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# Slaying the Slacker

Improving Underachievers' Productivity

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## Introduction

One of the biggest challenges a manager will face is achieving and maintaining acceptable levels of performance from each individual in the department. Dreaded performance evaluations, corrective actions and communicating opportunities for improvement come with this challenging terrain. Navigation can be improved by the use of the right mindset, management tools and processes as described in the pages to follow. Identifying certain underachievers can be gold nuggets taken from the continual stream of the organization's employees, while other underachievers can be that piece of carbon that, regardless of the pressure, refuses to become a diamond. Success lies in finding and harnessing the right precious type of human capital.

## Slackers come in all shapes and sizes

One of the most important and priority tasks of any manager is to assess the individual workers in the department. Out of this assessment (which is typically required annually by HR departments but should be done perpetually) comes the usual bell curve of productivity and the age-old dilemma of how to move the lower quadrant up to the next. It is nice to think that this process would identify the gross underachievers (aka 'slackers') and the next step of the scientific equation after problem identification could then be initiated. But in reality slackers can exist in any of the quadrants. Slackers, for the purpose of this essay, are defined as any individual who is grossly underachieving to the point that it is detrimental to the health and happiness not only of the department but of the individual as well. Several well-documented studies have shown a happy/satisfied employee is a contagiously productive employee, so a potential high performer doing 'acceptable' average work can be more detrimental in the long run than the lower quadrant employee. The most valuable lesson to come from identifying and comparing current productivity to potential is the relationship with the individual and the skill inventory now at your and your organization's disposal.

## Solicit and share ideas

It's simple, soliciting ideas triggers other ideas. Sadly the mechanics of the usual work environment do not usually foster a sharing of ideas. That's why the informal setting of a trip is so important for "testing the waters" and beginning the process for recruiting support for ideas that may bring about organizational

changes. All members must remain open and non-judgmental to new ideas so that no one is intimidated to share. And, the open sharing of ideas will help combat the tendency of different departments to go their own way with little or no knowledge of what others may be doing along the same line.

Each member of the team must personally participate which will help to demonstrate that everyone's ideas are valued and will be taken seriously. Make sure to select a comfortable, distraction-free environment. A loud and busy restaurant will only impede communication and lead the group off course. Perhaps most importantly and often hardest to do is to withhold all criticism of ideas presented.

## Identify the sheep in wolf's clothing

Just like all of us have personal closets we would rather not have the world peek into, so might many employees like to keep their work potential closet to themselves. Being 'outed' might cause them to do more without an immediate increase in pay. Selling 'short term pain for long term gain' is not any easy task for individuals who don't plan their finances beyond one paycheck. Some individuals just have never been taken under a wing and known someone who cared enough to push them to their potential. This is where prudent review of the individual's receptiveness to your coaching will be key in determining which 'sheep projects' to undertake. One key factor is how the individual sees her current position and employer. Is this merely a job or is this a career? Is this the industry of her life's calling or just a job to try out until something better comes along? You will not be able to shepherd all underachieving sheep so use your rod wisely. That is not to say value can not be gained by shepherding individuals. Younger ones, who have not put much thought into these questions, may be the only ones within your flock who are receptive or able to grow. Plus these seeds may germinate years from now, not to mention the intrinsic value received immediately. Time is always well spent when it comes to investing in an employee's growth and future.

## Stake them out to see if alone or in pairs

Give every slacking wolf the benefit of the doubt initially. Spend enough time to establish a relationship and gain a better understanding so you can better assess the underachieving employees' motives. Previous supervisors may have never done this. A little coaching may be all

that is required. Actually schedule time in your daily planner to be with these individuals.

However, underachieving wolves who desire to remain underachieving wolves are a fact of life. These wolves know that in order to be successful it is best to hunt in groups. As you inventory an individual's productivity, look for relationships to see if others' influences are impacting that individual. Know that all wolf packs have a leader and it is imperative you identify this individual and address those issues first to see if this is impetus enough to show them the error of their ways. Often times as human dynamics prove out, if there is no one following, then the leader will elect to fade back into the background. Going after the weakest wolf will only show the rest that either you do not have enough insight/savvy to know who the leader is or that you are not strong enough to confront him. Either way you lose.

