



SIX COMMON MISTAKES IN LEADING HIGH PERFORMERS©

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“There is an enormous number of managers who have retired on the job.”
-Peter Drucker

I have the title of “President.” Hundreds of people work under me, and my phone is constantly ringing with their questions and ideas. “What do you think about this idea?” “Who in town should I go to with this proposal?” “I really don’t like the direction this decision is going.” “That was last year’s goal...I think we should be able to double that this year.” “We didn’t do it like this last time.”

I preside over meetings and have to make decisions about who will serve on which committees. I wear innumerable different hats. Sometimes tempers began to flare and I must play the role of peacemaker. Other times I’m supposed to inspire and pour enthusiasm into everyone’s empty tanks.. And I am always brokering key relationships up and down the organizational ladder. Sounds prestigious, doesn’t it?

I’m the president of a junior high booster club.

I am not real sure why I said yes when the job was offered. The pitch was, “You’ll already be at all the games watching your son and you might as well help out.” It feels like I’m doing quite a bit more than “helping out.” It has been a case study on managing high performers. It is the proverbial task of herding, only it’s herding high octane, super achiever, very gifted people.

The role of booster club president is anything but a walk in the park. Think about it. It’s a volunteer organization so only the passionate get involved. Plus, most club members in our school are highly intelligent, educated women who are now stay-at-home moms. A college education and spare time can be a dangerous combination.

It’s one thing to manage a cadre of employees—entry-level, middle manager, college-educated, MBA-ready, etc. It’s another thing altogether to have a complete group of overachieving Type A personalities volunteering to work, and all coming with different motivations for being involved.

High performers are those people we often describe as “driven.” A.P. Gouthey described high performers as those who “snatch success from seeming failure” and Yousuf Karsh said they have “an immense belief in themselves and in their mission.” In the mind of high performers, a job is a problem to be solved. And they have the ability to solve it.

British explorer George Mallory was a high performer. “Why do you want to climb Mount Everest?” he was asked. “Because it’s there.” He had the three characteristics of a high performer:

- Inborn Initiative—He saw a job and was simply drawn to complete it, to “win.”
- Positive Perseverance—He was not going to tire or quit easily.
- Superb Skill—He was no dumb worker ant. He was a quick learner and could handle complex tasks.

So what’s the problem? High performers are often difficult to manage.

That is why often we come to conclude that “a regular performer in the hand is worth a high performer in the bush.” But Bill Gates said, “The key for us, number one, has always been hiring very smart people.” Your business isn’t just shaped by people, it *is* people. If you want to be an innovative company, you need innovative people. If you want a flexible company, you need flexible people. If you want a high performing company, you need high performers.

There are three types of employees: underachievers, achievers, and overachievers. Underachievers are quickly out of a job. Achievers have job security but no chance of promotion. Overachievers exceed expectations and can move up but require superb management. Don’t be fooled, though, the opposite of an overachiever is not the underachiever, but the achiever. Our world is so results-driven, that the underachievers are a complete non-issue. They’re not a choice for you. Your choice is between the achiever and the overachiever.

ACHIEVER/REGULAR PERFORMER	OVERACHIEVER/HIGH PERFORMER
Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations
Job security, little chance of promotion	Probable job security and chance of promotion
Likes the Predictable	Likes High Risk/High Reward
Needs continual direction	Avoids asking for help
Needs managing	Needs managing

So why do so many companies use achievers instead of overachievers, adequate performers instead of high performers? Two reasons: first, sometimes we simply don’t know how to effectively manage high performers, and second, our skittish view of high performers sometimes makes us avoid them.

How do you identify high performers? One man I know looks for employees who by habit take initiative. Another executive looks for “quality human beings who are intelligent and have a vision.” If you can look at a resume and see that someone has consistently excelled, you’ve got a high performer. Finally, look for quick learners. Those who ask good questions. Jacob Bronowski said of Albert Einstein, “[He] was a man who could ask exceedingly simple questions.” High performers know the questions worth asking.

