

# How to Manage Overachievers

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Overachievers have the drive, determination, passion, and energy needed to move huge projects forward. But they're not like other employees. You need to lead them differently if you want to take advantage of all they have to offer. You also need to watch out for characteristic quirks that can undermine their success: They sometimes set unrealistic expectations, work insane hours, and take risks to succeed at any cost. Without some savvy supervision, many can lose perspective and become obsessed, dysfunctional, and ultimately unable to perform.

In order to manage overachievers well, you need to understand their personality type and build a relationship on trust, so they know you have their best interest in mind. Here we'll show you how to curb the destructive tendencies that can disrupt a star performer's productivity and develop positive management skills to keep them — and you — happy.

## Things you will need:

- None. You can't put a price on a well-managed relationship.
- Keeping a super-achiever on track demands constant communication. Schedule an hour or two per week for pep talks, dealing with obstacles, and discussing personal goals.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** You'll need fundamental skills like listening, observing, and communicating to understand overachievers and the objectives they value most.
- **Mentoring Program:** Develop a mentoring program such as IBM's (see "The Nitty Gritty," below) to guide overachievers — and to let them provide insight and information to other employees.
- **Patience:** Overachievers demand a lot from their managers, but if you give them the time and attention they need, they can accomplish twice as much as other employees.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in black.

## Identify the Overachiever

**Goal: Recognize overachievers on your team and during job interviews.**

The most important part of managing overachievers is recognizing them early — as early as the job interview. An overachiever's work and personal history will no doubt show that they take the initiative to get things done — as will glowing reports from their references. Don't ask overly personal questions, but do pose questions like, #What did you do in college aside from academics?# If the candidate responds, #I put myself through school running my own window-washing company, and I was also president of my fraternity,# you're probably talking to an overachiever.

Think you already have an overachiever on your team? Look for some telltale signs:

Takes on tasks without being told or goes beyond the boundaries of their job description to solve problems

Prefers not to work in teams or take the time to follow basic processes and job functions

Becomes overly concerned with accomplishing tasks, no matter which job function you plug them into

#Overachievers typically forget to communicate vital information, often take shortcuts, and leave the details to someone else,# says Douglas May, vice president of worldwide sales at security software firm Bit9. #They may not tell you the entire story right away to keep you from thinking they've set expectations too high.# May says an overachiever on his team could be in the final stages of negotiating a million-dollar deal, but May wouldn't know about it until the deal has closed.

## Essential Ingredients

### Four Ways to Spot an Overachiever

We asked top managers how they know when they're dealing with an overachiever. Here's what they said:

- 1. Drive** #Overachievers don't always understand the reasons for their success and often question the outcome, so they push harder. They easily lose patience with those who don't push as hard. Many have difficulties interacting socially.# — *Frank Tallman, director and C-level executive coach at Professional Development Consulting*
- 2. High Expectations** #During the job interview, ask questions like, 'How did you put yourself through college?' to identify self-starters and independence. Most have extremely high expectations of themselves and others around them.# — *Toby Tobin, vice president of sales operations for the Mountain West region at Xerox*
- 3. Impatience** #Most overachievers are impatient when asked to explain the same thing more than once. They don't understand why people can't see the big picture as they do.# — *Christopher Coppola, director at independent movie studio Ears XXI*
- 4. Good Judgment** #Many have sharp problem-solving skills, foresight, good acumen, and the ability to blend into the company's culture.# — *Ken Elefant, founding partner of venture capital firm Opus Capital*

## Understand the Personality Type

**Goal: Learn what motivates overachievers in order to get the best out of them.**

For overachievers, completing tasks above and beyond expectations provides the same physical and mental high as a drug. But the sensation gets harder to come by as time wears on, so don't expect them to get comfortable and remain in their current position for more than two to three years. Most appreciate your mentoring but get bored quickly and move on to the next challenge.

