

# When I Can't Choose My Own Team...

Working with the Hand We're Dealt

In a perfect world, I would get to select all the people I work with. Alas, the world is often far from perfect. We don't always have the option to cut the deadwood and replace them with rock stars. You've seen the sports flicks where the underdog coach comes in and turns a bunch of "losers" into championship athletes. Some of these are true stories – take away the Hollywood touch and replace it with hard work, leadership skills, and grit.



## The Good, the Bad, and the Uncertain

For simplicity, let's describe the continuum of team members in terms of three buckets:

- **The Gainers** – These are the teammates you would choose. They're competent, have great attitudes, and get the job done with little oversight. We would clone them if we could. They make us look good and we're energized by spending time with them. But the reality is, they generally need the least from us and might even be better off when we get out of their way!
- **The Strainers** – The ones on the fence. They make some contribution, but if they vacated their seat you dream of filling it with a Gainer. They take more effort to oversee, and even if you could get rid of them you still might keep them just because of the pain and risk of replacing them.
- **The Drainers** – You dread seeing them coming. Perhaps they're incompetent, or their skills are fine but their attitude isn't. You procrastinate meetings with them, and the rest of the team feels the same way.

## What Do You Do with Them?

If you believe, as I do, that organizations thrive best when the people in them thrive, our goal becomes helping each person reach their full potential. Applying that to our three buckets:

- **The Gainers** – Our responsibility to Gainers is to provide clear objectives and the resources they need, then get out of their way. Stretch them to take on more responsibility so they can grow and you can focus elsewhere. They tend to rise to the challenges you give them.
- **The Strainers** – Our challenge here is to get them off the fence on the right side. Help them experience success (perhaps small at first) even as you stretch them and develop their skills at recognizing and overcoming obstacles. Show confidence in them. It will take all your emotional intelligence to discover what's holding them back and clear the obstacles. Focusing on turning Strainers into Gainers is hard work, takes a lot of time and patience, AND has the potential for big payback.
- **The Drainers** – Some Drainers aren't going to respond to even your best efforts. Others are potential Gainers under the right leadership (e.g. the sports flicks). Your challenge is discerning when to invest and when to resort to just minimizing their negative impact on the team (assuming you can't remove them). If you can tap into their personal values and help them rewrite their internal narrative of success, the rewards may astound you!

Good leaders rise to the challenge of developing potential at every level.