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Stop Ignoring Your High Performers

by Ruth Gotian October 8, 2024

Summary.

Managers often make a costly mistake in leaving high performers to perform at their maximum capacity without support, choosing to instead devote their time and attention to underperformers. In doing so, though, these high performers are often left feeling overlooked and neglected. Contrary to popular belief, high performers need just as much attention as underperformers — just not in the same way. Rather than being disregarded for their productivity, high performers need recognition and appreciation, opportunities for growth and challenge, clear pathways for advancement, autonomy and trust, and a feeling of purpose and belonging in the organization.

In every organization, high performers are the driving force behind innovation, productivity, and excellence. They consistently exceed expectations, push boundaries, and inspire those around them. Yet, despite their critical importance to an organization's mission and bottom line, high performers, who are generally [400%](#) more productive than an average employee (and as high as [800% more productive](#) in highly complex occupations, such as software developers), are often overlooked. Instead, managers focus on under-performers who demand immediate intervention. This unbalanced attention is costly, leading to disengagement, frustration, and ultimately, the loss of top talent.

Many managers operate under the assumption that high performers are self-sufficient and require less attention. They believe these individuals are thriving and don't need the same level of guidance or support as others. After all, if they're already delivering exceptional results, why fix what isn't broken? While this mindset is true in certain ways, it also leads to a hands-off approach, where high performers are left to navigate challenges on their own and may not be pushed outside their comfort zone where true learning begins. Independence is important, but the lack of direct support and feedback can create feelings of isolation and neglect. High performers want the opportunity to grow, receive feedback, and be stretched, and when these needs aren't met, their engagement can quickly wane, despite their strong output.

So, what do high performers really want in the workplace? They seek recognition, growth opportunities, and autonomy, but retaining their commitment requires more than just understanding these needs. By implementing targeted actions — focused on appreciation, challenge, advancement, and trust — you can create an environment where these indispensable team members remain engaged and motivated.

1. Recognition and Appreciation

High performers are not going to seek out validation for every success — they're too busy focusing on the next challenge. But they do want their contributions to be noticed and appreciated. A generic "great job" for something that is expected, like showing up on time or meeting a standard deadline, isn't going to cut it. They need to know that you see the specific ways in which they're going above and beyond. Whether it's their dedication to a complex project, their innovative problem-solving, or their ability to rally a team, be specific in your praise. Perhaps they identified

and fixed a bottleneck in a project, introduced a new feature you didn't know you badly needed, solved a systemic issue, or set up training sessions to level up the team. These are all out-of-scope solutions that should be appreciated.

Research has shown that recognizing positive skills and contributions not only boosts the [motivation](#) of the individual receiving recognition but also has a powerful [spillover effect](#) on the rest of the team. Recognition doesn't always have to be public, but it should be meaningful. For some, a quiet word of thanks or a thoughtful note might suffice, while others may appreciate being acknowledged in a team meeting or on a professional platform such as LinkedIn. The key is to understand how each of your high performers prefers to be recognized and to tailor your approach accordingly.

2. Opportunities for Growth and Challenge

High performers thrive on challenges. They are not content with simply meeting expectations — they want to exceed them. To keep them engaged, you must provide them with opportunities to stretch their abilities. This could be through challenging assignments, cross-departmental projects, or roles that require them to step out of their comfort zone.

To identify opportunities that match a high performer's strengths and passions, invest time in getting to know them on a deeper level and learn what makes them tick. Regular one-on-one conversations or even hallway chats can help uncover their interests, long-term goals, and areas they want to grow. Ask them what comes easily to them, what is more challenging, where they see their career heading, and what skills they are eager to sharpen or learn. This insight allows you to align assignments with their natural talents and aspirations and sends a strong signal that you care about their success. The key is to tailor opportunities that stretch their capabilities in areas they're genuinely passionate about.