In some cases, however, managers see high performers and still avoid them. Some managers who want the spotlight avoid a high performer who might take it. They should keep in mind what Andrew Carnegie said: “No person will make a great business who wants to do it all himself or get all the credit.” Other managers are simply lazy, wanting the predictability that comes from knowing the reports will be filed every Friday. They want achievers and not overachievers. High performers will keep pushing for more, and these managers don’t want to get pushed. And the company becomes stagnant before you know it.

It’s true high performers can be difficult to manage, but there’s a reason they’re called *high* performers. Develop the attitude of Kenny Williams, the General Manager of the Chicago White Sox, who said simply, “Give me a team of overachievers and let’s see what happens.”

But that's the issue: in theory, high performers are great for the business, but in practice, the benefits can be lost amidst the stress, headaches and complications. The good news: you have high performers. The challenge: Few of us have had specific training in managing high performers.

Most of us have had high performers under our stewardship at one time or another. Managing them doesn't come easy or automatic. I have identified the 6 most common mistakes I have made or observed in working with Senior Leaders, Business Owners and Entrepreneurs the last 25 years.

MISTAKE #1: "HIGH PERFORMERS NEED MORE THAN BUSY WORK."

Busy work won't do it in today's competitive market. The work we do must be productive, efficient and effective. I can't just be spinning my wheels and not making real progress. The most effective managing you can do is to ensure your high performers are as useful and productive as possible.

High performers need their work to challenge them because problem solving is a jolt of adrenaline to them. That's when you see their best effort. Stick them with busy work and you're going to drain their internal battery charger down to a trickle of self-motivation and not get their best effort.

It is particularly essential to point out the critical issues to high performers because high performers are somewhat driven. If they have the wrong issue in mind, they will go full speed in the wrong direction. They'll do a great job, sure, but it will be the wrong job. Jim Marshall was a high performing defensive end for the Minnesota Vikings for nearly twenty years. On October 25, 1964, however, he missed the critical issue. He scooped up a fumble and ran sixty-six yards. In the wrong direction. Into the wrong end zone.

So as a manager, how do you distinguish between the critical and non-critical issues? To use homeland security terminology, what makes a yellow threat day and what makes a red threat day? What's DEFCON 5 and what's DEFCON 4? Always look for the most strategic questions surrounding any situation. The more strategic the better! What will shape your organization five, ten, fifty years down the road? Maybe you need to reconsider some core values. Maybe you need to firm up support from your clientele. Maybe you need a new location. Maybe you haven't considered what challenges you'll face from competitors or changes in the market in a few years.

Of course, sometimes it's obvious. When you're in the midst of a Class V hurricane, you don't pass it off as routine. A possible merger, plummeting sales, a new launch—these are critical issues. Point your high performers to the critical issues and let them run.

In my coaching practice I often use two instruments to keep the critical issues in view and on target. The two tools are "my Dashboard- *Monitoring the Critical Gauges that steer my life and work progress*" and "my DartBoard- *Pin-pointing the action steps that will create leverage and momentum*". These two tools make us specify the difference between busy work and productive work. It makes us circle and focus on the most critical issue, not just the loudest issue. Sometimes, even brilliant high performers need the same thing—someone to remind them what are "the specific action steps that will create leverage and momentum."

MISTAKE #2: "HIGH PERFORMERS OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH DELEGATION."

U.S. Senator and university president James Boren said, "When in doubt, mumble; when in trouble, delegate." That's the common stereotype we have of the concept of delegating: it's a way to get out

of work. I've done it myself. As I load up the truck for a move, I frequently become a delegator. "Pick that up. Put that there."

But true delegation is not a way to get out of work. Rather, it's a common-sense strategy to maximize your effectiveness. Dave Thomas couldn't make every burger at every Wendy's after all. Break your work into parts and then give specific work to specific people. The key word is specific. Delegation requires painting a clear target (not to mention the right target). Your high performers need to know exactly what the assignment is. I once heard a man say about preachers, "A mist in the pulpit creates a fog in the pew." I think the same could be said of managing high performers, "A mist in the Manager's mind creates a fog in the organization."

There are two particular pitfalls in the realm of delegation, and the pitfalls are only magnified when it comes to high performers.