## Separate the pack to see if any can be rehabilitated

Sometimes something as simple as separating certain individuals will help all parties concerned. The individuals who have been and will continue to be followers in life should not be sacrificed along with the leader that chooses to be a martyr. All should be given ample opportunity to turn from their ways. Additional measures should be taken and patience practiced to assist those who were merely drafting off the leader. Some of these individuals if paired with the right peer/employee/leader can become one of your greatest assets. Bear in mind a successful department typically has more followers than leaders in it and identifying good followers is just as crucial as finding good leaders. Just like team chemistry is crucial to a sporting team's success, departmental chemistry is vital also. Five stars on a basketball team means you are four basketballs shy of making everyone happy on the court. The right combination of leaders and 'role' players are what allows teams to win championships. While only the lead dog on a dog sled team has a good view, trying to channel the energy and ambition of a department full of lead dogs can be just as exhausting and lead to the department's underachievement.

## Don't mask your scent, let them know you are coming

**There is no substitute for giving of your time to show you are genuine. These opportunities of**

## sharing feedback are the occasions that need to be documented anyway. When performance evaluation time comes, you have a record of assessing performance all year long and not just in the few weeks prior to the sit-down meeting.

As mentioned before there are underachievers who may not know that they are underachieving or who may have been negatively influenced causing their underachieving. So just going on a slacker safari will show that you are in it just for the sport and not the best interest of the individual and department. This will forever scar your leadership particularly with the ones who remain as well as your peers and supervisor. Nobody wants nor should give a gun to an overzealous hunter. To show that you are not in it for the sport, communicate your expectations and how individuals – especially the underachievers – are measuring up. While expectations can be more overt in their presentation, do not let time constraints or convenience make you think sharing individual feedback can be done in group settings or other places not conducive to constructive 'shepherding'. There is no substitute for giving of your time to show you are genuine. These opportunities of sharing feedback are the occasions that need to be documented anyway. When performance evaluation time comes, you have a record of assessing performance all year long and not just in the few weeks prior to the sit-down meeting. If your organization has evolved to the point of offering customer service or other organizational development education sessions, attendance should be encouraged. Note attendance in the employee's file and ask and look for ways to apply the learning to his environment.

## Let missed deadlines and expectations be your salt block to flush out

Several opportunities of shared communicated expectations and results need to be given before you begin packing your hunting gear. Too often employees are able to hide in the brush of unclear expectations. Involve them in setting goals and expectations and how they will be monitored, then record and update them monthly, whether it be your departmental Balanced Scorecard or just with rudimentary marker on paper graphs where resulting performance is visible for all to see. The key is involvement. No ask, no buy in. Would you want a bull's eye placed on your back like a 'kick me' sign without you knowing it? As repeat offenders

keep showing themselves, have discussions with these individuals that go beyond what is not being performed. Ask the offender what strengths they possess and what type of work they prefer to do. You both may discover that what is really causing the lower performance is misaligned skills. They might be a people person doing back office tasks or vice versa. Again, how that individual sees their current job determines the next step. If it is just a job, giving them their freedom might prove the best use of your and their time. Likewise if their personality is one of not being a servant heart and/or being high maintenance, cut bait. Our own organization has languished over this point and did not progress with customer satisfaction until a commitment to 'hire for attitude, train for skill' was adopted over the previously accepted 'hire for skill, train for attitude.' We too refused to accept what we already knew: a person's personality is mostly established by age six and that we have a greater opportunity teaching an old dog new tricks than trying to change the dog's personality. Expect some short-term staffing pain but also expect long-term staffing and other gains.

## Hunt for survival, not sport

Steps must be taken to show staff that your only goal in addressing any performance 'opportunities' is to have the department functioning at its highest capable levels and to let them know that you will not let a few hold the rest captive. It is for your survival. Managers are expected and held accountable for what they produce or don't produce. Don't be afraid to share this sentiment but be careful that you don't play the administrative 'good cop/bad cop' routine where administration is always the bad guy and you are the innocent good guy. Don't fool yourself. You are administration to your employees and you are part of setting the expectations for which you are held accountable. Take ownership of your department and its performance. You can not expect them not to scapegoat if you are doing it yourself. You will be surprised at the additional increase in respect and resulting performance of your satisfactory staff as well as overachievers when they see you are not afraid to address these issues. A note should be made to ensure clarity. No department should be expected to function at 100 percent all day, every day and you know some days are busier than others. Communicate that you do not expect everyone to be exhausted at the end of every shift. But you do expect an honest day's work and if a person is honest with one's self, he knows if he or others are giving it or not giving it.