Don't just give overachievers pats on the back and expect gratitude in return. Because they tend to be spontaneous and have little patience for protocol, overachievers demand more of your time than others. For example, they may want to bounce around new ideas at a moment's notice. Stephen Kern, director of decision support systems in Pfizer's global manufacturing division, likes working with overachievers, but admits they can spend too much time on a project and not get things done. #There's an upside to having overachievers on your team,# Kern says, #but it can take a lot of energy to focus them because they're continually looking to accomplish things beyond the obvious tasks.#

Overachievers can often appear scattered and unable to focus, but that might merely signal that they're focused *too* intently on one task. And since they hate to be wrong, they don't always respond well to criticism. William Quigley, managing director of Clearstone Venture Partners, finds this problem among CEOs and company founders. As a board member for several companies, Quigley says he spends much of his time asking overachieving chief executives probing questions. #I don't find it useful to tell them about a problem in their supply chain and give them a solution,# he says. #Instead I ask them overarching questions about their priorities: Do you feel resource constrained? What areas could you use more help with?#

### Checklist

#### Related Books

[#What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful#](#) by Marshall Goldsmith and Mark Reiter (Hyperion, 2007)

[#A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future#](#) by Daniel Pink (Riverhead Books, 2006)

[#Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence#](#) by Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee (Harvard Business School Press, 2004)

## Lead by Inspiring, Not by Commanding

### **Goal: Give top performers the flexible environment they need.**

Overachievers don't like to be told what to do. Managers get the best results from them if they involve them in decisions and planning whenever possible. If there's a problem with their work, rather than telling them how to fix it, ask them what they think the solution should be. Here are a few strategies for hands-off management:

**Provide emotional coaching.** Praise them for work well done. Though they pretend to ignore the pat on the back, overachievers know their worth and won't respect you if you don't acknowledge their contributions. They sometimes get bogged down in details and need a manager to inspire, motivate, set goals, and provide direction. They also need someone to provide occasional reality checks. Bit9's May says he provides emotional coaching to his sales staff by continually reinforcing positive attitudes. #I have to tell them, 'No, I'm not going to fire you for only selling 100 percent of your monthly quota rather than 150 percent,'# he says.

**Remove obstacles.** Perceived or real barriers could prompt overachievers to quit. Leverage your employees' status to cut through red tape and pave the way for success. Most executives know their company's top performers — from professional services to sales and marketing. Use that to your advantage to make business processes easier for those who meet specific quotas. For example, you might allow an IT professional with a proven track record to gain approval on specific code development more quickly. Both Xerox and IBM bypass red tape to make it easier for top performers to fast-track their projects.

**Follow through with commitments.** Overachievers are not easily fooled — and they're quick to recognize insincerity. Keep your word with them. You'll earn their trust and respect. #Your loyalty toward them will also emphasize good work ethics, such as, 'Don't strive for achievement and run people over in the process,'# says psychologist and executive coach Robert Pasick.

**Tap into their creativity.** To keep overachievers from getting bored, managers need to create an atmosphere in which the employees can explore their own ideas. Google, for instance, allows employees to spend 20 percent of their time each week on pet projects — which may or may not turn out to be profitable for the company. #As a manager, you need to keep an open mind,# says Don Kosak, chief technology officer at search engine Lycos. #Remain receptive to new ideas because many times your overachievers will take problems and come up with solutions you never anticipated.#

### **Hot Tip**

#### **Star Power**

One way to keep overachievers happy is to determine their long-term goals, figure out ways to tie those into current assignments, and find projects that make them shine. During weekly team meetings, Pfizer's Kern keeps staffers focused and interested in

tasks at hand by associating the current project with their long-term career goals. Kern also holds periodic #folder reviews# with individuals who overachieve, using the time to coach the overachiever and talk about his or her career goals.

Overachievers continually look for their next promotion, Kern says. #They can handle the promotion, but I need to make sure they're working on projects that highlight their capabilities,# he says. #Overachievers need to shine — otherwise they won't stay.#

step 4

## Make It Safe to Fail

**Goal: Let overachievers know that failure isn't the end of the world.**

Overachievers love taking risks — and often reach for unrealistic goals. Given their mindset, they hate to fail. But many do, simply because they've set their sights too high. Any setback can make them feel inferior. Intelligent managers should help employees accept failure, not punish people for it. Here are a few ways to help reinforce this message:

**Recognize learning experiences.** IBM uses mentoring programs to teach overachievers the value of failure and how to learn from mistakes. Elizabeth Smith, general manager of IBM Global Technology Services, says this training served her well when a program she designed failed to achieve positive results in Asia. In the past she might have tossed out her hard work in frustration, but thanks to IBM's supportive environment, she was able to make a few minor modifications and successfully launch the program in the United States.

