

Expert Tips for Leading Top Performers

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Managers in charge of overachievers must find ways to keep these high-maintenance employees in peak form. Here's how executives at IBM, Lycos, and Xerox do it.

Cut Red Tape for Them

The Manager:

Toby Tobin, Xerox vice president of sales operations for the Mountain West region

The Challenge:

Bureaucratic policies that prevent top performers from delivering results

Tobin says the overachievers in his department will do two to three times more business than the average sales rep — if they have the freedom to operate. Aggressively confident, overachievers start selling when the customer says #no,# and often seal the multi-million-dollar deals.

But big sales can mean big problems. Since they outsell other reps, overachieving salespeople continually have trouble securing enough credit to cover the price of large equipment sales to customers. That can slow down, and even threaten, the sale. #You want to remove the barriers in credit, billing, and service problems,# Tobin says, #and you better do it in a timely manner, because overachievers will lose faith in you. You have to gain their respect and maintain it.#

Each week, Tobin sits down with one of his overachieving employees, product sales manager Rene Parish, to discuss ways to eliminate such obstacles. One strategy they came up with is a program that lets Parish and other overachievers in the department move credit approvals through the finance process more quickly.

Enforce Breaks in Their Schedule

The Manager:

Elizabeth Smith, general manager, IBM Global Technology Services

The Challenge:

An overachiever who's burning out

An overachieving sales rep we'll call Jill was working to put together a detailed proposal for a client in a struggling market. Smith, who manages about 100 employees globally, noticed that Jill kept trying the same strategy: She worked late nights researching the company's position in the market.

That strategy had worked in the past, but it wasn't working now, and it was wearing Jill down and eroding her self-confidence.

Intent on success, Jill couldn't see that she was trying the same strategy over and over. She remained rigid and focused, not receptive to change — a trap many overachievers fall into. Smith knew Jill needed to clear her head, so when she went on a two-day business trip, she asked Jill to come along. #I didn't need anyone to come with me, but I needed time with her to talk,# Smith says. #I really just wanted to get her away.#

During the trip, Smith arranged to spend the morning with the client and an hour-and-a-half in the afternoon at a spa, speaking to a dozen female executives about collaboration and innovation. Jill and Smith spent the rest of the day together at the spa. Smith's strategy worked: After an afternoon of rest, it took all of 30 minutes before Jill came back with several new ideas that ultimately turned around the deal.

Teach Them to Learn from Mistakes

The Manager:

Don Kosak, chief technology officer at search engine Lycos Inc.

The Challenge:

A failed product that dampens overachievers' confidence

A team of overachieving Web developers at Lycos spent six months building the social-networking platform Lycos Circles. The site debuted in 2004 — and shut down a year later. After this blow, Kosak worked hard to rally his team. #Overachievers are often very hard on themselves when they fail, and you need to take the extra step to point out what they've learned,# he says. While the initial technology project didn't pan out, all was not lost. From the ashes of Lycos Circle, the search engine built better blogging tools. The technology was incorporated into personal publishing platforms — Tripod and Angelfire — used by more than 1 million bloggers.

Although it's natural to first examine the cause for failure, overachievers should look beyond that and review the lessons learned, Kosak says. Examine the business ideas, technologies, and practices that *did* work. Picking up the pieces that worked well and using them in the next project is not only practical, it also helps team members regain self-confidence.

Show Them How to Play Nice

The Manager:

Frank Tallman, director and management coach at Professional Development Consulting Inc., whose clients include 3M, Bank of America, The Coca-Cola Co., General Electric, McKinsey & Co., and Siemens

The Challenge:

An overachiever executive with a brusque leadership style

A senior executive we'll call Joe asked Tallman for help providing leadership training to his team. A typical overachiever, Joe had high standards and liked to continually critique his team's work — while insisting that he was open to their creative approaches. Those who reported to Joe knew any work submitted would be scrutinized and sent back for improvements, so they didn't bother to submit their best work. In fact, Joe's management style led to lower performance and de-motivation for his direct reports.

Tallman stepped in to help Joe understand his management style. The two worked together to set clear expectations for projects and milestones. Joe learned that asking his team leading questions, rather than blasting out orders, prompted higher productivity levels: It made employees feel that their ideas were valued. The change prompted increased productivity, innovation, and motivation among team members, Tallman says, and it created a teaching/learning culture that goes both ways.
