STRETCH GOALS VS STRETCH EXPERIENCES
THE RIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE SETTING TEAM GOALS

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OW often have you heard this in management meet-
ings: “Our numbers are looking dismal, each one of you need to take on a new set of stretched goals to push our company performance to the next level!” Everyone then leaves the meeting feeling so excited and enthusiastic to push themselves to achieve the much higher, stretched numbers. Or so, we think.

If stretching the goals is all it takes to push towards greater profits and productivity, then performance management should be the most straightforward of all educational development practices. Yet, it is more than just a numbers game.

In fact, the more we focus on numbers – the more numb we become. Unless, we fortify our approach with not just stretched figures but also with challenging experiences.

PRESSURE VALIDATES POTENTIAL
It is said that one’s character is like a teabag – you don’t know what is inside until it is placed in hot water. The optimum water temperature brings out the best fragrance and flavour in the tea. So it is with the performance of the employee – it requires the right mix of experiential elements to validate the espoused potential of the individual.

Confronting challenges produces advantageous benefits for aspiring leaders. It speeds up their learning curve, stretches their capacity and capability for high performance, and expands their horizons about what is possible for an organisation to achieve. Instead of just focusing on pushing the numbers game, capable leaders can challenge their teams to achieve significant work goals. In fact, these leaders themselves were likely assigned significant challenging experiences at key points in their careers while being given the freedom to determine how they achieve their outcomes.

It is not the absence of pressure which creates performance, rather it is the presence of the right type of stretched experiences which will develop the personal character from within for motivated performance. What constitutes the right type of pressure is to be appreciated so that there is a breakthrough (and not breakdown) in performance?

1. The pressure to go beyond the job description.
   2. The pressure to go beyond the skill description.

With the proper administration of the right types of pressure, the setting of stretched goals will no longer be an exercise in futility. It will become an investment in fruitfulness.

Organisations today require employees who are not stuck in their job description and comfortable in their skills description. Once you have an individual who is both stuck and comfortable, no amount of stretched goals is going to move them on to that next level of performance.

BEYOND THE JOB
According to Gallup, only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged. The situation of being stuck in one’s job is fundamentally an issue of engagement. For the majority of workers who come to work every morning in a disengaged state, you’re almost picturing them turning up with their hands and feet, but their hearts and minds are thousands of miles away.

It is no wonder then that the mere incantation of stretched numbers has little effect on most employees. The concept of stretched targets work only on employees who are already actively engaged – those whose hearts are already in their work.

What then is the type of “pressure” to be applied on disengaged teams?

It is that which appeals to the aspirations of a higher cause, a common good that binds the team together in unity towards a vision that is not imposed, but one which is inspirational. Hence, here is the leadership question to ask even before you start dishing out the stretched goals:

Am I providing a clear and challenging vision for the team before I even talk about the stretched numbers?

Your answer to the above will determine the readiness of your team to embrace the challenging experiences ahead and give them that extra tenacity to last through tough times.

BEYOND THE SKILLS
There are those who are of the view that the inability to meet stretched targets is due to employees who are not skilled or not competent enough to meet the demands of the job. While this can be the case, the leader should also be attentive to the motivational needs of the employees as well.

When it comes to meeting the demands of stretched expectations, employees need to be working in an environment where they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day. Hence, while it is necessary that specific goals are set to move employees out of their comfort zone, leaders need to ask this critical question: “Am I building the skills of my team towards the area of their strengths?”

In order to help your employees to shine in their performance, you first need to realise that there is no such thing as a well-rounded individual. The concept of well-roundedness is illusory. It might sound desirable from a developmental perspective, but really all that happens when people try to fix their weaknesses is that they spend inordinate amounts of time trying to become marginally better in an area that will never be particularly strong for them. So they’ll get far less of a return by trying to shore up relatively mediocre capabilities because they’ll probably always be below average in those areas.

Leadership is not a construct of well-rounded attributes; it’s nearly always the consequence of some pretty incisive talents that are relatively specific and slightly narrow in focus being leveraged to the maximum.

Hence one reason that your employees are not able to rise to the challenge of the stretched goals could be that the element of personal strengths was not considered as part of the development equation. When an employee has the opportunity to do what he or she does best every day, he or she will be six times more engaged. This certainly translates into next level performance.

IT IS ABOUT THE RIGHT MIX
The right kind of challenging experience is a crucial element of leadership development. But no amount of experience will turn an average leader into a great one.

Leadership takes the right kind of talent coupled with the relevant experience that will unleash the motivational energy necessary to rise to the expectations of the stretched goals. The principle is this – build up the performer first, then you will get the performance.

Without a focus on engagement and ownership, you may still get the high performance by command and control, but it will not be a sustainable performance.

By JOSEPH TAN
joseph.tan@leaderonomics.com

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