- **Problem 1—No delegation:** Take advantage of your high performers! They're high performers! There is a temptation to keep all the important and crucial work for you. There is also a temptation to give them the busy work we talked about already and to start thinking you're necessary to every little job. You're not. Get over yourself. If you don't give them work to do, you have no one to blame but yourself when they get nothing done. Give them the highly complex problems they're capable of solving. Most high performers love taking complete ownership of a task and taking it from start to finish. So give them the ball.
- **Problem 2—Dumping instead of delegating:** If problem one is no delegation, problem two is poor delegation. In this scenario, you give your high performers immense amounts of generic work. Instead of "cultivate relationships with potential distributors in the tri-state region in the next 120 days," you say, "We need new people and new areas. And make sure everyone knows what you are doing. And cut costs a lot. And do it in a hurry. And. And."

How are you at delegating to your high performers? If your high performers seem to have plenty of idle time but you're burning the candle at both ends, start delegating more. Give your high performers jobs just a bit beyond their experience and reach. Match their particular skills and passions with specific jobs. Require them to come up with one new project for themselves every so often based on their perception of the organization's needs.

Oh, and one other thing. Remember what Robert Half said, "Delegating work works, provided the one delegating works, too."

MISTAKE #3: "HIGH PERFORMERS MUST NOT BE MICRO-MANAGED."

The more attached you are to the job or the organization, the more you will want to micro-manage. But remember famous General George Patton. As a high-ranking officer, Patton had plenty of high performers under him. Plus, if there's ever been a situation in which you need to be to the success of your venture, it's got to be war. The great ones have to take matters into their own hands, right? Yet Patton said, "Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

When you're working with high performers, micro-managing is particularly tempting because high performers are exciting to work with. It feels like there's an opportunity to make huge strides as long as they don't screw it up. And that "as long as" is the trap. Don't fall into that trap. Pull a Patton and give your high performers the opportunity to succeed.

Have you ever loved a project to death? Like Tim Allen's character in one episode of the 1990s sitcom *Home Improvement*, you think that for the project to turn out all right, everyone around you needs all your guidance all the time. Allen's character directs a how-to video and spends hours trying to make it Oscar-worthy. Meanwhile, the owner of the store is losing customers. Tim's high-performing, flannel-wearing partner Al Borland is exasperated. Even Tim is stressed, feeling that no one understands that his vision is the right one. They're running far over budget and far past schedule.

Sound familiar? Overmanaging means "too much" of something. You hang onto too much control, you give too much instruction, you want too much information. You want to be in on every little decision. You give a high performer a project and stay right beside them every step of the way—offering suggestions and critiques. Imagine the stereotypical mother-in-law and you're there.

And the worst of it is, over-managing will cripple high performers. It's tinkering with Albert Pujols's swing or Tom Brady's spiral. Sure they need guidance and feedback, but not after every swing or pass. President Teddy Roosevelt said, "The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it." Meddling (a.k.a. overmanaging) will make your high performers frustrated with you and will take away their confidence and risk-taking spirit, the very things that make them high performers.

If you want to stop overmanaging, start with hiring high performers. Jim Collins said, "The moment you feel the need to tightly manage someone, you've made a hiring mistake. The best people don't need to be over-managed. Guided, taught, led—yes. But not tightly managed." Second, discipline yourself to meddle less. How often do you offer an unsolicited suggestion? Track yourself for a week or a month and then cut back by a fourth or a third. Learn to walk by a high performer's desk without asking for an update. If you're particularly courageous, you can even ask employees (or a spouse) if they feel that you micro-manage and, if so, how you could stop. Emphasize that you're available to answer questions, and then back off. As the travel agency ad reads, "You need to go away."

MISTAKE #4: "HIGH PERFORMERS DON'T NEED COMPLETE AUTONOMY."

Okay, so we've talked about delegating and about not micro-managing. Cut your high performers loose. Give them the chance to excel. Let them make their own mistakes. That's good managing, right? Yes, but as Paul Harvey always said, you need "the rest of the story." Don't step out unless you know how and when to step back in.

Great management includes knowing when to take charge and when to let go. It is not always sitting back and staying out of the way.

