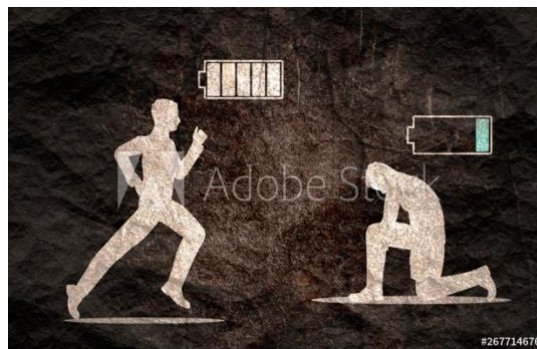


How to turn high performers into low performers – 3 common leadership mistakes when managing performance

by Dragan Milicevic on October 20, 2020

"People leave bosses, not companies"
-unknown

The other week, I ran a performance management training for leaders. 90% of the participants wanted to learn how to turn low performers into high performers. It seemed to be their biggest challenge when leading their people. This comes as no surprise. If you browse through the business literature, it is hard not to find an article on how to turn low performers into high performers. However, it reveals one of the biggest misconceptions about performance management: "If I want a high performing team, I have to focus my energy on my low performers". It implies that a high performer does not need performance management – an assumption which couldn't be more wrong. In fact, not spending time managing the performance of your high performers may actually turn them into low performers or, before you know it, even drive them from the team. Here are three biggest mistakes leaders are guilty of when it comes to their high performers.



1. Taking high performance for granted

There is nothing more demotivating than not receiving acknowledgement for an achievement. And yet I'll often hear leaders say "My high performers don't need praise. They know themselves that they consistently perform well." . There seems to be a belief that a team member with a good track record doesn't need to be told they did a great job. Now when we experience success AND receive acknowledgement for it, something happens within our brains: Dopamine is released. This "reward chemical" plays an essential role in reaffirming a great performance and motivating for the next challenge. Athletes know all about this. They jump for joy. They get hugged by their coaches. Formula One winners celebrate their success with a shower of champagne. Without Dopamine there is the risk that your high performer starts procrastinating, to feel demotivated and lack focus. If you want to maintain the performance level or even increase it, celebrating success - no matter how small - is essential. High performers, more than any other, need acknowledgement.

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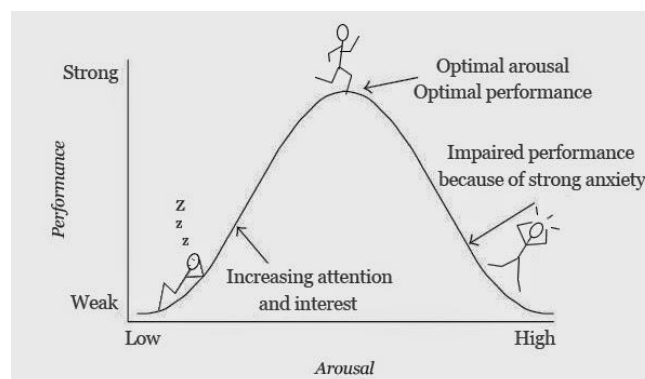
They would not be high performers if they were not hungry for praise. Moreover, it is easy to do and costs nothing.

2. Reducing interaction

“I have this great person on my team. I don’t need to devote any time to them. I can rely on them completely to do a good job. And that frees me up to do mine” is what I hear leaders say often. This is understandable, on the one hand, as time is a scarce resource. On the other hand, there is an assumption behind this - that high performers don’t need anybody and can do it on their own. Think of Nadal or Djokovic and imagine their coach disappearing for a whole year just because they recently won a Grand Slam. Unheard of. Without regular interaction, offering support, feedback and coaching, you lose the opportunity to help your high performer get better. Moreover, without caring human interaction, your high performers will experience a drop in levels of Oxytocin, the “love chemical.” This is another brain chemical, which is essential for high performance. The result: S/he will feel lonely, anxious, and stressed which impacts performance negatively.

3. Overstraining high performers

“High performers can constantly go the extra mile” is another statement I often hear leaders say in my trainings. They may go the extra mile more often than low performers, yet high performers have limits too - like every other human being. The chart below shows perfectly what happens if we overstrain team members. It may not be common knowledge, but top athletes mostly practice at 80%. They take breaks to recharge and make sure they don’t go overboard with competitions, in order to avoid burn-out. And there is good reason to do so. From a neuroscientific perspective, we need the brain chemical noradrenalin (as well as adrenaline and cortisol), if we want to master a challenge. Without these performance boosters, no one can perform a demanding task. We become slow, easily distracted, and we lack motivation. A problem occurs however, when we have too much adrenaline and cortisol in our body over a longer period of time. We end up in panic mode. Sleep suffers, decision-making suffers, our problem-solving capabilities plummet, not to mention our mood. What was meant to help us perform on a high level, backfires and causes a drop in performance.



Once a high performer, always a high performer is not a given. Check how much time you are actually spending managing the performance of your high performers. If you spend most of your time managing low performers, you risk undermining the performance of your high

performers. Worst case, they leave the team for a boss who will give them the necessary attention. Both options are not really attractive as you may end up with a team of only mediocre performers.