But don't just hand them a tough project and walk away. Offer them the tools, resources, and autonomy they need to succeed. If it is a cross-departmental role, check in with the other leader. Also ask the high performer to see how it is going, what they are learning, and what they wish they knew in advance. Offer perspective and historical context to help pave their success. This shows that you are interested in their success.

3. Clear Pathways for Advancement

High performers are [ambitious](#), described as a persistent striving for accomplishment, attainment and success. They want to know that their hard work is leading somewhere. And they don't just want to know a skill; they want to master it. It's not enough to have vague promises of future opportunities; they need a clear, actionable pathway for advancement. They like goals and targets to aspire to. Regular career conversations — far more frequently than just at annual reviews — are essential. These discussions should outline the next steps in their career, the skills they need to develop, and the metrics by which their progress will be measured.

When having career conversations with high performers, dive deeply into their ambitions and goals. Ask questions such as, "What new challenges excite you right now?" or "Which skills do you feel would take your performance to the next level?" This gets them thinking not just about the present, but about their future growth. You'll also want to establish concrete steps for their development: "What milestones would you like to achieve over the next six months?" or "How can I help remove any obstacles in your path?"

Make these regular conversations. Just as you would prioritize check-ins for underperformers or those needing immediate help, high performers deserve that same level of attention. Schedule monthly or quarterly meetings to ensure you're keeping their growth at the forefront. These discussions reinforce that their development is a priority and that you're invested in their long-term success.

Don't wait for a high performer to ask about their career trajectory. Career advancement opportunities should never be kept a secret. Be proactive in identifying opportunities for them, whether it's a promotion, a leadership role, or a new project that aligns with their long-term goals. By doing so, you show that you're invested in their future, which, in turn, deepens their commitment to your organization.

4. Autonomy and Trust

One of the quickest ways to disengage a high performer is to [micromanage](#) them. These individuals have proven time and again that they are capable, innovative, and reliable. What they need from you is the autonomy to make decisions, solve problems, and execute their responsibilities in the way they see fit. Trust them with the authority that matches their responsibility, and they will not only meet your expectations but often exceed them.

To give high performers autonomy while managing your natural tendency to keep tabs on them, set clear expectations upfront. Define the outcomes you're looking for, but give them the freedom to decide how to get there. Schedule regular, brief touchpoints where they can update you on progress. During these check-ins, focus on offering guidance and support rather than steering the process.

If you find yourself wanting to micromanage, remind yourself that their past performance has earned them this level of trust. Consider framing it this way: "I'm here if you need me, but I trust you to run with this." This allows you to stay informed without stifling their independence. Letting go can be tough, but trusting their process will ultimately lead to better outcomes—and stronger engagement.

5. Alignment with Organizational Values

High performers are not just looking for a bigger paycheck; they are [looking for purpose](#). They want to feel that their work is meaningful and aligned with the values of the organization. This is why it's crucial to ensure that their personal values are aligned with the company's mission. Engage them in conversations about what drives them and find ways to connect their work to broader organizational goals.

To uncover what drives a high performer, ask questions that get to the core of their values and aspirations. Ask, "What part of your work gives you the most energy?" "What part of your work depletes you?" or "Which aspects of our mission resonate with you the most?" Go deeper with, "What kind of impact do you want your work to have on the company or the industry?" This creates a connective tissue between their daily tasks and the larger organizational vision.

Research by [Gallup](#) and [McKinsey](#) consistently shows that when employees are able to align their work with their personal values, their engagement increases which ultimately results in high creativity and productivity. As described in my book, *The Success Factor*, this is heightened and a fundamental principle for high achievers. Encouraging high performers to live out their values through their work not only enhances their engagement but also leads to more innovative and

impactful contributions. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves, and it's your job to help them see how they fit into the larger picture.

When you prioritize these elements, you'll not only keep your high performers on board, but you'll also unlock their full potential, driving your organization toward greater success. In the end, what high performers really want is to know that they matter — that their efforts are making a difference. And as a leader, it's your responsibility to ensure that they do.



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