## Keep a hunting journal for HR

Since hunting is a regulated sport and rightfully so, not only for leisure but in the business setting, obtaining proper licensure and filling out the proper paper work is crucial. Licensure comes from keeping your human resource department abreast of any situation that might lend itself to giving an employee more severe corrective actions, including granting them their freedom to pursue other opportunities. Consultation with HR and your supervisor is critical not only for your mental well being by having second and third opinions, but needs to be part of the 'record' should legal action be taken later by a 'freed' employee. Plus 'journals' should be kept anyway for all employees, addressing their performance and communication concerning it. Findings and suggestions from HR or supervisors should be communicated to the individual. This lets him know where he stands and that you have involved all key stakeholders, in case he thinks he has an out by going around you to your boss or HR. Nothing is to be gained by having a clandestine hunting journal. If anything it may turn out to be the instrument of either your immediate or career path destruction.

## Enroll in sanctioned hunting inservices

**Anytime you have moved past initial verbal warnings you will want to have a witness - and who better than the ones who deal with these issues daily (HR) - to accompany you to deliver this message.**

Hopefully your HR department routinely sponsors or offers the education you will need to be a knowledgeable and safe marksman of your communication skills. It may be in the form of just-in-time training where it is a one-on-one meeting with your company's HR personnel, attorney or consultant. Regardless, do not go into the woods until you feel comfortable communicating what needs to be communicated. Just like it is not a good idea to go hunting alone, if you are communicating severe corrective actions such as the final written notice or termination, you will want to include someone from HR or some other managerial witness. This will help keep you focused and assure safeguards are in place if emotions become elevated. This is just good business 'common-sense.' Anytime you have moved past initial verbal warnings you will want to have a witness – and who better than

the ones who deal with these issues daily (HR) – to accompany you to deliver this message. With today's litigious society, witnesses have become a way of life for employers when communicating anything that can turn into a 'he said, she said' situation. Remember an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

## **Be patient, be consistent, be introspective and be remorseful should any show themselves**

Patience is needed to develop relationships, assess performance, communicate expectations, then gauge impact. Should an unrepentant slacker show himself in your departmental meadow, don't be afraid to take it to the next 'corrective action' level. But it should not bring a smile to your face. Enjoying this process is paramount to the other gut-wrenching examples shown to us in our society where cruelty is the goal. One can and should still honor the dignity and worth of the individual identified, not only for the individuals directly involved but the ones sitting in the bleachers observing as well. Thought should be given to make sure you have done what you said you were going to do. Sometimes we think we said or did something but in reality we forgot. Make sure this is not the case here with regard to any milestones being met or not being met. Consistency is particularly crucial. A manager must say what he means, mean what he says, do what he said he would do and say and do the same things in similar situations with any and all employees. Undocumented and unclarified mid-course deviations are the stuff of break room discussions and, worse yet, courtroom discussions. In trying to find the sugar and water to turn these lemons into lemonade for your perspective, you will want to reflect on these events and jot down in your managerial journal – preferably on paper or mentally if that works for you - anything you would do differently. We all have a favorite axiom about how failures can be successes if we learn from them. The problem is we soon forget what we learned, so for a few months they may be of help, but ultimately they end up as failures.

## **Come down from your supervisory hunting stand**

Likewise, you will want to help the employee find the sugar and water so he can make lemonade out of the situation. It may take time for him to view one door closing as really allowing for other doors to open. But honoring the dignity and worth of the employee by

