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The Value of A-Players

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Almost no one wants to spend time on recruiting. You know it's important and has to get done, but you are busy. Typically, your team is shorthanded during the recruiting process. You have an open position, after all, which makes you even busier. So why take the time to read this book and commit to hiring A-player employees?

Thriving Businesses Are Built by Teams of A-Players

Nothing has a bigger impact on the results of your business and the quality of your life than hiring—and keeping—A-players. Perhaps you have a vision for growing your business, having a great life and career, and then selling your business one day for a sizable sum. If you don't hire great people, those dreams will fizzle. Dedicate yourself to hiring A-players today if you want to be a leader who turns this vision into a reality. Whether you have a sophisticated recruiting apparatus or not, you must figure out how to find, attract, and employ A-players. It is essential for success.

Chief executive officer of Meridian Enterprises Corporation Sam Toumayan started his company in 1978 as an incentive travel company. A number of Sam's peers founded similar companies around the same time. More than three decades later, Meridian stands as a transformative power in the sales incentive industry. Companies around the globe use its patented credit card-based programs. Meridian has changed this industry forever, while similar companies that started at the same time have gone out of business or been acquired.

What made the difference?

If you ask Sam, he will tell you that he hired strong people and trusted them to do their jobs well. Sam recognized that he had to recruit A-players and have them build the enterprise that he wanted. The difference between a business that fizzles and one that takes off is often whether the CEO knows how to hire and lead A-players.

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A-Player Principle: You have to be willing to let go of some control in order to grow your company. Do you currently have A-players on your team whom you can trust to lead some—or even *all*—of your business for you?

The Impact of Just One Great Hire

A-players have an exponential, not incremental, impact on your business. Microsoft has more than 80,000 employees worldwide. How much impact could one employee have on a business that size? Not much, right? Bill Gates believes otherwise. He claims that the entire company was really built around fewer than 20 people.¹ If Gates needed fewer than 20 people to become the wealthiest man in the world, what impact could just two or three *true* A-players have on *your* business—and your life?

I am convinced that most businesspeople are not committed to recruiting because they believe that hiring great people is a crapshoot. But hiring doesn't have to be a roll of the dice. While you can never eliminate all of the risk, there are certainly steps you can take that will result in bringing more A-players into your company. The question is: Will you and your company pledge to continually find and hire A-players? Is it worth the time and effort? The answer should be an enthusiastic YES—because adding just a few more A-players to your team can pay off in fantastic ways. Let's take a look at how much impact just one great hire can have on a business.

One A-Player Can Give You Your Life Back

Jody and Heather Herzog own a Fleet Feet Sports franchise in Cleveland, Ohio. This young, energetic couple ran a good business and had big plans for the future. They had a number of good employees, but as with many small businesses, the bulk of

the responsibility for leading their specialty retail business fell on their shoulders. They served customers, bought product, oversaw the financials, ran training programs, created marketing campaigns, and dealt with the hundreds of other tasks that had to get done.

Then the Herzogs found Eddie, who happened to have 12 years of experience managing a competitor's store across town. He was bored with his current role and saw Fleet Feet as a great new career opportunity. Plus, he would likely have a shorter commute. Over a period of months, these factors were enough to get him to make the move and come to work for Heather and Jody. The impact was immediate. Eddie essentially started running the place. He used proven methods for improving buying and inventory. He brought specific ideas for new marketing programs. Eddie anticipated what needed to be done, and he did it.

Eddie began to mentor and lead the other staff. He set a positive pace and tone for other employees. In doing so, he helped to create a great company culture in which even average employees perform at their highest possible levels.

The impact of hiring one A-player was exponential, not incremental, for this business. After hiring Eddie, the Herzogs could focus their time on important activities for acquiring new customers, improving customer retention, and managing inventory levels to maximize profitability. In other words, the best people in the business got better because they had one more person on whom they could really depend. That process, repeated over and over, is how great businesses get built.

