



Maximizing High Performers

There have been many studies conducted on the unique characteristics of high performers. One of the common traits among the majority of high performers is their automatic desire to be better at their job today as a result of what they learned and discovered yesterday. In other words, high performers are hard wired to focus on the areas of their performance that need to be stronger.

No doubt, this is an admirable trait. Not surprisingly, many managers share that trait with their high performers. Like all human behavior, this desire for continual development has a set of obvious assets and, perhaps, not so obvious liabilities.

At Learning Dynamics, we have a long, successful track record for one-on-one coaching high performers. These coaching assignments are never remedial. The candidates for coaching sent to us are always high potential performers who can benefit from an objective coach whose only task is to help the employee find ways to be more effective at work.

One of the first challenges in our coaching relationships is to get the employee to list their strengths. This is remarkably difficult for many high performers. They don't want to talk about what they're good at; rather, they want to focus on the areas of their performance that need improvement or growth. So, they aren't aware of how they hit the targets successfully. Instead, they want to zero in on the ones they missed.

The supervisors of the highest performers are typically happy to have them on their respective

teams. These are the employees who get the job done – correctly, on time, and within budget. The idea of their best performers needing or seeking coaching from their boss is often lost in the hectic pace of work.

Supervisors' schedules are finite, not unlimited. They only have a set number of hours in the day to get things done and often have to make difficult decisions about how those hours will be spent. Their attention typically goes to those employees who need it most.

This can become a time-consuming set of behaviors. The payoff is that with the proper coaching, those employees with the greatest needs respond favorably and become fully contributing team members. But the time spent by the supervisor/coach can increase exponentially when the employee does not respond. The "problem children" can become a significant burden on the supervisor/coach.

So where does the supervisor find the time to deal with poor performers? Typically, he/she appropriates it from the high performers. While effective performance coaching would be very helpful to high performers, there just isn't enough time for the boss to get it done.

The best managers we know try to strike a balance on the time they spend coaching and on which people will benefit from it most. Weighing the value of a successful coaching plan for poor performers versus the performance improvements possible from coaching high performers is a difficult position for any supervisor. Too often, the

(OVER)

problems associated with struggling employees can consume inordinate amount of time for supervisors. Even with the help of HR or other associates, the requirement for supervisors can be disruptive from the normal ongoing results for which the team is responsible.

We have seen some creative and effective solutions to finding the time to coach high performers. One of our clients assigns a high performer to a new employee from their first day of employment. Before that assignment begins, the supervisor holds a coaching session with the high performer. In that session, they establish goals and targets for the high performer to reach, thereby expanding the strong employee's impact on the job and increasing the likelihood that the new employee will be assimilated faster.

Another solves the problem by assuring high performers that they are entitled to coaching on the job. They are given the green light to track the boss down and conduct the coaching

session. This employer also works with the idea that it doesn't always have to be the boss who does the coaching. Subject matter experts from other departments often make great coaches and the employee's visibility is increased as well.

In any case, the risks of not coaching the best employees are significant. These employees are often the most marketable to other companies. They can easily become disgruntled, especially if they can see how much time the boss spends with far lower return-on-the-investment employees. Most high performers do not need a lot of praise or attention from the boss, but offering none is an unwise decision.

Coaching your best employees is often very satisfying, but it does require careful decision making. The payoff is well worth the effort, and striking the balance about who gets coaching when is not easy. Including the high performers in that mix provides a significant payoff.

