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Glenn C. Altschuler Ph.D.  This Is America

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Working on How You Work

Practices that enhance on the job performance.
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For more than a century, experts on individual and organizational behavior have tried to account for differences in performance at work. They have measured the impact of many factors, including innate talent, work ethic, institutional structures and incentives, inspirational leaders, and industry-specific conditions. And they have identified ways for individuals to work smarter, including prioritizing, setting clear goals, delegating, networking and collaborating.

In Great at Work, Morten Hansen, a professor of management at the University of California, Berkeley, adds significantly to our understanding of job performance – and satisfaction – in an increasingly competitive workplace. Drawing on recently published empirical studies, in depth interviews with 120 professionals, and his own comprehensive survey of 5,000 supervisors and employees, Hansen has identified seven practices that, he maintains, have enhanced on-the-job performance.
Supervisors and their direct reports, Morten indicates, can and should shed some tasks, and then obsess about the remaining areas in their portfolios. They can and should redesign work; learn and adapt as they go along; match passion and purpose; be forceful champions; challenge colleagues (and conventional wisdom) and then stop second-guessing to fully implement decisions. They can and should engage in disciplined collaboration, with every member of the adequately-resourced team willing and able to deliver measurable results.

Some of Hansen’s principles, which are reinforced by the inspiring achievements of a high school principal, a sushi chef, and a poor farmer in India, may seem obvious. Some of the terms he uses, such as “passion,” “purpose,” and “diverse experiences” may seem a bit vague. Some of his recommendations may be a lot more difficult to implement than they appear to be in Great at Work. And on one occasion, Hansen appears to endorse “borderline unethical tactics” because they worked.

That said, Hansen highlights hidden in plain sight practices that ought to be reconsidered. A failure to start with values rather than productivity goals, he demonstrates, has led doctors to measure success by the number of patient visits rather than the enhancement of health and hospitals to wake up patients at night for blood tests.

Hansen also integrates basic psychological precepts into his analysis. Preoccupation with our own objectives, he points out, often serve as obstacles to advancing our agenda. Cognitive empathy, the capacity and willingness to understand another person’s beliefs and behavior, is a key to success in all of our personal and professional lives. Figure out what is behind the positions of colleagues, Hansen writes, “and you can take steps to surmount them.”

To coax co-workers to speak candidly at meetings, supervisors must create a climate of psychological safety. Dolf van den Brink, a rising star at Heineken, Hansen reveals, went so far as to put 2x3 cards on the table. A red card declared “Challenge, Have Another Solution.” A green card opined, “All in – Ask Me Why!” A gray card cautioned “Shiny Object Alert, Get Back On Track.” And anyone around the table could toss a toy horse at a speaker who was belaboring his point and “beating a dead horse.” The tactic worked, Hansen reports. As robust discussions became the norm, the props disappeared.

At times, Great at Work oversells the potential impact of its seven practices and the degree to which they challenge or “upend conventional thinking.” Nonetheless, his findings, bolstered as they are by a massive and statistically rigorous study that included different kinds of for-profit companies, should command the attention of those of us who want to reengineer our work lives, reduce burnout, improve performance and job satisfaction. And to his credit, Hansen advises his readers to “take small incremental steps at first and keep at it.”