assisting them, shows you are more than talk and your actions will be appreciated later. Actions always speak the loudest about who you are as a manager. It is helpful to point out at this time that everybody has strengths and skills and maybe this is just not a match of those strengths and skills. Hopefully you have already had the 'skill match' discussion and both of you are beginning to see that a different environment might prove helpful. Each situation is different. If the personality and motivation is right, looking for opportunities within the department or within the organization might be options to explore. Be careful that you do not just ease your pain by passing it along. You will be tempted to give a better than deserved report if this employee bids on other jobs inside the company but outside of your department. Don't pass the buck but save the organization some bucks by not recycling performance that will be received like the passed-along fruitcake at Christmas time. You may try to rationalize by telling yourself that it was just a personality difference or that new co-workers will fix their shortcomings. Not intended to sound sexist, but 'be a man'-ager and do what is best for the person and organization by addressing and relaying these aspects that you have found troubling. Encourage the other department managers to interview and ask specific questions about the concerns you had. It may be helpful to stress to the employee whether he leaves 'voluntarily' or 'involuntarily' either way it is his own doing. The employee, like a student, earns or deserves what he gets based upon his actions. The teacher or manager just evaluates and tabulates the performance. Don't just 'pass them' for another manager to deal with.

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## **Pull back the bow**

Once you have resolved, based upon the preponderance of documented evidence, that the best solution is to grant the employee his/her freedom to pursue other opportunities, you will probably need to give yourself a pep talk in order to do what needs to be done. Just as the dog becomes unsure when the car he has been chasing stops, you may reach a point in stopping a relationship with an employee that you have been chasing, causing

similar anxiety and uncertainty. Because this deals with interpersonal conflict in one of those worst case managerial mental scenarios, here is where you will need to remind yourself why you must do what you know needs to be done. Removing unproductive or negative employees will be like a fresh coat of paint. You do not realize how much better it can be or how much it was needed until after it is done. Seek validation and encouragement from others whom you have sought counsel from over these issues. You may want to do a little reading on dealing with conflict to help better prepare yourself and to allow you to be able to sleep on the night preceding the event. Schedule a meeting with the employee preferably on the last hour of the last day of the workweek. That way both of you can go your separate ways and home after the meeting. This will prevent having to put on facades as you try to go back to work and will allow the employee some time to digest the situation before he is confronted with co-workers' questioning. Likewise, concentration will be almost impossible for both of you, so staying at work would deteriorate into going through the motions.

## Shoot or shoot over their head, but shoot

Create and share improvement plans with deadlines. Follow through with appropriate disciplinary action if a deadline is missed. For the underachiever who can do more, this follow-through serves as a warning shoot that whizzes past their head to let them know you expect more and will hold them accountable to this articulated standard. For the unrepentant repeated underachiever who is causing the department to suffer, this means taking the fatal shot at your scheduled meeting. Do not waiver. Employees will try to convince you that it is your fault by saying "You did not tell me" or "I did not know what you meant," or "What about so-and-so actions," etc. Stay the course. If they try to incriminate others, inform them that you will deal with that employee and take appropriate action after you have investigated and compiled all of the facts. You might hear "Give me a different job and I'll change" or "Extend my probation so I can show you I can change." Respond by explaining that you have already discussed these issues repeatedly (and you should have) and have seen no improvement. Do not own a gun unless you can pull the trigger and do not have the termination conversation unless you go through with it. If they say during this conversation that "I'll just quit then," immediately look for a pen and paper to hand them. Write it if need be and have them sign. You will rue the day if you give in to this ploy because that employee will forever feel secure in their position. Should you back down now would be like an accidental discharge, not only posing danger to them but to you. Inconsistency at any point is

troublesome, but to aim and not shoot will essentially lock up your ability to manage in the gun cabinet.

## A wounded slacker is even more dangerous

**Employees who see that the manager is unable to handle the conflict will eventually resort to what happens when children are left to govern themselves. It isn't pretty. In this management vacuum, cliques of power bases will form led by the individuals who you could not deal with effectively. Ultimately they will rule the department.**

Consequences of not following through can be severe and immediate. Employees who see that the manager is unable to handle the conflict will eventually resort to what happens when children are left to govern themselves. It isn't pretty. In this management vacuum, cliques of power bases will form led by the individuals who you could not deal with effectively. Ultimately they will rule the department. No one will take you seriously again until you develop the spine called for in your manager's job description. Let one person walk on you once without objecting or suggesting a different path and pretty soon you will have a four-lane highway down your back. Every child and employee has the inborn skills to figure this out. If you think it was tough to try to take the hill of correcting or terminating an employee the first time, beware that after failing, it will be even tougher. Not only will you have to fortify your resolve but now the employee's resolve has been strengthened. Do not be afraid of asking for others' help as you re-tool and re-align your strategy of re-claiming your department. You will still have to face them but now you will have faces to go along with your demons.

