



WHITE PAPER



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OPTIMIZING YOUR LEADERSHIP PIPELINESM FOR: **INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS**

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- > Challenges facing individual contributors
- > The individual contributor Success ProfileSM
- > Assessing and developing non-management professionals
- > Common categories of concern at this level

Individual contributors—also sometimes called team members—outnumber leaders in your organization, likely by a large margin. They satisfy your customers, negotiate with your suppliers, create and support your latest innovations, and provide the manpower for your most pressing business strategies. When most people think about individual contributors they tend to think about these individuals advancing their careers by moving into leadership positions. While this is true for many individual contributors, it is certainly not true for all. In a recent study of individual contributors and team members, we found that 62 percent of these individuals do not aspire to a leadership position. The challenge for HR professionals is to provide development and career advancement opportunities not just for emerging leaders, but also for those who wish to advance their careers through the specialist, professional, and expert ranks.

Successful companies are those that determine the appropriate selection and promotion methods for both of these categories of individual contributors. They also need to find more efficient and effective ways to take their existing individual contributors to higher levels of skill and competence to deal with the complex and ever-changing business challenges of today's business environment.

Exceptional performers in this category need to exhibit skills in three key areas, which we call the “high-performance imperatives”:

- > Influence through personal effectiveness
- > Partner with others
- > Build customer loyalty

The ability of your individual contributors to fulfill these high-performance imperatives will make the difference between strategy realization and underperformance.

CHALLENGES

Individual contributors may not hold formal leadership roles, but they still have a great deal of influence over the ultimate success of your business. To be effective, individual contributors need to work as part of a team, and that means interacting with colleagues in a positive and productive way. Some will step up to informal leadership roles, managing parts of a process or a workgroup with a specific mission, while other top performers want to make the most of their unique technical expertise.

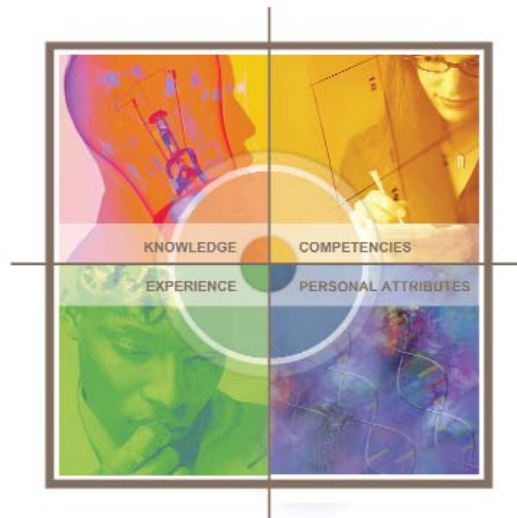
To realize the best performance from individual contributors, organizations need to ensure these valuable associates successfully navigate beyond the following challenges.

- > Ineffective communication, in one-to-one, or group situations.
- > Offering poor feedback or no feedback to others, or failing to act on feedback received from others.
- > Inability or poor ability to navigate beyond conflict.
- > Aversion to change.
- > Working in isolation, without a network of colleagues who can positively contribute to individual goals.
- > Struggling to exceed customer expectations to increase their loyalty (with internal or external clientele).
- > Skepticism to ideas, approaches, or opinions that are different from one's own.
- > Insufficient teamwork skills.

THE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTOR SUCCESS PROFILESM

A successful individual contributor will have a unique combination of skills, knowledge, experience, and personality attributes (See Figure 1). Together these are the components of a Success ProfileSM.