Let's face it, high performers don't ask too many questions. That's what makes them great—their inborn initiative. They're driven to excel and to solve the problem. They won't be the employees coming back every ten minutes and asking for your opinion. They won't be the kids raising their hands for permission to go to the bathroom. They just go.

But sometimes they should ask questions. That's life; no one knows everything. Sometimes problems will arise that are beyond their expertise. Could be a simple question ("Where do you want me to send the report?"). Could be a huge question ("Will this project really benefit us?"). By not asking these questions, however, the high performer can finish the job incorrectly, waste precious time, or deprive you of an important perspective.

So it's your job to cultivate a relationship with your high performers so that they know to come to you with the right questions. Arthur Bloch said, "Every clarification breeds new questions." Emphasize that you expect them to have questions. Then, when they have questions, treat them respectfully and answer them fully. With high performers, you don't have to worry about them becoming too dependent on you, so give them more information rather than less.

In addition, however, you have to learn how to step back in and navigate critical issues, even when you're not asked. Witter Bynner said, "The biggest problem in the world could have been solved when it was small." Step back in before it is too late. The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 started when a single cow kicked over a lantern. Had Farmer O'Leary been able to step in right there and douse the flames, lives and buildings could have been saved.

Therefore, sniff the air for smoke. Look for telltale signs that your high performer has started a fire. After all, he's likely trying to solve the problem himself and just spreading the flames. Set up checkpoints for the project beforehand so that you can measure to see if things are progressing as expected. Listen to what the high performer's peers and subordinates are saying. Watch your high performer's stress level. In other words, don't overmanage, but don't undermanage either.

If you sense that a major problem might be arising, you have to step back in. Winston Churchill said, "The price of greatness is responsibility." You are responsible for your high performer's performance, so sometimes you have to step back in. If you do step back in, keep your high performer in on the project. Get a full update on the situation (even though he made the mistake, he knows the project better than anyone) and assess the damage.

If you can keep the high performer involved in stopping the fire, do it. He'll feel like part of the solution and not just the problem-causer. In all likelihood, however, you'll probably have some ruffled feathers. He'll think "I would have figured it out." It will take time to smooth those feathers, but help the process by giving him another chance and by discussing the fire. Don't let him fume behind your back. A "fume" means that another fire is only a spark away.

MISTAKE #5: "HIGH PERFORMERS NEED FEEDBACK, EVEN IF THEY RESIST IT."

High performers, especially those with past success, rarely seek out feedback. They don't ask questions because they want to solve the problem themselves. They don't ask for feedback for the same reason. But a manager can compound the problem. We see that they're working hard, so we don't tell them anything. We assume they'll figure out how to improve on their own. They're confident. They're tough. They'll be fine.

Truth is, they'll only be fine if you give them feedback. Kenneth Blanchard says, "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." And that breakfast has two food groups. Specific feedback and strategic feedback.

- **Specific Feedback:** The more specific the feedback is, the better. One size fits all feedback doesn't work. Specificity is the fuel of lasting change. That's why flying in

a big name speaker isn't nearly as influential as the daily, relational interaction. As a manager, when you know your high performer, you can offer them feedback specific to the way they work. Give specific feedback for individual projects (What specific aspects of the project are done well or need work? Were guidelines followed? Where does she consistently excel or struggle? What are her default modes that she needs to change?) Specificity always increases the possibility for lasting change.

- **Strategic Feedback:** Webster defines “strategic” as something which has “great importance within an integrated whole or to a planned effect.” Strategic feedback, then, always has the end goal in mind. It usually will involve a more comprehensive scope of the work. The wider view offers the high performer the chance to connect the dots for the next occasion. This turns a feedback session into a learning opportunity for the high performer. And over time a self-developing environment is one of the most important criteria for a high performer’s sustainability.

Take Butch Harmon for example. Harmon was Tiger Woods’s swing coach. Does that sound like the easiest job in the world or the hardest job in the world? It might sound like an easy job but imagine getting this phone call. “Butch, I just won the 1997 Masters. At age 21. By 12 strokes. I want to completely change my swing. Will you coach me?” Time Magazine called this strategy risking being the greatest golfer in the world for the chance to become the greatest golfer in history.

