisions regarding which goals to pursue, what strategies to implement, which mentor to seek out or which employees and consultants to hire that will compliment their own strengths, and compensate for their own weaknesses. They recognize that what might be a risky venture for one individual may not be for a team of individuals simply because of the synergy that is created by complementary differences in their skills, values, personality traits, and strengths. Risk is controlled, tempered and managed when your own strengths and weaknesses, along

with those of your team members, are identified and considered as you pursue your goals.

5. Top performers have high levels of self-confidence, but seek the assistance of experts whenever available. They are confident in their own skills and capabilities, but also recognize the value others with specific areas of expertise can bring to the equation. They keep an open mind with regard to input from others, provided they are knowledgeable (see point #3). But, most importantly, they recognize that it is impossible to know in advance all the obstacles and challenges they will face. What they *are* certain of is their own capacity to handle and deal with those issues and problems as they arise, no matter what they might be. They do not expect to be able to anticipate all problems that may be associated with any particular challenge or problem before those problems arrive – they just expect that they will find a way to deal with them, either through their own efforts or by calling upon the expertise of others. More and more, today’s top performers are utilizing a performance coach to assist them with achieving their business as well as personal goals. However, it is important to identify a coach who has a process and system for developing a clear understanding of you and your strengths and weaknesses as they relate to your goals (see point #4)

6. Top performers do not follow the crowd, but they recognize the advantages of utilizing existing successful systems whenever possible. Similar to point #5, top performers forge their own path as they pursue goals, but they have no desire to “reinvent the wheel” if that is not necessary. Utilizing existing successful methods and proven systems is part of every top performer’s repertoire, which catapults them to success. A quality performance coach can assist with the identification of systems and resources that will compliment the top performer’s strengths, support their areas of weakness and serve as a springboard to meet their goals. Top performers recognize the value of being part of such an interdependent system which can lead to *interdevelopmental* relationships that will not only allow for tremendous creativity, it will spawn it.

7. Top performers let emotions and intuition guide them, but avoid making strictly emotional decisions. They recognize that logic and fact gathering alone do not lead to the best decisions. Rather, a combination of logical decision-making processes utilizing “data”, *in combination* with guidance from intuition and emotion are most effective. However, the order these processes are used is critical. Top performers will start with the logical and pragmatic approach to investigating opportunities and options,

and then only after all data has been gathered do they let their emotions and intuitions assist in the final stages of any decision making process. The individual who starts any decision making process by responding to their emotional reactions and emotional appeal, and then uses logic as a means of trying to make their final decision, risk falling into a trap which we call a cognitive illusion. That is, after the emotional decision is made, the individual believes he is *confirming* his decision with data, when in reality what he is actually doing is attempting to *justify* his decision. The differences are critical. Starting with logic and then utilizing emotion and intuition to guide the final decision produces sound decisions. Starting with emotion and intuition and then using data to justify a decision only produces the illusion of a sound decision.

How emotions and logic join in the decision making process is affected by each individual's own behavioral traits. Behavioral research has demonstrated that there are four "categories" of human behavioral responses. While given different labels by different behavioral researchers throughout time, there is a universal finding that each of these 4 traits can be found in varying degrees in everyone. While it is beyond the scope of this article to give a detailed discussion of these 4 traits, it is important to recognize, that how you approach important decisions is affected by your behavioral profile. Different behavioral profiles must confront the challenge of making sound decisions in a variety of different manners. For some individuals, the sequence of logical data gathering followed by utilization of emotion and intuition will occur naturally. For others, following that sequence will require some effort and possibly coaching from a knowledgeable consultant. Failure to fully understand yourself and your own decision making processes places you at risk of a cognitive illusion as you face challenges and decision making dilemmas. This is an example of a risk that can be "managed" (see point #4) by utilizing a consultant with expertise in this area (see point #5).

8. Top performers pursue their business goals consistently and with zeal yet they recognize the long-term value of being able to live balanced lives that will ultimately prevent stagnation and burnout. As they go through the process of setting goals, they keep an eye on the issues of "life style," attitudes, personal values, and their personal strengths (see point #4) as important variables. To focus all energy and attention exclusively on just business goals can lead to financial success, but still leave you unfulfilled with regard to your *ultimate* goals and objectives. Top performers avoid this by having a clear vision of all of their goals, needs and expectations (see point #2). As business consultants we are constantly amazed at the limited foresight many

individuals have given not only to their business or career goals, but also to their personal “non-business” goals. Top performers are sure that the business, career and financial goals they are pursuing are in line with their attitudes, values, strengths, and life style they desire. If you have a clear picture of *all* of your goals, not just your business goals, you are much more likely to achieve them. Top performers will, as Stephan Covey advises, “begin with the end in mind”. That is, create a picture of your desired future, then build and pursue your goals around that image. This is the key to the persistence and endurance of goal pursuit seen in top performers.

9. Top performers constantly challenge themselves and push the limits of their experience and skills, but use their current interests and skills as a starting point for setting their goals. They are not blind to examining potential goals and opportunities outside the limiting domain of their current interests and skills. They recognize the potential to discover new interests as part of the pursuit of a goal. This requires personal growth and a willingness to go beyond current comfort zones (see point #2). Some people are content to live their lives without any change or challenge from one day to the next. The majority of people go through life confronting challenge only when it is forced upon them by circumstances. Top performers seek out challenges and enjoy the thrill of having new experiences and learning new skills. They are able to turn difficulties into opportunities (see point #1) and are on a constant journey of self understanding and improvement in order to effectively manage the risks they take to become top performers (see point # 4). Again, remember, being a top performer is a journey, not a destination.

10. Top Performers are ethical and operate from a solid personal foundation, yet are aggressive and proactive in the pursuit of their goals. They completely understand the difference between taking advantage of opportunity verses taking advantage of people. They approach *all* aspects of their life with vigor, aggression, and in a proactive way. They constantly push their own limits, but never in a manner that takes advantage of others. In fact, they desire that others share in their own success and excitement for life. The interdependent and interdevelopmental culture that exists among top performers leads to not only short-term success, but long-term success and fulfillment as well. Somewhere along the way in our society we developed the tendency to see the ethical as weak and ineffective within a business setting, while equating the “no holds barred” approach with success. While the latter approach can

lead to short term success, it is the individuals and companies that operate on the former that have sustained, long term success, and who emerge as true top performers.

Each of the psychological and behavioral characteristics discussed can be developed and utilized by anyone desiring to become a top performer and interested in maximizing their potential for long-term success. Most will find that they already possess at least some of the traits, but will need to develop others. For some, just becoming aware of the need to develop and nurture certain characteristics is all that will be required to have the full set of psychological and behavioral characteristics needed to rise to the top. For others, utilizing a knowledgeable performance coach is the most effective and efficient way to ensure you fully develop all the skills you need to effectively handle challenges and possess the paradoxical traits required of a top performer.

About the authors:

Mr. Molden is the Managing Member and Dr. Swavely is a Consultant at Performance Development Group, LLC, leaders in assessment tools and expertise dedicated to developing high performance people and teams, and a value-added strategic partner of Catalyst Strategies Group, Inc. Growware™ is a trademark of Performance Development Group, LLC,

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