

Rebels and Robots, Stars and Citizens

Who Fills Out Your Performance Appraisal?

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People are some mix of self-directed and other-directed. This is true of people who, in their role as managers, have to prepare performance appraisals. This paper looks at four basic mixes of self-directed and other directed in the context of preparing performance appraisals.

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At times people are self-directed and at times they are other-directed¹. They follow their own lead or they take their cues from others. Based on the mix of the extent to which a person appears to be self-directed or other-directed, there are four basic styles. As the matrix in Figure 1 shows, these four styles are Rebels and Robots, Slugs and Stars. Descriptions follow.

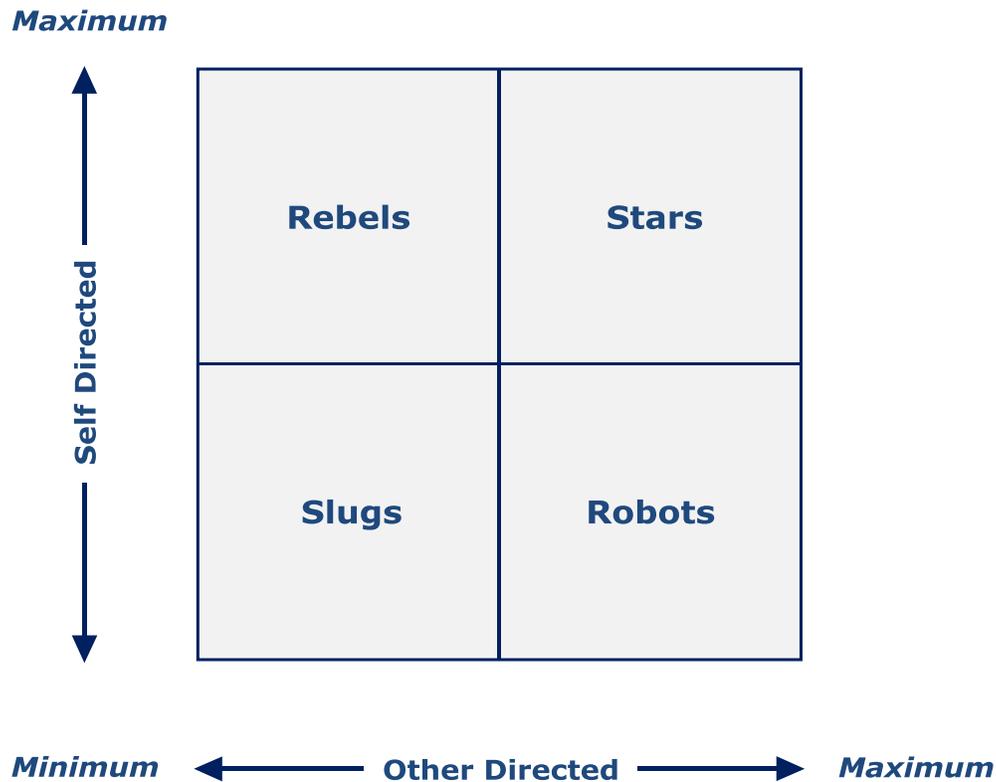


Figure 1 – The Self-Directed vs Other-Directed Matrix

- **Stars** do a good job of balancing and integrating the guidance and directions they receive from others with their own views and beliefs about the proper way of doing things. They can be counted on to give it their best.
- **Rebels** act mainly in accordance with their own notions of what is right and appropriate. They single-mindedly pursue their own initiatives and that often brings them into conflict with others.
- **Slugs** are passive, largely inactive people who take little or no initiative on their own nor are they very responsive to direction from others. They move slowly if at all.

¹ The concepts of self-directed and other-directed trace to a landmark sociological study by David Riesman, et al, that was first published in 1950 (*The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*). Riesman and his colleagues actually identified three sources of directedness: tradition-directed, self-directed and other-directed. Their study showed that tradition-directed had given way to self-directed and that was in the process of giving way to other-directed which, of course, was exactly what organizations needed.

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- **Robots**, as the term implies, take most of their direction from others and, lacking any agenda of their own, they display little initiative.

I found myself speculating about how these styles are reflected in the way managers approach that dreaded aspect of organizational life known as the annual performance review. Based on what I've seen over the years, I think there are some recognizable patterns. Descriptions follow.

1. **The Star Approach.** Under this approach, the appraiser is a good corporate citizen and strives to do the best job possible under the circumstances (which might or might not favor a realistic and useful appraisal of performance). The forms and interviews reflect honesty, candor and an attempt to be helpful, although they are constrained by many factors beyond the appraiser's control (see the requirements listed under the Robot heading below)
2. **The Rebel Approach.** Here, the appraiser despises performance appraisal systems and simply refuses to go along with the program. He (or she) shows no interest in writing others' appraisals; indeed, the appraisees are often asked to write their own appraisals and to assign their own ratings as well as indicate their own merit increase. They are also asked to take the lead in discussions of their performance. Surprisingly, the resulting forms and interviews are of uniform and unusually high quality (it seems appraisees really do care about their appraisals).
3. **The Slug Approach.** This approach is marked by the seeming inability of the appraiser to complete the necessary forms and interviews in a complete, timely and professional manner. In some settings, this shows up as extreme tardiness; in others, the appraiser simply never gets around to it until threatened first by HR and then by his or her boss (who has also been threatened by HR). The forms and interviews are themselves characterized by a minimum amount of effort and are of extremely poor quality.
4. **The Robot Approach.** This approach is one where the appraiser essentially does what he or she has been "programmed to do," blindly following company guidelines and procedures, up to and including the incorporation of recommended words and phrases and ensuring that the distribution of ratings (if ratings are used) satisfy whatever statistical requirements might be imposed (e.g., mean, median, mode and distribution). The forms and interviews pass muster so to speak, but although they meet the letter of the law, they do not fulfill their spirit.

As someone receiving a performance appraisal, it's worth your while to pay attention to the style of the person preparing and conducting yours. Why? Because, depending on the style of your appraiser, you can do different things to influence your appraisal. If you've got a Slug for an appraiser, you might nudge him or her along or lend a helping hand. If your appraiser is a Robot, you might focus on trying to influence the words and other content of your appraisal (i.e., reprogramming the robot). If your appraiser is a Rebel, rejoice; your appraisal is largely in your own hands. And, if your appraiser is a Star, be open, affable and as helpful to the appraiser as you can.

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If you're a manager who prepares and delivers appraisals, it might benefit you to reflect on your style as an appraiser and perhaps think about why and perhaps changing it.

If you're in HR, you might consider taking a look at how the styles of those who fill out appraisals in your company are distributed among the four categories described here. Are they mostly Stars with a few Slugs, Robots and Rebels? Or are they mostly Robots with a smattering of the others? Whatever the distribution, it will tell you something about your company's performance appraisals beyond what the data tell you.

And, just for the fun of it, you might try allocating your time among the four quadrants. What percentage of the time are you a Star? A Rebel? A Slug? A Robot? Does that distribution of time differ when you are at work and at home or on vacation?

About the Author

Fred Nickols is a writer, consultant, former executive and long-time observer of the workplace. He is also the Managing Partner of Distance Consulting LLC. The matrix in this paper is one of the many tools for knowledge workers found in a section of his web site known as the [Knowledge Worker's Tool Room](#).