So Butch Harmon’s job was to find the weaknesses in Tiger Woods’s swing. Keep in mind that if they went out and played a round, Woods would no doubt beat Harmon by ten strokes, maybe twenty or thirty. And Harmon has to find weaknesses in Woods’s swing. Of course, as history bears out, it worked. Woods went almost two years without winning a tournament, but once he start winning, he started playing more consistently and remarkably than ever before, winning four straight major tournaments in 1999-2000. Three years later, he did it all again, reworking his swing in 2003-2004, and then coming back stronger than ever.

High performers like Tiger Woods need to be continually challenged. In fact, they need it more than anyone because high performers are the first ones to get bored with what they perceive as a routine task. Peter Drucker said, “Knowledge has to be improved, challenged, and increased constantly, or it vanishes.” High performers can grow stagnant just like everyone else, it’s just stagnation at a higher level.

Of course, feedback isn’t always great fun. Particularly when your high performer made a mistake. How do you tell a high performer she messed up? Whatever you do, don’t avoid necessary negative feedback. Hugh Prather said, “Negative feedback is better than none. I would rather have a man hate me than overlook me. As long as he hates me, I make a difference.”

So your job as the manager is to find the areas in which they need to grow. Look for their weaknesses, their blind spots. In the movie *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Kevin Costner’s Robin Hood says, “I can teach this twelve year-old boy to find the weak spots in a soldier’s armor.” Knights were 95% protected against the sting of an arrow, but with the proper guidance the 5% could still be found. That’s your job: find the 5%.

Look in a variety of areas for weak spots:

- Job skills—Should your high performer improve her writing, accounting, etc.?
- Networking—Does she need to meet with a new set of people?
- Character issues—Is your high performer sacrificing his integrity in any way?
- Professionalism—Should he work on punctuality or preparation?

- Relational skills—Could he listen better? Direct more clearly? Interact more casually?

You get the point. As the manager, you can challenge in soft items or hard items. The issue is often not how you challenge them, but simply that they are challenged. Your high performer needs to be convinced that there is always room for improvement.

MISTAKE #6: “HIGH PERFORMERS CAN TAKE THE ORGANIZATION HOSTAGE.”

The Greek storyteller Aesop told a fable about a group of house flies. The flies spied an overturned honey pot and quickly landed and began greedily eating the honey as it spilled out of the pot. A few minutes later, however, the flies noticed that their feet were stuck, and they could not escape. Next, it was their wings that were stuck, and they knew they would perish. As the honey rolled over the flies’ heads, suffocating them, they exclaimed, “What fools we are! We have destroyed ourselves for the sake of a little pleasure.” Cheery story, huh?

High performers can become that kind of trap. Assuming you’ve avoided normal performers and chosen high performers, the opposite temptation is to dive in headfirst and over embrace your high performers. Revel in their hard work. Rejoice in their ingenuity. However, be careful. Before you know it, you’re no longer managing. You might be trapped.

In the worst case scenario, your high performers know it. As one worker sarcastically said, “I’m not good in groups. It’s difficult to work in a group when you’re omnipotent.” Sure, you’ve got the business card, the name plate, and the big expense account, but they’ve got the power. You depend on your high performers so much that you are entirely dependent on their performance. What they say goes. And they can evolve into high maintenance prima donnas, nightmares to work with. As the old saying goes, “Can’t live with ‘em, can’t live without ‘em.”

You see this a lot in sports. Players start to think they’re bigger than the team. According to most news reports, wide receiver Randy Moss was a nightmare to work with during his years with the Minnesota Vikings and the Oakland Raiders (Moss’s team commitment has improved greatly with the New England Patriots)—not running hard unless he knew the play was a pass to him, complaining about the playcalling, even getting in trouble with the law. But he was a high performer. Boy, was he good. Even if the coach didn’t want to keep Moss, he had to, because Moss made catches and money. Indeed, many coaches even end up trading other players in hopes that the high performer will be happier. Everything revolves around the high performer.

