

The Aptitude and the Appetite

A model for assigning tasks to people and managing them through to completion.

Introduction

Whenever you are assigning a project task to someone, it is worth considering the likelihood that they will deliver the result you want.

A good first step is to make sure you've been clear in communicating the who, why, what, when, where and how much.

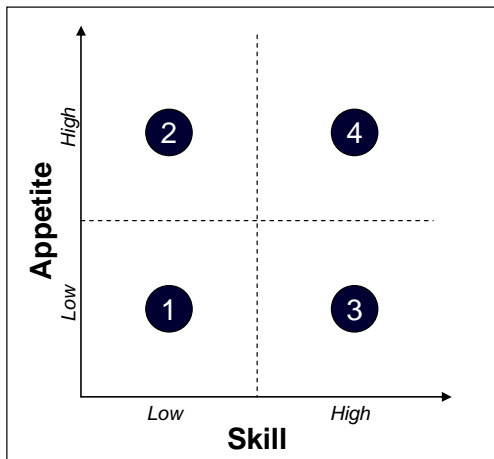
Assuming you've managed this (and give yourself a pat on the back if you have) the next step is to look at the person themselves, and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do they have the aptitude?
2. Do they have the appetite?

If they have the aptitude, they'll have a good mixture of the right skills and experience. If they have the appetite, they'll want to do the work. Perhaps it is a task they find rewarding in itself, or perhaps the task is a stepping stone to some longer term goal.

The Model

It is possible to draw these axes of appetite and attitude as the edges of a square, and position anyone who is working for you in that square.



If we divide the square into four quarters, we get the following combinations:

1. Low appetite, low skill
2. High appetite, low skill
3. Low appetite, high skill
4. High appetite, high skill

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Commentary

At first glance, the obvious thing to do is look for (4), and avoid (1). (4) represents the pleasure of working with the consummate professional. You just point them at the problem, pour yourself a drink, and relax. At the other end, we've perhaps all had to endure (1) - the call centre is a prevalent modern example.

Now although most job adverts say they want a (4), the problem we face is, there is greater competition for people in the (4) category and their services come at a corresponding premium. People in this category seem to be annoyingly oblivious to the fact there is a recession. They are still booked up for three months advance, and are still charging full rates. We may not have the freedom to engage or hire people in this category. Or we may just be stuck with the people we already have - mainly (3), with a little bit of (2) if we are lucky, and the odd (1) if we are unlucky.

So as managers, our challenge is:

1. Can we get our incompetent, jaded person out of their rut?
2. Can we turn our keen but green person into a keen, experienced person?
3. Can we motivate our experienced but jaded person to keep them performing (and stop them leaving)?

Each of these cases requires different approaches. Most people start off in the (2) category and they are the people it is easiest to work with. A mixture of training, mentoring and on-the-job learning will bring them along nicely.

Many people in the (3) category will cast envious glances as an organisation showers development resources on their more junior counterparts. Motivating these people requires a little more creativity. It is possible to throw money at the problem, but that will only work for so long. A better approach is to try and introduce some novelty. This could be a task the person has not got experience in, or perhaps the opportunity to exert greater influence through a part-time management role, or even assigning the person the coaching and mentoring role for people in the (2) category.

For people in the (1) category, there has to be an iron fist somewhere in the velvet glove. People in this category will not deliver anything of value, and are costing you and/or your business money. Without enthusiasm, they will never develop experience and skill. Therefore your task here is to find the lever to generate enthusiasm, but to be clear in your own mind what you will do when the search of levers runs out. But don't be too despondent about this category - if you do manage to 'turn around' someone like this, I guarantee the satisfaction you feel will live with you long after any number of encounters with people in the other categories.

Summary

1. Consider the appetite and aptitude your staff have for their tasks
2. Adjust your management style accordingly, and make sure you spend the time with the awkward squad as well as the dream team
3. Remember that the pleasure of dealing with the people in the (4) category will be matched by the pain of paying for them, and that you may be able to profit more from 'bringing on' people in the (2) and (3) category
4. Don't shirk dealing with people in the (1) category - they are costing you money, and will sap the morale of everyone else.