In addition to the business benefits, Eddie helped Jody and Heather to get their lives back. They don't have to spend every waking hour at their store. They can take a day off together and trust that the store will be run well in their absence. They gain some margin in their lives and again look forward to the days they spend in the store. Too many owners of small and midsize businesses have lives that are indistinguishable from their work. They have no time to themselves because without them, things fall apart. But one A-player like Eddie can change all of that. He or she can take responsibility for important pieces of the business, oversee other people,

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and even bring in new business. While no business can or should sit on the shoulders of one person, for Jody and Heather, this single key employee gives them the ability to keep building a great business without completely sacrificing their personal lives.

A-Player Principle: Even one A-player can help you to build a great business—and have a full and satisfying life outside of work.

One A-Player Can Keep You from Getting Divorced

Whether literally or figuratively, you have to employ people to whom you trust “the keys” to your business. Executives and business owners who lack strong employees cannot take a vacation without worrying that their entire operation will be in ruins when they return. They cannot “turn the lights off” in the office of their mind or focus on the rest of their lives—which can result in train wrecks at home. Marriages become strained or even ruined when businesspeople don’t have at least one A-player who can supervise in their absence. Hiring A-players and setting them up to succeed can help you to regain balance in your life—and keep your personal life as well as your business life on track.

I coach a number of business owners and senior managers who are A-players. They are personally effective and get a lot done. However, their strength becomes their weakness. Their employees don’t take ownership and initiative because they know that “Jack or Lisa will do it.” These clients of mine make every decision. If a new idea is going to be created, they create it. If a new program is going to be implemented, they implement it. Things can go on like this for only so long before the business and their personal lives suffer. One of the best things you can do for the long-term success of your career and your life is to hire people who can move the ball forward in your business without you.

A-Player Principle: Finding and hiring A-players may save your marriage and key personal relationships.

One A-Player Can Help You to Sell Your Business

Do you have an exit plan from your business? Is your retirement plan contingent on being able to sell your company for a meaningful sum? Have you had your business valued? How much money is at stake for you personally if it is estimated to be less than you think it is worth?

Business valuation expert Vic Haas says that “when buyers look at your business, they must be convinced that [it] can survive without you.” When Vic is hired to value a private business for sale, one factor he always examines is the compensation of top executives. He wants to know if there is anyone in the business who is worth a big salary other than the owner. Having a management team comprised of a bunch of poorly compensated average performers reduces the company’s value. Vic wants to see a corporation in which future growth and daily operations are driven by people other than the owner. Potential buyers for your business know this. They will assess the quality of your team as part of their own due diligence.

When viewed in this light, you can see how hiring A-players has a direct impact on the value of your business and your net worth. Most businesspeople understand that they need to create systems and processes that operate without their involvement. But you have

A-Player Principle: Selling your business for the price you want may depend on having A-players who can run it for you. Would a potential buyer today believe that you have an A-player management team?

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to have people who can run these systems effectively. If you hope to sell your business one day, you should be hiring A-players right now to build and run it.

You Can't Turn Midgets into Giants

How well do your current employees respond to coaching and training? Do they produce great results after you invest time in them? If your answer to these questions is “not well,” you have to examine both the effectiveness of your leadership and the talent of your people.

Coaching and developing your staff is vital for improving performance and retaining good employees. I have helped numerous executives, managers, and key employees increase their business value in this respect. But don't fool yourself into thinking that you can turn a C-player into an A-player. You can't turn midgets into giants. Look around your organization. If you see one person whose performance is head and shoulders above everyone else, chances are that she was already a superior performer (or at least had superior talents) when you hired her. Get committed to finding more of these people. The best way to make your investment in your staff pay off is to coach A-players!

A-Player Principle: Don't try to solve a recruiting problem with a coaching solution. You can't turn midgets into giants.

The Best Coaches Are the Best Recruiters

I am a devoted fan of the St. Louis Cardinals. Pitching coach Dave Duncan is legendary for taking pitchers, who used to win 15 games per year but now only win 7 or 8, and getting them back to the top of their game. He is so good that there is talk of making him

the first pitching coach to be added to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame.