And like the flies in the honey, you’re trapped, and you can’t find a way out. Even if he’s not a prima donna. It shows up in areas far beyond sports. If your high performer has the big sales account, you’re handcuffed to him. If your non-profit has one big sugar-daddy donor, you’re handcuffed to him.

You’ve inadvertently abdicated your managerial throne. And you’ve indicated to the high performer that he, and not the project, is the most important thing. J.D. Salinger said, “It’s really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs.” Likewise, it’s difficult to work with a high performer who thinks he’s far more important than you.

So what do you do? Ask two questions to determine whether the high performer is needed.

- Does this person still make economic sense? Is he helping our bottom line? If yes, then move to the second question.

- Does this bottom-line bump outweigh the high performer headaches? How destructive is he to the overall team? How draining is he on you as a manager? It might be worth a bottom-line sacrifice to make the team better as a whole (plus, you'll be surprised, it might even help your bottom line to make the change).

If he's not needed, get rid of him. If he is needed, work to free yourself from the handcuffs. It's not easy, but you have to reassert your authority. Force yourself to take first steps at distributing your dependence outside your high performer. Communicate to your high performer what has to change. Follow through on your demands. Be prepared for painful readjustments. Take command. Or better said, take back command.

SUMMARY

Everybody has to be managed. Especially high performers. Jack Welch said, "I was a gardener providing water and other nourishment to our top 750 people." You don't have to be perfect. But you have to be willing. Willing to lead. Willing to challenge. Willing to be responsible. Willing to be the manager.

- **Be competent:** Make it your job to have the answers to your high performer's questions. Many times, your education and experience will make you competent by default. At all times, though, stay on top of your field. Yousuf Karsh said of leaders, "At the crucial moment, they draw on their accumulated wisdom." High performers will learn to look to you as you prove that you have that wisdom. That you can answer their questions. That you know what you're doing.
- **Be confident:** All people, including high performers, want to work with and follow those who exude confidence. I'm not saying become a dictator, but I am saying that when you demonstrate that you don't have doubts about your ability, your high performers won't have doubts either. As Henry Ford said, "Whether you think you can or you can't, you're right."
- **Be in control:** Don't shy away from authority. Be firm and clear when you give directions and projects. In addition, remember that with authority comes responsibility. Take responsibility for your high performers. When they make a mistake, don't blame it on them. Blame it on yourself. High performers will seek out your feedback when they see you want them to excel and are in the battle with them.

Sports offers lots of examples of high performers, athletes who are at the top of their profession. One of the greatest challenges in sports, however, is remaining on top. That's where a coach becomes important and where we can see one final example of managing high performers.

In 2006, the Florida Gators cruised through the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament, winning the national championship by nearly twenty points over UCLA. Then the surprise came, as all five starters announced that they would return to school rather than enter the NBA draft. Coach Billy Donovan faced the question, "How do you improve on victory, on a championship?"

The parallel is clear. Billy Donovan was managing high performers. The players had proven they had the skills and competitive desire to succeed. It was Donovan's job to assign the proper roles, see potential trouble spots, offer new coaching tips, and, sometimes, just stay out of the way. In other words, he had to delegate, see the critical issues, provide feedback, and not micro-manage.

Credit Donovan: he realized that he too needed some management. He sought out coaches from other sports who had faced the same situation. He asked, "How do you manage high performers who seem to do just fine on their own?" These other coaches gave him plenty of suggestions. Combine that with plenty of trial and error and you've got the 2007 Florida basketball team.

In the end, Donovan and the Gators did what no one had done in fifteen years, repeating as national champions. Sure, there were trouble spots along the way (the team lost five games during the year), but Donovan kept the team focused on the goal and improving.

That's the challenge of managing high performers. How do you keep your high performers focused? How do you challenge them to improve? It's not an easy question. But in the Florida basketball team, we also see the opportunity. High performers destroy the limits. Greatness becomes possible. You can tread in realms and succeed in ways few others have. After all, you have the high performers to do it. All you need is the manager.

"Nothing we do is more important than hiring and developing people. At the end of the day, you bet on people, not on strategies." –Larry Bossidy