

Chapter 17

A Players: High Worth + High Worry

John Stevenson
JG Stevenson Associates, USA

ABSTRACT

The term “A Players” was not a familiar categorization for staff until this author had been leading Information Technology organizations for over twenty five years. “A Players” as well as B, C and D Players is a common term for local charity and Pro-Am golf tournaments where competitively equal golf foursomes are created by balancing the known golf prowess and skills in each group. The “A Player” is the top ranked player in the group and “should” be the “low” or best scorer during play. The “B” Player is the next most skilled and so on. During my youth and mid-adult years, the author pursued other non-golf hobbies and activities such as boating and flying where “A Player” wasn’t a common term.

INTRODUCTION

In the early part of the new century I was presented with a new IT executive opportunity by Larry Kittelberger, who at the time was the Chief Information Officer of Lucent Technologies. Larry had previously been the CIO at Allied-Signal where he was an early adopter of ERP packages. We knew each other over the years through sharing our common issues at the business user group of

one of those large ERP application firms. Lucent had just unfolded a major new corporate strategy where it was going to split the company into three independent businesses: Lucent, Avaya, and Agere Systems. Larry knew I had a lot of consumer business as well as high technology background from my previous IT executive positions and he convinced me to take the inaugural CIO position of the newly formed Avaya Company. As part of this new strategy, each of the Lucent headquarters business segments; human resources, finance, facilities, information technologies and the executive

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group were expected to divide up their global staffs to go into the three new independent companies.

After the Lucent corporate executives aligned their own future positions with each of the corporations, they wisely decided to have the corporate Human Resources function finish their own split up of staff assignments next. This gave the remainder of the staffing selection process a core group of agents from HR who was focused on creating the best staffing solution for their own new businesses. The process was a lot like a professional sports draft. I presided as the “process owner” for Information Technology for Avaya; my most trusted talent scouts were the Avaya designated human resources leaders assigned to my new IT group.

We needed to select over one thousand information technology staff from the large pool of global resources at Lucent. A key to the potential success of the whole Avaya IT function was going to be the caliber of our choices for top leadership. The three IT group leaders from Lucent, Agere, and Avaya decided to start our selection process by filling our top positions and work down the org chart.

I independently studied the backgrounds and other attributes of the top incumbent vice-president level candidates. When it was time to select the department head for one of the Avaya key IT functions, I thought that either of the current top two highly experienced and very competent appearing execs in that function at Lucent would be good choices to fill the slot. As I was about to firm up my choice, to my surprise, my Avaya designated human resources Director hurriedly called me aside and stated emphatically that there was an “A Player” hidden a bit further down the org chart and that I should pass on the higher two experienced candidates and select that specific lesser experienced individual. When I asked the HR Director what an “A Player” meant, he compared him to a low scoring golfer who would be the one to “win the tournament for my team”. Following his guidance, I ‘uncomfortably’ switched choices and worried that I had given up seasoned talent for this

young “A Player”. During the next phase of the selection process, I became guided by my team of HR leaders toward the “A Player” preference style. Of course, the assigned human resource leaders for the other two businesses were savvy to this selection methodology and soon asked if we could all come to consensus as to who each would designate on their A, B and C level staff lists so that we could put one master list A, B and C selection list together. Soon thereafter we were alternating our selections from each of the lists so that all three businesses would have an equal opportunity to get a balanced share of the A, B and C talent.

During the first year of Avaya as a new stand-alone corporation, I soon learned that it was the A Players we selected for the Information Technology group that really pulled the entire organization along to great achievements. I also learned a key priority myself, keep the A Players motivated and satisfied and the whole IT function will thrive.

DEFINITION OF AN A PLAYER

Taking a step back, what is the definition of an A Player when it comes to the Information Technology staff function in a corporation? I found that there isn’t a specific prescription or exact set of criteria for an A Players attributes across the broad staff types of an IT function. However, there are some common traits that exist across most of these top contributors.

The first and foremost attribute of an A Player is; when they speak, you ‘want’ to listen. What they have to say may be on a technical item, or it may be on a project point or just relating a communication that is needed to be heard. The key is, what they say and when and how they say it commands a listener’s respect. While this attribute can be learned, often it is innate to the person and their natural style. Later in the chapter we will discuss some ways for an Information Technology

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