Do you think that if a pitcher with great ability has been on a losing streak and then gets the chance to play for Dave Duncan, he would do everything in his power to make it happen? You better believe he would. By playing for Duncan and the Cardinals, such a pitcher could add years to his career and millions to his bank account.

The dynamics (if not the salary levels) are the same in every industry and business. The best coaches are the best recruiters. They excel at selling their program to A-players. A-players want to keep improving; that is part of what makes them so good. You recruit A-players in part by showing them that you can help them to reach the next level in their career.

Progressive Business Publications provides newsletters, books, and online training via a sales force of 550 telemarketers in 15 locations across the United States. The vice president of sales, Colin Drummond, is the Dave Duncan of Progressive. He places a huge emphasis on instructing and developing salespeople. He requires his team leaders to be coaches, not just managers. They spend their time asking questions so that salespeople are forced to think for themselves, diagnose their own problems, and take ownership of the solutions. His telemarketers are typically making \$9 to \$12 an hour. Yet as Colin says, “People will take \$1.50 less per hour at Progressive because they know that they’re being developed.” The strong sales coaching at Progressive—and the leadership’s commitment to helping salespeople achieve—is a competitive advantage that allows the company to attract and keep people in a very cost-effective manner.

A-Player Principle: Recruit A-players by showing them how you can help them to reach the next level in their career.

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Get Passionate about Finding and Hiring A-Players

As Barney Kister, senior vice president of sales and operations for Supplies Network, says, “You should never hire just to fill a position. You should always be looking for good people to add to your team.” If you start to think about recruiting only *after* a position has opened up, you have already lost. Don’t just fill empty roles. Define the team you need to achieve your goals. Then work constantly to put that team in place.

Make Money Next Year from the A-Players You Hire This Year

Legendary sales trainer Bill Brooks once worked for a billionaire who owned multiple companies across the country. He asked this man what the secret to building a great business was. “Make money next year from things you sell this year” was one of the billionaire’s replies.

If you think about it, this principle applies directly to finding and hiring A-players. The investment of time that you make in finding great employees this year will pay off for you for years to come. Hiring A-players is one of the best investments you can make, and the only way to do this consistently is to implement a good recruiting system. Develop a passion for recruiting and pass that passion along to your executives and managers. Communicate the importance of building a great team and respect the time that they spend networking and recruiting. Create a culture where people strategize about finding A-players.

Focus on the Value of A-Players

Focus on the value of hiring just one more A-player instead of worrying about the time it will take to do so. As British physicist Lord Kelvin said, “When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when

you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge of it is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind.”²

Executives shy away from recruiting processes because they have a clear sense of their costs—the time and effort that takes them away from their “real jobs”—but not of the benefits. They are not completely convinced that their own recruiting and interviewing efforts will pay off in more A-player employees.

The programs described in this book don’t cost a lot of money to implement. But they do require time and commitment. You have to sell yourself and your team on the importance of recruiting. Put some numbers to the impact that better talent will have on your organization. If you start paying more attention to the quality of people you hire and follow the steps I outline in the following chapters, the overall talent level in your organization will rise. You will hire people who produce better results and increase your team’s productivity. Hiring just a handful of A-players in the near future will have a powerful impact on your business. You don’t have to find 100 extraordinarily high-caliber people to create a measurable improvement in results; just one great hire could make all the difference for you.

Simply buying this book has demonstrated your willingness to do what it takes to build a superior team. Investment always precedes return. The steps you are taking today will result in a team that can fulfill your vision tomorrow.

A-Players Beget A-Players

Talent begets talent. Merely hiring one A-player begins to create an environment where other A-players *want* to work. Conversely, if you don’t devote time and energy to hiring more A-players, the ones you already have may leave. Carl Gersbach, managing director of Brokerage Services in Philadelphia for CB Richard Ellis, put it this way: “The minute you bring the wrong person into the group, you create a situation where strong people who have always said that they would never leave now might consider it, because the environment within the organization has changed.”