FIGURE 1: COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESS PROFILE



Competencies

For individual contributors, important competencies or skills include:

- > Maintaining effectiveness when experiencing major changes in work responsibilities or environment and adjusting effectively to work within new work structures, processes, requirements, or cultures.
- > Effectively meeting customer needs by building productive customer relationships and taking responsibility for customer satisfaction and loyalty.
- > Clearly conveying information and ideas through a variety of media to individuals or groups in a manner that engages the audience and helps them understand and retain the message
- > Actively participating as a member of a team to move the team toward the completion of goals.
- > Identifying and understanding issues, problems, and opportunities; comparing data from different sources to draw conclusions; using effective approaches for choosing a course of action or developing appropriate solutions and taking action that is consistent with available facts, constraints, and probable consequences.
- > Being proactive and taking prompt action to accomplish objectives and achieve goals beyond what is required.
- > Accomplishing tasks by considering all areas involved (no matter how small); accurately checking processes and tasks and being watchful over a period of time.
- > Establishing courses of action for self and others to ensure that work is completed efficiently.

Knowledge

Individual contributors need:

- > Technical and professional skills.
- > In-depth knowledge of their business unit's products, services, and customers.
- > Knowledge of business processes, and an understanding of how they contribute to the success of their teams and workgroups.
- > Knowledge of their team's goals, and how those goals fit into the overall corporate strategy.

Experience

One way to look at experience is, "what an individual has done." We add the qualifier "successfully" to the end of this definition to distinguish individual contributors who might have years of experience but are less than effective from those that we see as exceptional performers. Individual contributors may not be formal leaders, but one can still consider common informal leadership experiences such as:

- > Working on a team.
- > Successfully dealing with internal and external customers.
- > Exposure to concepts that are appropriate to the work, such as Lean or Six Sigma.
- > Some individual contributors may also be informal leaders, heading up workgroups or task forces (but not directly managing others).

Personal Attributes

Exceptional performers should exhibit the following attributes:

- > Works well with others.
- > Sustains a positive outlook to approach challenges with confidence and realistic optimism.

- > A drive to succeed.
- > Demonstrates discipline with a structured approach to decision making and the ability to manage one's own workload.
- > Maintains high work and ethical standards.
- > Inspires confidence and elicits trust in others.
- > Demonstrates a continuous learning orientation and rapidly applies new information to work issues and problems.

Success ProfilesSM paint the target. There are a variety of means to develop and confirm them. An efficient means involves the use of the online job analysis advice and tools contained in DDI's Success Profiles: Navigator[®]. This software guides and documents the process from start to finish.

ASSESSING INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

Once a Success Profile is determined, a range of assessment tools help organizations measure an individual against the competencies, knowledge, experience, and personal attributes defined by the Profile. We commonly see three distinct reasons that prompt organizations to evaluate individual contributors, which are:

1. To assess how an individual is performing in their current role.
2. To uncover leadership potential and the likelihood of leadership growth. (This reason is covered in our paper addressing aspiring and incumbent frontline leaders.)
3. To determine readiness for and fit with a new role, job, or job family.

In this section, we'll detail a number of assessment options to assess performance and readiness.

Assessing Performance

Individual contributors need (and want) to know how they are performing, and what they can do to be better. Two tools stand out to accomplish these goals:

- > **Performance Management.** At this level, we strongly advocate the use of a solid performance management system to assess individual contributors' performance. A good system will include goals for the team member, competencies, and development plans.

DDI's Maximizing Performance® system provides these three essential components. Each plan is designed to spell out goals at the beginning of a review cycle, and those goals will be specific, measurable, realistic, and attainable in the given amount of time (typically a year), and relevant to the key function of the team member's role. Each plan includes competencies appropriate to this level, such as Adaptability, Building Customer Loyalty, or Technical/Professional Knowledge and Skills. Development plans help individual contributors gain new skills, or strengthen and improve existing skills.

Individual contributors and their managers should regularly create a development plan that align and set expectations. When it's time to revisit the plan to assess performance, the pair should review the plan together. During these meetings, the team member receives valuable feedback from his or her leader, and at the end of the conversation should clearly under-

stand how well he or she is performing and what steps to take to be successful moving ahead.