**Build on their wealth of ideas.** Never tell an overachiever (or anyone else, for that matter) that their ideas are bad or unrealistic. Overachievers are especially sensitive to criticism, and one harsh remark could shut down their creativity for good. Besides, many times #bad# ideas tossed around during planning or brainstorming sessions lead to successful projects. Salvation Army CIO Clarence White specifically hired two overachievers because they thought in different ways. The first one often came up with quixotic ideas that the second one turned into brilliant initiatives.

**Reinforce confidence.** When overachievers do fail, their confidence will take a beating. Remind them of their strengths and get them back in the saddle. Quigley of Clearstone funded a Web portal in 1998 that allowed companies to search for online advertising space in target markets. By late 2000 the company had shut down because the Internet ad market took a dive. Quigley helped place the CEO into another company. His assistance reinforced the CEO's confidence in his own ability and allowed him to successfully lead a new company.

**Danger! Danger! Danger!**

**Beware of Burnout**

Overachievers are at high risk for burnout. It's easy for them to lose track of time when working — a state of mind some call #the flow.# It's like a dream state for the worker

wholly absorbed in a task, but it can become a nightmare for everyone when it turns into 12-hour work days. #Remind them it's 8 p.m., they began work 12 hours earlier, and they accomplished a lot,# Kosak of Lycos says. #Tell them to wrap it up and finish the task at hand tomorrow.# If they don't leave, you may need to lay out ground rules and invoke company policy, which usually limits the amount of time employees can spend in the building.

step 5

## Turn Overachievers into Team Players

**Goal: Help overachievers fit into the team and contribute.**

Overachievers typically prefer to work alone to prevent getting bogged down (and sometimes to keep the kudos for themselves). Other employees also may prefer it that way if the overachiever is hypercritical or impatient. But there are times when collaborating is essential. Here are a few strategies for bridging the divide:

**Teach overachievers to listen and share problem solving.** #Overachievers tend to be aloof,# says Roger Matus, co-founder and CEO of InBoxer. #When you don't know them, they could appear threatening at first.# Matus recommends building alliances by bringing together an overachiever and another employee to solve a problem. Sit down with both employees and have each ask the other how he or she would solve the problem. Sharing techniques will help build respect: Overachievers learn that other team members can have good ideas, and other employees appreciate the chance to be heard.

**Pair coworkers who complement each other.** Overachievers aren't perfect at everything they do — most usually have an area of great strength that overshadows another area of weakness. By pairing people well, you help them overcome those weaknesses. Even mavericks who like working solo will notice that their work improves with the right match. For example, when the Salvation Army needed to improve the quality of data collected from its locations across the country, White paired two overachievers on his team to solve the problem: an idea person and a details person. The more conceptual thinker came up with the idea of soliciting data with a questionnaire rather than just asking for numbers on a spreadsheet. The employee who executes directions well took the idea and finished writing the software program before deadline and within budget.

**Develop a coaching culture.** One method to get an overachiever to participate in a group setting is to ask him or her to mentor or coach another employee and provide ongoing feedback. #Help them become part of the process,# May suggests. #They have a lot to offer and love to be the center of attention, so use it to your advantage and get them to mentor someone else.# Set guidelines that emphasize positive reinforcement to keep overachievers from becoming too critical.

## Nitty Gritty

### Setting Up a Mentoring Program

IBM's Top Talent Mentoring Program provides one-on-one coaching for employees who demonstrate the potential to become leaders. The company pairs a manager or executive within the company with an employee to learn their goals and identify opportunities for advancement. Then the executive provides regular feedback to help fine-tune skills such as leadership style.

To identify employees who have the potential to step into leadership roles, IBM's Smith says she looks for sustained high performance, keen self-awareness, and positive role-model attributes. Then she matches those employees with executives who share their interests or have jobs they're aiming toward. In addition to sage advice, mentoring gives the overachiever a chance to learn his own value. #Overachievers look for how they connect and how they are recognized for making a difference,# Smith says. #Taking the time to help them understand their current value, and how that ties in with the company's strategy, gives them a sense of future job opportunities.#