Characteristics of the "Perfect" Support Worker…

There is no such thing as the perfect support professional. There are perfect combinations of support personnel and end user and incident characteristics. But these serendipitous instances are like the alignment of the planets (but without the element of predictability). Certainly some support personnel fair better than others. And some appear to fair better than others. All too often it is the appearance of success that is taken as actual success that leads to inappropriate promotions and the associated negative morale which follows. If support management are to avoid falling for the self-publicity of the self serving few and want to recognise and reward the real contributors to their success then they must determine what they believe to be the optimal characteristics of the support professional and look to ways to encourage such behaviours on an ongoing basis within their environment.

The following, is a non-exhaustive list of some of the things that managers and supervisors should consider when evaluating the performance of their teams:

- Technical competence
- Communication
- Empathy
- Analytical reasoning
- Healthy respect for risk the need to mitigate its effects
- Careful and consistent management

Technical Competence

Knowing what you know and more importantly knowing what you don't know are the keys to being technically competent. It is impractical for a support representative to be all knowing on every subject. It is however; very practical for a support agent to know what to do when an issue is outside of their comfort zone of pre-existing knowledge. The best support representatives have extensive networks of contacts internally and externally and call upon these self-support infrastructures when necessary. They know how and when to leverage knowledge marketplaces and peer-to-peer support communities to their advantage and have sufficient kudos points in the bank to be sure of a queue of ready and willing assistance when they need it. Technical competence is much more than certifications and qualifications; it is the application of knowledge in practical situations. And yet many support managers become blind to this over time and place a disproportionate value on the attendance of formal training over and above the war wounds and battle scars from being down in the trenches fighting technology in hand to hand combat to get something actually working.

Communication – Remembering to switch the dial from "broadcast" to "receive"

People have a tendency to process oral information erratically, often missing vital pieces of a statement and filling in the blanks themselves, interpreting the inbound message as they believe to be appropriate. This is a problem for both the user reporting the issue, explaining its importance, responding to questioning etc and the frontline support agent who is trying to determine what is wrong. The advent of web browsing, instant messaging, multi-tasking and the like have provided considerable distractions for your average front line agent and it is critical that they listen attentively to the caller if they are to glean the information they need from the conversation in order to resolve the incident to the users satisfaction.

The key to an accurate and efficient incident diagnosis and resolution is the ability to ask the right questions at the right time, interpreting the responses correctly and using them to refine ones hypothesis through additional questioning until one is able home in on the actual problem and/or root cause. It sounds trivial when put like that doesn't it? Unfortunately the vast majority of users are completely incapable of providing any useful additional information without being prompted. It is also important to remember the majority of users lie and ensure that if they do provide you with unprompted information it should be treated with extreme care! Knowingly or not, 99.9999% of users will give misleading or contradictory information during the course of a typical conversation to report an IT incident. It may be that they are trying to cover up their lack of understanding, it may be that they have a little knowledge in the

subject and have extrapolated it beyond the realms of all credibility, it may be that they are trying to hide a guilty secret, it may be that they are just repeating an urban myth or inaccuracy that they themselves have been told. Whatever the reasons behind the intentional or unintentional deception, it is important to remember that any information provided by the end user must be treated with healthy scepticism until such time that they can be proven to be a reliable and credible witness.

The only thing worse than not asking the right question is to ask the wrong question. Countless hours are lost every year chasing imaginary causes to equally imaginary problems because someone asked an overly vague question or failed to refine an initial finding appropriately. Requesters will usually provide responses to any and all questions that are asked of them, this does not mean that such responses are either relevant or useful. It is important to remember that in the majority of cases that the person requesting help doesn't know how to resolve the issue themselves (excluding instances where they don't have sufficient access privileges to fix their own problem) and so their opinions regarding the root cause of their predicament may or may not be valid.

A little empathy can go a long way…

A 2006 study of medical malpractice attorneys in the US found that the single most important factor when patients were deciding whether or not to sue their doctor was the way in which they were treated. It had little to do with the physician being competent or never making a mistake, it was in fact much simpler. Patients who genuinely liked their doctors rarely felt inclined to sue them. In fact, US attorneys often shake their heads in disbelief after they point out that it was actually their client's doctor who made the mistake only to hear, "I don't care. I'll sue the hospital but I like him and I'm not going to sue him."