## Letting others see you cry is acceptable

**Grant as many weeks as possible to help the employee leaving look for other work, although in some instances it may be best to pay him his two-week notice and have him**

## **leave immediately. You should know what is appropriate in each case.**

Crying is probably too strong a word – remorse might be better suited. It is painful to have to make tough decisions when it impacts another person’s livelihood. Do not go into management unless you have already crossed this mental bridge. Not doing what is called for will only leave you crying along with those ‘good’ employees who were hoping for relief of having to make up for the slackers. The remaining employees would be concerned if you did not show some form of remorse during this time. You have been dealing with this ‘grief/potential loss’ for quite some time and you may have already processed it. The rest of the department has not. Keep their perspective in mind. Display sympathy for their sake even though you may be past that stage. Look for ways to make the transitions easier for everyone. Ask the employee who is leaving how he would like you to communicate this to department. Or does he want to communicate it? What reason does he feel comfortable sharing? Grant as many weeks as possible to help the employee leaving look for other work, although in some instances it may be best to pay him his two-week notice and have him leave immediately. You should know what is appropriate in each case. You do not have to worry that it will not have its full effect if you say that the employee left to pursue other interests or that he was not happy. You know and others will know the unspoken truth. Leave it that way.

## **Don’t take it to a taxidermist**

Refrain from giving in to the temptation to use this as a stick to others. Use what you can and bury the rest. Do not make a trophy or poster child of the casualty. Respect the dead by not referring to them by name in discipline discussions even months or years later as a reminder to current employees. Nothing good will come from “Remember what happened to Stan?” or even worse “what I had to do to Stan.” What your mother told you still holds true, “you never pull yourself up by pulling someone else down.” Saying their name should not be avoided, but rather the context in which it is said. Remain consistent in your management style and current employees will share this and other similarly ‘motivating’ stories in their own lunch and break-time tribal discussions. Also refrain from immediately taking down anything that had the departing employee’s name or picture. Time will allow for these to come down. Several of the staff may have fond memories and attempts to try to make it look like that employee never existed will not lend itself to desired enhanced productivity or further endear yourself to the group.

## **Celebrate later**

After a respective amount of time has passed, find an opportunity to celebrate. This can be triggered by reaching new highs in output levels, no absentee hours or injuries for the month. Find something to celebrate. You need to show you are just as willing to reward positive behavior. Commemorating even relatively small milestones via some form of celebration will reap big rewards. SOMC has gone so far as to implement a new program covering a wide variety of reasons complete with party themes called ‘Party in Box’ to assist departments in these mini but needed celebrations. Celebrations where you and others let down your hair (and guard) a bit, help create a friendlier, more at-ease departmental culture that knows how and when to have a good time. This is vital to supporting high performance.

## **Conclusion**

Slackers, more appropriately referred to as underachievers, are a fact of life. Some do it purposefully while others do not realize they are capable of more. A manager’s key to success is to separate the wheat from the tares. The underachievers left to themselves may choke out the productive employees. It is not as easy in corporate settings to just take aim and pull out the underachievers. Civil and moral laws require due process and that they be granted their rights too. Everyone needs feedback to either validate or help improve. If a manager consistently follows the process outlined within, satisfaction and productivity should be increased while not overlooking the legal or human elements that sometimes cause this to be such a dreaded aspect of management. Satisfaction is also gained, even for those individuals who might be freed to pursue other interests, because you can force a square into a round hole, but neither the square nor the hole is going to like it. Skill alignment is key to individual and organization success. Identifying it sooner is better than later for both parties involved.



### **About the Author**

Craig Gilliland (MBA, Ohio University) is the Director of Financial Support Services at Southern Ohio Medical Center. Current President of Portsmouth Area Chamber of Commerce Board, he also serves on Southern Ohio Growth Partnership, Shawnee State University (SSU) Development and Alumni Boards. As Adjunct Professor at SSU, he teaches or has taught computer, business and human resource classes. Craig is also very active in his church as Head Elder and Prison Chaplain Volunteer.