- > **Multirater assessments.** At this level, a 360° feedback tool helps individual contributors identify strengths and areas for development based on feedback from managers, peers, internal partners, external suppliers, and customers (as appropriate). DDI's Leadership Mirror® effectively gathers feedback online, and the Targeted Feedback® approach takes 360° a step further by identifying the top three strengths and development areas so individuals know where to focus their development efforts. These are highly cost-effective tools to assess competencies at this level.

Assessing Readiness

It's important to be able to assess the readiness of individual contributors to take on expanded roles. Some will aspire to lead, but more often, individual contributors want more challenging roles that are not formal management ones (e.g., moving from 'engineer' to 'senior engineer'). Organizations need confidence that a person is ready to step into a new role, get up to speed quickly, and deliver good performance without a huge learning curve. With this in mind, three key contextual variables must be considered when choosing a tool to assess readiness:

- > **Risk:** What is the danger associated with a poor fit between the individual and his or her new position?

- > **Volume:** How many people need to be assessed?
- > **Role:** What tools (simulations, exercises, surveys, tests, etc.) will produce the most relevant information to use in making a selection decision for a specific position?

Often these variables shift in priority depending upon the stage in the selection process. At the top of the selection funnel, numerous people must be assessed, and the readiness assessment tool needs to uncover information that is fair, easy to compare, and useful in the selection process. At this stage cost effectiveness is important, and automation is a way to achieve this, especially for large groups. Screening assessments like DDI's tests and inventories are efficient, lower-cost tools that can be used to assess larger numbers of individuals.

In later stages of the selection process, the focus shifts towards risk and role, and getting sufficient information to ensure a sound hiring decision. This requires conducting behavioral assessments, interviews and simulations that give you insight into how individuals have performed or will perform in job situations.

- > **Tests and inventories.** Using a test or inventory is helpful to identify individuals who are ready to move to higher roles. For example, DDI's Team Member, Professional, Customer Service, Sales, and Support Services (for Health Care organizations) Career Batteries (and Engagement Readiness Index which is

included with all Career Batteries) will uncover core skills and attributes required for success in individual contributor positions. These instruments are easy to administer and provide valuable insight. They can be used with behavioral interviewing to collect more detailed information about a candidate.

- > **Behavioral interviewing.** Targeted Selection[®] behavioral interviewing is an effective tool to gather information on experiences, motivations, and aspirations. It's a proven solution that examines past behavior in order to predict future behavior. Questions posed support the specific competencies important to an organization's Success ProfilesSM for individual contributors, as detailed on page two.
- > **Behavioral assessments.** Behavioral assessments are future-focused, used to evaluate the skills and readiness of both potential leaders and individual contributors wishing to advance into a non-leadership role. DDI's Assessing Talent[®] platforms use modular, web-delivered simulations designed to diagnose the development needs of individual contributors. When used with tests and behavioral interviews, this approach yields the most detailed information about a candidate.

ONBOARDING

Part of a successful transition to a new level of leadership is successful onboarding and orientation.

According to a recent Aberdeen study, the most important goals identified for onboarding are to ensure that employees are engaged and assimilated into the company's culture and to make them as productive as quickly as possible. (The Aberdeen Group, *Onboarding: The First Line of Engagement*, February, 2010.)

DDI's *Strong Start*SM course helps to do all of the above. It provides new leaders and/or new hires with insights and a process so they can begin contributing quickly, get and keep them engaged in their job, and position them for current and future success within the organization. There are three strategies for successful onboarding:

- > **Clear expectations**—it's important to understand specific information about job responsibilities, why those responsibilities are important to the organization, and how they relate to the organization's key business drivers. Also, how success will be defined and measured.
- > **Effective business networks/
Courageous Networking**—Seeking the help of peers and others in the organization with assignments and projects will accelerate speed to proficiency more than any other activity. But seeking is only half of the networking; the other half is opening a mutual channel of sharing.
- > **Powerful development plan**—This is important to establish from Day One. It helps to build confidence, should focus on leveraging strengths, and should cover areas that need to be addressed in order to become fully proficient in the job.

DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

DDI's research shows that effective individual contributors influence through personal power, partner effectively with others, and are at the front line of building customer loyalty. But our research also shows that just half of those surveyed feel they are "very good" or "excellent" at interpersonal skills such as these. Development programs aimed at this level are important. They must provide workable solutions for everyday and long-term business needs with these skills in mind and should focus on behavior change and competency development.

DDI research also shows that a variety of methodologies have the greatest impact on learning and development. Learners acquire skills and abilities through fast-paced, engaging, interactive activities such as simulations, exercises, learning maps, discovery learning, and job-relevant case studies. The right combination of classroom and web-based training, combined with online performance support and on-the-job learning experiences, will lead to a higher level of application, satisfaction with learning, and proficiency. Mixed methods also can reduce the cost of training. Several solutions play a part in developing essential skills in individual contributors.

> **Training and Development.**

DDI offers training through our Interaction Management[®]: Exceptional Performers (IM:ExP) series. Topics support the competencies and skills found in a Success ProfileSM, including communication, building strategic working relationships, contributing to team

success, managing conflict, networking, leveraging diversity, adaptability, and building customer loyalty.

Some courses from our development series for leaders (Interaction Management®: Exceptional Leaders . . . Extraordinary Results®) address additional skills and can be successfully leveraged for individual contributors.

> **Online Performance Support.**

Outside of training, leaders often need help to tackle a specific challenge, or to revisit and refresh the skills they already learned in training. Many organizations offer an online library of performance support, such as DDI's OPAL®, so individuals have 24/7 access to just-in-time support. OPAL includes information, action planners, assessments, worksheets, performance tools, and videos that enable individuals to take charge of their own development or address problems that arise on the job.

On-the-job Learning Experiences.

Blended training programs offer the optimal mix of classroom and web-based training, online performance support, and on-the-job learning experiences to reduce overall cost and reach broader populations.

COMMON CLIENT SCENARIOS

While every client and every client request is unique, the following categories represent typical challenges that clients look to DDI to address for individual contributors.

> **Building Advanced Interpersonal Skills**

Interpersonal skills are critical foundational skills for all individuals in the organization. Effective interpersonal skills enable exceptional performers to work within and across teams, and to interact effectively with vendors and customers. Embracing change, navigating beyond conflict, listening, giving and receiving feedback, and networking are some of the key skills required for individuals to increase their performance and contribute to the success of the organization.

> **Optimizing Team Success**

The majority of individual contributors self-describe their role as being a 'team member.' This is due to how work is organized in many companies today. Individual contributors function as members of both intact work groups and cross-functional teams. The ability of these individuals to understand and be effective in the team is critical to their success in their current roles and to their ability to advance within the organization.

> **Building Business Networks**

Networking is more important now than ever before. Today's jobs are more complex and demanding, increasing the need for information and expertise from diverse contacts across, and outside the organization. Effective networking skills allow exceptional performers to build

strong business networks that contribute to individual success and enhance collaboration across the organization.

> **Creating Customer Loyalty**

Loyal customers who exhibit the three R's of customer loyalty—they return, they refer, and they relate—are the key to success for every organization. Individuals at this level of the Leadership Pipeline are the most likely to be the ones who are managing these important points of contact for the organization, and their ability to build and sustain customer loyalty creates a sustainable competitive advantage for the organization.

The Leadership Pipeline doesn't start flowing until assessment and development are connected. Whether an organization is developing mastery in individual contributors for excellence in their current role, or accelerating their development into leadership roles or higher-level individual contributor roles, assessment combined with comprehensive development planning and execution results in individual and organizational performance above expectations.

For additional thought leadership and other white papers in the "Optimizing Your Leadership Pipeline" series, go to www.ddiworld.com/leadershippipeline.

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