

The 3 Types of C Players and What to Do About Them

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When you start leading a new team, one of your first imperatives is to assess the caliber of the talent you are inheriting. At a minimum, you'll want to focus on three dimensions: (1) Competence – Does each individual match the competence demands of their role? (2) Motivation – Does each member of the team possess the required drive and the willingness to learn new capabilities as needed? (3) People skills – Is each person capable of building constructive working relationships with their

colleagues and with you? Those who excel on these criteria are your A players, your outstanding performers. The strong but not exceptional contributors are your B players. And the few who fall below expectations on one or more of these are your C players.

Early in your tenure as the boss, you will spot the C players by their lack of preparation on assignments or their consistent failure to meet deadlines and follow up on requests. They may accomplish only 40% to 50% of what you were expecting. They tend to blame others or external factors for delays and incomplete assignments. Perhaps they even blame you for not giving them more-precise instructions and expectations.

While it's easy to devote your attention to your highest performers, you'd be remiss to neglect your C players. In our work with managers, we've learned that it's critical not to procrastinate when it comes to addressing their performance and their roles on the team; their negative impact can have serious consequences. They can block the advancement and development of your most talented people, who will question your credibility as their leader. They'll ask themselves: *Why does my boss tolerate this person's low standards and lack of motivation? Their poor relationship skills and micromanaging? Don't they see how demotivated I am working for this person?*

So what should you do with C players? The typical response is to manage them out of the organization. But might there be ways to rejuvenate some of them? To help them become B, or even A, players? Wouldn't you become a better leader by taking on their personal development? Shouldn't you at least start by more rigorously testing their competence and motivation?

Not All C Players Are the Same

There are three main types of C players, and what you should do depends on which you're working with. The first are those who have been promoted beyond their level of competence (a concept popularly known as the Peter Principle). They simply don't possess the capability to perform in their current job. These are the individuals you need to manage out of your team. Perhaps they can flourish in less-demanding roles or in other parts of the organization, or perhaps they simply need to leave entirely. The second type of C player possesses the competence to do their job but is not motivated for a variety of reasons. These are the individuals you need to reengage through coaching or by finding a better fit in responsibilities. We'll get to the third type shortly.

It's frustrating not knowing if what you're seeing is due to a lack of competence, a lack of motivation, or both. But you can start by assessing someone's actual level of competence in critical responsibilities. Give them challenging assignments that have short-term, concrete, and measurable outcomes. Be extremely clear about the deadlines and metrics that will measure their progress and the caliber of their results. At the front end of the project, always ask: "What resources do you need to achieve your goal?" Make sure to provide the support they say they need. If you do this, and they still don't meet your expectations, you'll have a clear indicator that it was their competence that was lacking, not your guidance. If they are defensive about their results, you'll know you have an individual who is not open to learning. They most likely need to be managed out.

To assess motivation, ask them directly what motivates them and what does not. Pay attention to whether they ask the right questions. And observe carefully how they tackle the learning demands of assignments that push them beyond their experience or competence. Do they appear dedicated to accomplishing the task so that it exceeds your expectations – undertaking extra effort and seeking ongoing feedback? Do they show a surprising level of initiative? Do they listen to and incorporate information, recommendations, and learning from others around them that result in a better outcome overall? If the answer is yes, you have a highly motivated individual who will be open to your coaching. If not, you'll have to diagnose the root of their lack of motivation.

Motivation problems come in several forms. For example, certain individuals underperform due to a mismatch between their responsibilities and skill sets and/or interests. If someone is doing a great deal of work that they don't enjoy or that requires greater competence than they possess, they will naturally end up demotivated. Your challenge then as a manager is to assess whether this particular C player possesses the drive to learn the skills needed for their current role, or if they should be moved to roles that better match their skill set.

When you meet with them, ask what about their job motivates them, what things they would change if they could (and why), and what things they'd want to stay the same (and why). Ask what they would most like to be doing if they could. If you're new to leading the team, ask how they would restructure the team and their own work. Their answers can help you determine whether their skills and competence fit their responsibilities. In many cases, we've found that giving them more responsibilities they are good at and enjoy will reenergize them. The dilemma is whom to give the work to that they don't like or cannot do.

But there's another reason why someone might be demotivated: you. If your employee senses a mismatch with your style, or thinks you simply aren't invested in them, they will certainly struggle to perform. It's critical that you step back as a boss and assess the ways in which you might be contributing to someone's mediocre performance. Perhaps you haven't given enough direction about your expectations, or maybe you're imposing a very rigid view of what commitment and motivation should look like. Working closely and developmentally with your C player may actually benefit both of you.

There's a third category of C players. We often don't consider them as such, because these individuals deliver strong performance. But their C is due to poor people skills – they achieve their results at the cost of relationships. They tend to be domineering, aloof, abusive, self-serving, or arrogant. They may steal credit. They can interfere in other people's work. They often feign interest in receiving coaching and mentoring but never act on it. And they enjoy muscling their way through assignments, even if it means steamrolling their direct reports and peers in the process.

Don't be blinded by the outstanding performance results of these individuals. In the long run, they will derail themselves and may take you with them. At a minimum, they will reflect poorly on your ability to manage your team.

If you have a hunch about an individual falling into this category, ask your other team members. Pay close attention to their comments. They may be reluctant to directly critique their colleague, so listen for off-the-cuff or softly cynical remarks that suggest some underlying interpersonal problems. For example, they might comment that their colleague never attended meetings or contributed to a project but then showed up at the final presentation. Watch how they treat their direct reports or peers in meetings – do they respond curtly or callously? Do they criticize or downplay the work of others in public? Do they take credit when it should be shared?

These C players need very actionable, clear feedback from you if you want to reform them. You have to draw concrete connections between their behavior and the negative consequences on relationships you observe. You have to illustrate precisely what the appropriate interpersonal behaviors are that they need to demonstrate and which are the inappropriate ones they need to stop. Be candid about career consequences if they don't change. Tell them that their job or next promotion is at risk if they continue with their current behavior.

Making Tough Calls

We've already said how important it is to act early to address C players. Yet something often gets in the way of tackling these individuals' performance head-on: your personal relationship with them. This is less of an issue when you're taking over a new team (although chances are you still want to be liked), but in some cases the C performer may be a former colleague or even friend of yours (or friends of other powerful individuals in the organization) – or they may be long-tenured and loyal employees. Addressing their performance and fit on the team becomes an emotional challenge – it's hard to discipline or even fire someone we know or feel obligated to.

McKinsey research found that only 19% of the thousands of senior managers they polled felt their companies removed low performers quickly and effectively. We ourselves cannot think of a single leader who told us that they moved *too* quickly on a C player. Most regretted waiting too long to act and giving them too many opportunities to prove themselves, only to end up firing them later.

At the end of the day, you need to recognize that if a C player lacks the competence and motivation to make significant progress, you have to move them out. While firing a person is one of the toughest things managers must do, leaders have to make such calls. You need to hone this ability to fire your poor performers whether you like it or not. Don't make someone else do it for you. Be transparent in your assessments and honest in your approach with the poor performer. Before you make any decisions, get your boss's support, and keep HR in the loop to ensure you're following the right processes.

Whatever you do, don't move your C players elsewhere in the organization unless you are sure they will be successful in the new role. Passing a poor performer to another manager will seriously damage your reputation as leader.

Our best advice to you: Focus on your C players early on. Find out whether the issue is one of competence, motivation, or people skills (or all of the above). Give them ongoing coaching and an opportunity to reverse their course within a reasonable time frame. To the extent that you are part of the problem, correct your own actions with them. If they still don't deliver over a specific time frame, let them go.

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