

The 20-60-20 Rule

This framework was introduced to us by our colleague Dr. Rod Napier many years ago. It is a helpful way to look at organizational change but we will show how team leaders can use the thinking behind the 20-60-20 Rule in managing their teams.

Briefly, this framework assumes 20% of people in most organizations are “positives,” people who have an optimistic view of things. They are great team players and generally work hard in service of the organization’s mission and goals. In some special organizations there might be 30% or even 40% of the people who fit this category. Generally speaking about 20% of the folks are “positives.”

Another 20% are “negatives.” Being a “negative” has everything to do with attitude. These individuals tend to be cynical, pessimistic and complain a lot about. An example of a “negative” would be someone who just learned that they won \$42 million dollars in the national lottery and their response to this wonderful luck would be, **“I have to pay taxes on that.”**

Several things give the negatives their power and influence:

- ✓ They are often very smart people
- ✓ They often speak truth to power. Unfortunately, they bite you as they deliver it
- ✓ At times they were previously “positives” but, over time, their bad experiences in the organization made them cynical and negative — they once had hope and now they don’t
- ✓ They prey on people’s fears by bringing up past grievances and identifying all the reasons why new ideas just won’t work

The middle 60% are the regular folks who need direction and attention by their leaders. This is where the real leverage in any organization lies because if a leader can get the middle 60% aligned with the 20% “positives”, they can move their organizations forward in powerful and constructive ways.

As leaders, we must be very conscious of where we spend our time and attention. Focusing too much on “negatives” is a waste of time. “Negatives” will suck all the energy you can give and it won’t make a difference. Too many leaders believe if they pay attention to this group, listen to all their complaining and invest time with them, they will come around and be more positive.

Unfortunately, negative people rarely change their attitude or mindset. We can not emphasize this point enough, a leader must be strategic about where they spend their time and attention.

When you look at the 20-60-20 Framework and how it applies to teams, the following might be helpful. If you have eight people on your team, and you find yourself spending an inordinate amount of time with one team member, trying to motivate them and help them improve, you might be dealing with a “negative.”

If you find yourself with a “negative”, here are some effective strategies:

- ✓ Make sure the performance expectations are clear for all team members, especially the negatives. If things are fuzzy and unclear, they will take advantage of the situation. Clarity is essential.
- ✓ Hold them accountable for their performance. Don't let them diffuse the situation with lots of reasons why they couldn't produce or meet a deadline.
- ✓ Be strategic about the amount of time you spend with discussion and feedback. Allocate the same amount of time you do for everyone else, not any more.
- ✓ Regularly scheduled meetings usually are effective and avoid the informal and ad hoc hallway meetings they prefer.
- ✓ When meeting with them, be prepared with your agenda, don't wing it. Make sure you have clear goals and outcomes for the meeting and communicate them ahead of time. If you are not well prepared, they will take you down a rabbit hole and get both of you lost.
- ✓ Have a visible way to keep score of the team's overall progress so you can counter the inevitable complaining about not having enough resources or time to do things right. A team scorecard that is shared with everyone creates a disciplined framework for discussion.
- ✓ It is important to acknowledge their contributions to the overall progress and accomplishments of the team. Do not expect any appreciation for rewarding and recognizing their efforts, however, as it isn't in their repertoire. Don't be disappointed.

Finally, if you have a team culture that has robust communication and where feedback is normal, you can share with the “negative” what the impact of their interactions are on the team, e.g., people tend to shut down in team meetings when you start to complain, people assume all their ideas will receive negative feedback and therefore will not involve you in important, informal discussions, people simply avoid interacting with you.

Once in awhile, a “negative” will be unaware of the impact they have on others and being honest with them about their real impact creates a choice point for them. Sometimes, they choose to be more constructive, not happy or positive, but less negative.

The bottom line for the team leader is pay attention to how and where you allocate your time and spend it wisely. The bottom 20% aren't worth the time and attention that is paid to them - focus on the positives and leverage the teams' talent.

Patrick Sanaghan(2011)