What can we, as IT support professionals, learn from this? Simply that as we dispense our own brand of advice and assistance, that our customers will subconsciously notice our ability to show that we believe in them and our empathy and concern for their situation. Treating a requester as a peer, worthy of your respect, has just as much of an impact on the perceived quality of our service delivery as all of the knowledge, workarounds and fixes that we impart. In fact, when a support agent is committed completely to their customer's success, their customer's become their biggest evangelists. It is imperative therefore to never forget to invest time and emotional capital in your customers. If their behaviour needs correcting, it is more helpful in the long run to point out an area of their skill set which needs enhancing or refreshing than simply to ignore it and label them an 'idiot'. No one likes to be told that they are in the wrong, but the skilful communicator can introduce such concepts subtly without having force a confrontation.

Support agents should be prepared to open, honest and frank with customers because they can tell if your heart isn't in it. The hearts and minds of the wider business need to be won on a one to one basis and the support team are ideally placed to take the fight to them and smother them with kindness.

Analytical reasoning – Going beyond mere Newtonian physics and getting to the nub of the issue…

Disciples of Sir Isaac are committed to the notion of cause and effect. Every action will have an equal and opposite re-action. Or so hundreds of years of scientific fact say. This may be true. But attempting to recreate the dying moments of a server with a low level systemic memory leak is a mind-numbingly painful and difficult process. Especially if all you have to go on is an incomplete or corrupt dump file and your intuition. Support personnel must routinely show the deductive reasoning abilities of Sherlock Holmes or Monsieur Poirot if they are to resolve the trickiest of incidents without resorting to the dreaded workaround get out clause.

Risk averse but willing to take a calculated risk…

Characteristics of the "Perfect" Support Worker…

Does being risk averse stifle one's ability to find innovative solutions to vexing issues? Maybe. Maybe not. But at least it will prevent an ill-conceived fix from desolating the entire IT environment. No action is without risk. The only people that don't make mistakes are the ones that don't do anything. A bias for action is a critical trait for the perfect support professional and consequently they must be skilled in the art of risk assessment if they are to follow the IT equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath and "do no harm". Calculated risk is the aim of the game. Every intervention into the IT infrastructure has inherent risk associated with it. The key is to understand how this risk manifests itself and to put in place suitable control measures to mitigate its effects. Only then should those actions be undertaken with the confidence that they are a safe as is practicable…

Management consistency and approach

The final and most important characteristic of the "perfect" support worker has nothing to do with the workers themselves at all. Employees are like a mirror, if their management don't like the results they see then they should first look to themselves for the answers. Team performance and morale is directly related to they way in which they are managed. Every manager has their own personal management style ranging from the David Brent's or Gordon Brittas's of the world to something even less appealing.

Unfortunately, some IT managers have been promoted beyond their level of competence based upon past glories, time served or a wish to get them away from hands on situations where they can do harm… It is not uncommon for middle managers within the IT function to have little or no formal management training and to lack the many of the 'soft skills' needed to effectively lead a team of individual contributors. Managing IT teams sometimes requires a delicate touch in order to be able to balance the ever changing needs of the business against the peculiarities of highly skilled technical resources. This is not to say that IT staff should be allowed to become demanding prima donnas but it is important to recognise that often the motivations and behaviours of the very best IT staff are more closely aligned to performing artistes than production line workers. It is important to remember that a good Java monkey or hard core DBA is worth their weight in gold and that they are in very short supply…

And finally…

Just as there is no perfect support professional, there is no perfect definition as to what such a person should know or how they should act. Instead we are left to deal with the imperfections of the world and the IT industry in particular, making the best of what we have in an attempt to improve the quality of service we deliver to our customers. Hopefully this article has helped reiterate some of things you already knew and perhaps raised them a little higher in your own mental listing of the relevant attributes of your support staff. As for the important things in life… We should perhaps look to the untapped wisdom of Mr Gordon Brittas himself for guidance. As the great man once said, "Since I have been manager, I am proud to say there have only been twenty-three deaths. And not one of them was a staff member." And that is surely a goal to which we should all aspire!

Rob Addy is a Research Director with Gartner covering IT Infrastructure Support Services across EMEA where he advises organisations on a variety of Support and Outsourcing related areas. He is also the author of "Effective IT Service Management: To ITIL and beyond!" which was published in September 2007 by Springer. See www.gartner.com and www.effectiveitsm.com for details.