Carl strongly emphasizes the importance of recruiting and hiring. Not only does he understand the value of A-players, he knows

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the risks and costs of hiring weaker players. Over the long haul, it is not enough to have just one A-player employee who is surrounded by weaker team members. Most A-players have a strong desire to learn, grow, and develop. One of the ways they do this is by working with other great people. If your team is one Great Dane surrounded by Chihuahuas, your “big dog” is at risk. One of your competitors simply needs to convince that person that he or she will have greater professional development opportunities with them rather than with you.

A-Player Principle: If you don't keep hiring A-players, the ones you already have may start leaving.

Isn't This HR's Job?

You may be wondering, “But isn't this HR's job?” If you have a strong human resources and/or recruiting department, it *can* be a tremendous asset in finding and recruiting A-players. But as a leader in the business, you must own ultimate responsibility for improving the talent in your company. Hiring A-players is a business priority, not just an HR priority.

In addition, the ability to hire A-players rises and falls on relationships. A great recruiter provides you with leverage in reaching A-players. However, you and your managers also have professional relationships and networks. You are the ones who are—or should be—rubbing shoulders with the best and brightest in your field. While HR can do a lot of the groundwork, it ultimately cannot make an A-player come to work for you. It is *your* responsibility to discern which individuals could make a major contribution to your team.

Hiring A-players is an ongoing commitment to creating a team that achieves superior results, so don't get lazy if you find one great person. Instead, use that person as the foundation for an A-player

team. While your HR contact or recruiter can be a great resource for reaching out to these people, *you* have to drive the process.

The 80/20 Principle Is Alive and Well

If you want to convince yourself of the impact which A-players will have on your business and your life, step back and assess your current team. How much more productive are the top 20 percent versus the other 80 percent?

AirClic is a Pennsylvania-based company that sells solutions for automating mobile work processes by using cell phones to capture and track data. Its customers include airlines, manufacturers, health-care companies, and others. But the company faced a challenge: Many prospective customers were excited about the solution, but this highly technical sale required buy-in from both financial and technical decision makers within these corporations. While salespeople could open the doors, they needed help to persuade prospective clients of the technical merits of the system.

To accomplish this, CEO Tim Bradley and his executives retooled their internal consulting group to provide technical sales support and they used their A-players to do it. While every consultant on the team had strong technical skills, a handful of them also had especially keen communication skills and personal presence. These people could explain the company's solutions in terms that both technical and nontechnical buyers could understand. AirClic took this handful of persuasive technical consultants and teamed them up with their salespeople.

Now, when AirClic salespeople line up a meeting with a prospective client, they take their A-player technical consultants along with them. The consultants bring technical credibility to the sales process, but they also know how to move the sale forward rather than getting bogged down in technical minutiae. The results? AirClic's sales have increased significantly due to the company's ability to identify a talent choke point and deploy A-players to solve it. AirClic recognized that 20 percent of its internal consultants were A-players who could help to drive sales as well as implement solutions. By focusing on this 20 percent

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and actively recruiting more people like them, the company was able to move its sales results to the next level.

Where Are Your Talent Choke Points? —

Now bring this type of evaluation to your own company. Where are the talent “choke points” in your business? What results will be attainable only if you employ higher-caliber people? What positions in your organization are capable of turbo-charging your sales and profitability if they are filled with A-players? Examples include:

- **Sales.** Salespeople who can find new prospects, marshal internal resources well, and manage accounts after the sale.
- **Sales management.** Sales managers who know your industry, can earn the trust of your sales force, and serve as leaders and coaches.
- **Marketing.** Marketing managers who can design campaigns that more effectively drive leads for your sales organization. They go beyond tactics. They understand how marketing drives new customer acquisition.
- **Project management.** Project managers who ensure that an internal team hits its deadlines and interact well with clients. They free up others in your firm to spend more time on business development and less time managing existing accounts.
- **Store management.** Store managers who are leaders, not just doers. They improve sales and customer satisfaction by knowing how to put a great store team in place.
- **Financial leadership.** Financial executives and managers who get the financial reporting and monthly close processes under control and help the rest of the company make better business decisions by being strong strategists and internal advisors.

