

Social Performance Management: Talent management insights inspired by the Tour de France

Steven T. Hunt, Ph.D.

Click to follow my posts: www.linkedin.com/in/steventhunt

The 105th Tour de France bicycle race ended with a first time win for Geraint Thomas. Most of the focus in the Tour is around the performance of individual riders. Yet riders point out that their success is a team effort. One rider wins, but their ability to win is a team accomplishment. The interaction between individual and team performance in the Tour de France has parallels in the corporate world of performance management. This article summarizes some of these insights drawn from a new paper called “The Peloton model of social performance management”.

People work in teams. Who we work with has a major impact on our performance. Maximizing the performance of individuals requires creating group cultures that unlock and inspire people’s full potential. The drive and skills of people is influenced by the drive and skills of the people around them. What we believe is impressive, possible, or simply expected at work is defined in part based on what our peers at work are accomplishing.

Social performance management (SPM) describes methods that focus on managing individuals taking into account the degree to which their performance is defined, influenced, and constrained by the people they work with. It is different from many performance management methods that focus on individuals without considering how their performance is affected by other people. A core tenant of SPM is that to create a high performing organization companies must manage employees in the context of their work groups. It is not enough to focus on individual performance in isolation. Performance management methods must take group dynamics into account to be fully effective. On the other hand, we cannot change the behavior of groups without changing the behavior of the individuals in the group. This raises the challenge of how to manage individual employee performance in a group context. This requires doing two things. Effectively categorizing employees based on their level of performance relative to the group. And then managing them appropriately based on their performance category.

The “peloton” model of SPM notes that the performance of employees often follows the distribution of riders in a long bike race. The peloton is the core group of riders that forms in bike races such as the Tour de France. Both bike racers and employees can be divided into five categories that reflect different levels of performance:

Break-away performance –riders well out in front of the peloton. These people’s performance is often orders of magnitude higher than average performers. Break-away contributors tend to be highly self-driven. They hate anything that prevents them from being productive. This includes working with low performing people. Managing break-away contributors is about recognizing them for their contributions and giving them resources that help them be more successful.

Leading edge performance – riders at the front of the peloton. These are individuals whose performance consistently exceeds expectations but who are not achieving break away performance levels. Even if these employees never achieve break away performance, they set the pace in terms of defining what good performance looks like in the company. Managing leading-edge contributors is about letting them know they are viewed as being above average and investing to help them reach even higher levels of performance.

Solid performance – riders in the middle of the peloton. These employees are good employees doing good work. Many employees move back and forth between this category and leading-edge performers. A few may even reach the break-away performer level. Managing solid contributors is about showing appreciation for what they contribute and giving them access to development resources for those interested in getting to higher levels of performance.

Trailing performance – riders at the back of the peloton. These are employees who are struggling in their role. Managing trailing contributors is about providing a path for improvement and giving them confidence in their ability to get back on track. If trailing contributors are unwilling or unable to improve their performance, then they should be moved to another role where they can be more successful. Tolerating trailing contributors erodes the commitment and performance of the entire work group. The issue is not just with their performance. It is about ensuring that high performing employees do not have to work with low performing colleagues for an extended length of time.

Stragglng performance – riders who have fallen well behind the peloton. These are employees whose performance is counterproductive. Their performance is undermining the success of their colleagues. It is unproductive and unfair to force other people to rely on them. Managing these employees involves being very clear on what they need to improve, provide them with resources to improve, and then hold them accountable for improving within a set amount of time.

The speed of the riders at the front of a bike race like the Tour de France is influenced in part by the speed of the riders behind them. This is particularly true for the bulk of riders who form the peloton. The same is true for companies. How an organization addresses low performance impacts the behavior and commitment of its high performers. People draw energy and ideas from being around others who share similar passions for their work. They lose energy if they are forced to work with people that do not share their dedication and focus on doing the best job possible. If you want to increase the results achieved by top performers, then the best place to start may be through increasing the level of results achieved by average and low performers.

For a more thorough discussion of these concepts please read the recently released paper “The Peloton model of social performance management”.