

# From Trial Tactic To Tool Of Engagement: The Star Profile

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In this post, I’ll show its origin. In subsequent posts, I’ll apply it as a management/leadership tool.

## Hypothetical: You Are Your Company’s Key Witness

Let’s say you manage an accounting department. After years of dealing with problematic behavior, you fire an accounting clerk. He responds by suing your company for wrongful discharge. At trial you take the witness stand. As defense counsel, I say to you: “Please tell the jury why you decided to fire the plaintiff.” You respond with a litany of the clerk’s misdeeds over the years, painstakingly describing his chronic bad attitude and mistreatment of others. Surely any manager in his or her right mind would agree this employee deserved to be terminated. Although you may be right, juries don’t necessarily like to hear corporate representatives vent over unemployed human beings (a job status many of them share). Although they may agree the plaintiff is a jerk, they may think he isn’t the only one (hint, hint)—in which case, the defense is in trouble.

## Bolstering Your Credibility

Instead of that approach, let’s say I ask you on the witness stand: “For the accounting clerk position, what employee behaviors matter most?” You respond: “There are three: “First, every transaction must be entered promptly and accurately. “Second, every internal and external customer must be treated with courtesy and respect at all times. “Third, within our department this person must interact with co-workers in ways that promote trust, cooperation, and teamwork.” I then say: “In light of these three standards, please explain why

you made the decision to end the plaintiff's employment." You answer: "When it came to the technical aspects of his job, he was a good accounting clerk. He handled the data accurately and timely. It was the other two standards where the problems occurred.

"With regard to treating internal and external customers with courtesy and respect at all times, this repeatedly broke down. There would be angry exchanges, finger-pointing, accusations, and counter-accusations. Several people in other departments (our internal customers) refused to deal with him. They said: 'I'll work with anyone in your department but him!'

"As for the external customers, on at least two different occasions, they threatened to switch their business to a competitor because they were so offended at the way he treated them. "As for the third standard, promoting trust, cooperation, and teamwork within the department, unfortunately this was not possible. His repeated outbursts, accusations, and finger-pointing caused ongoing tension and conflict. Two employees in my department told me they were looking for other jobs because they could no longer stand dealing with him. "I repeatedly attempted to work with him. I emphasized that it wasn't just handling transactions accurately that was necessary—so were the other two standards. Unfortunately, his behavior didn't change, and as a result, our department could not function effectively. "Eventually, I realized I had to let him go to fulfill my responsibilities as department head to our customers, my other employees, and the company. That's what I did and why I did it."

#### From Courtroom To Workplace

While this approach worked well in a courtroom, it struck me that it had value well beyond enhancing witness credibility. When coaching a manager on handling a high risk, problematic employee, I began asking the manager to identify the two, three, or four core behaviors that maximize the value of that employee's position. This "Star Profile" became the foundation of a corrective action plan. Using this approach produced one of two outcomes: (a) the employee eventually left the company without trouble; or (b) despite his or her initial skepticism, the manager learned how to turn a lose-lose relationship into a win-win one. I later wrote an article on the concept for *HR Magazine*. After the article generated interest and after further experiences and applications, I presented the concept in book form: ***The Star Profile: A Management Tool to Unleash Employee Potential*** (Davies-Black Publishing, 2008), which, at the 2009 Book Expo America, won the gold medal in the business—not law—category.

In subsequent posts, I'll share how I've used Star Profiles with clients as well as in my own management role. Star Profiles have a number of uses, including recruiting, hiring, promotion, succession planning, discipline, performance management, conflict resolution, and interdepartmental cooperation. In next week's post, I'll share an application close to home—how I used the Star Profile with my secretary

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