This list can go on and on, but you get the point. Every company has roles in which A-players produce quantifiably better financial results than do B- and C-players. Find those roles, define the A-player profile for that role, and lead your team through the

processes I describe in this book to find your A-players. The impact to your top and bottom line will be powerful.

A-Player Principle: Every business has talent choke points. There is no excuse for not recruiting A-players for these roles.

Challenge Your Leadership Team

If you buy into what I am saying, then challenge your leadership team to focus on finding and hiring A-players. Do not assume that they are already committed to this goal. Though it's impossible to argue with the statement "We have to hire better people," you want more than an absence of argument. Why will hiring more A-players in particular roles pay off in your company? Get your leaders involved in a conversation about the potential benefits of committing to an A-player hiring strategy. The very act of articulating the benefits will help them buy into the plan.

Payoffs from This Management Discussion

You accomplish four things by having this conversation with your leaders.

1. You stress the fact that hiring and keeping talent is a priority for you, not just a topic to which you pay lip service. Hiring A-players is a goal that you will both emphasize and measure.
2. You make sure that your department heads and team leaders are thinking objectively about the talent on their teams. Many managers lose perspective regarding their people. They identify with their own team more than they do with the company and *its* leadership team. Your job is to bring them back to a more accurate perspective on where and how to make their teams stronger.

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3. You determine whether your current leaders know A-players in and out of your industry. The best business leaders are networked and aware of the level of talent that is available out there. They know how their people measure up against this benchmark.
4. You assess the quality of your own leadership team. Do your leaders perceive a need for better talent on their teams? Furthermore, would *you* want to work for them? Why or why not? And if you wouldn't want to work for them, what makes you think that other A-players would?

A-Player Principle: Involvement creates buy-in, so involve your leaders in a conversation about an A-player hiring strategy. The very act of articulating the benefits will help them own and execute a plan.

The Team You Need versus the Team You Have

In the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, about the development of a chess prodigy, a young chess player sits across a chess board from his coach, who is trying to teach him to plan his moves four, five, or six steps ahead. The young boy struggles to do so—all he sees before him is a board crowded with pieces. Finally, in frustration, the coach swipes his arm across the board and knocks all the pieces to the ground. “Now do you see it?” he asks the boy. “Don’t focus on the pieces; you have to see the whole board.”

Building an organization is like that. You can get so caught up in the separate “pieces” that comprise your current team that you fail to see the “whole board”—the team you *need* to achieve your goals. In his best-selling book *The E-Myth Revisited*, author Michael Gerber points out that creating an organizational chart can force you to define what you need accomplished apart from the people

you currently employ.³ Review or create your own organizational chart, and define excellence and key results for each role. Then write the names of the people you employ into the roles you've defined. As you complete this exercise, it is likely that gaps will begin to emerge between the job that needs to be done and the people you currently have. While many of us tolerate poor performance in key roles, we need to have the courage to admit that one or more of our team members are not doing—and will not be able to do—the jobs that need to be done. By acknowledging this, we do our companies, our teams, and ourselves a great favor.

Believe it or not, the strategies in this book will not only help you to find better people, they will help you to confront poor performance more effectively. Often executives and managers don't deal with inadequate workers because they don't have anyone to take their places. The strategies in this book give you a pipeline of talent to help solve both problems. Interested? Then read on.

A-Player Payoff Points

Chapter 1: The Value of A-Players

- If you want to build a substantial business, you must stop being a control freak. Start hiring A-players, and let them build your business for you.
- Hiring A-players is critical to building the company you want while having a life with which you are happy.
- Potential buyers for your business will check to see if you employ A-players who can run the business without you. If you don't, the value of your business goes down.
- Stop trying to turn C-players into A-players. It doesn't work.
- The best coaches are the best recruiters. They attract great talent, incorporate it into their system, and produce winning teams.

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- Recruiting A-players is everyone's job, not just the job of human resources.
- Stop hiring to fill positions. Start making every hire a piece of the puzzle in building a great team.
- Recruiting is not a necessary evil. Start viewing recruiting as a competitive advantage.
- It is likely that the team you have is not the team you need to get your business where you want it to be. Get committed to finding the right players for your team.