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Managing People

Managing a Top Performer Who Alienates Their Colleagues

by Rebecca Knight

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Managing a Top Performer Who Alienates Their Colleagues

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You know the team superstar: The one who's brilliant, high achieving, and outperforms pretty much everyone else — but burns through relationships all the while. What's the best way to manage this dominant personality? How can you encourage them to improve their interactions with colleagues? What can you do to emphasize the importance of collaboration, especially if your formal incentive system only rewards hitting goals and targets?

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What the Experts Say

Having a supremely talented and confident employee on your team is a wonderful thing — except, of course, if that person is also alienating their colleagues. "This is a person who's both contributing to — and undermining — your team's long-term performance," says Nancy Rothbard, professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. Even though this hard-charging employee may be very good at their job, colleagues are "repelled by their general disagreeableness" and uncollaborative attitude. "People may respect this person, but they don't like working with them and they don't trust them," says Linda Hill, professor at Harvard Business School and coauthor of *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*. "Over time, this person becomes isolated because others go out of their way not to work with them." In the interest of team cohesion and productivity, you need to take action. Here are some tips.

Give tough feedback.

It's no fun to give negative feedback, but in the case of a so-called "competent jerk," you need to make the person aware of the problem, says Rothbard. "This person needs to understand the metaphorical wake they leave behind." She recommends starting by acknowledging their positive contributions to the organization. "Say: 'You're doing a great job here and you're an integral member of this team. I need you. But I also need you to know the effect you're having on other people." This person needs to understand how other colleagues perceive them, says Hill. A little tough love is in order. She suggests saying something like: "You're being held accountable for not just what you do, but how you do it. In order to fulfill your ambitions, you must learn to behave differently. Otherwise, you will not accomplish what you want to accomplish." Don't sugarcoat the situation. "Say: 'You are in repair mode.'"

Talk about development.

It's important to frame the consequences of this behavior in terms that your abrasive high-achiever will appreciate: As a hindrance to their career

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growth. Your employee needs to buy into the fact that their attitude and approach "matters in a material way to their performance and their reputation," says Rothbard. Strong peer relationships are critical to both short- and long-term professional progression, says Hill. If this over-aggressive superstar aspires to a promotion — which, of course, they do — they need to change. Even in spite of myriad talents and abilities, this person will not advance in your organization without good interpersonal skills. As the manager, you need to "help them understand that this behavior could derail their career." Hill also recommends being honest about the flaws and conflicts in your organization's incentive system. "Say: 'I know you're getting mixed signals because there's pressure to make deals and hit your numbers, but I need to impress upon you the importance of building and maintaining relationships.'"

Encourage empathy.

Next, you need to help your employee develop a plan to improve their relationships. It starts with empathy. "You need to teach them techniques to help them become more sensitive to others' reactions," says Rothbard. Encourage your employee to pay closer attention to colleagues' emotional responses. "Are they pulling back? Do they look uncomfortable? Are they anxious?" This kind of observation is the first step toward "improving self- and social-awareness," she adds.

You also need to help your employee develop a deeper understanding of others' perspectives, says Hill. She suggests engaging your employee "in active inquiry" by "asking them to step into the shoes of the people they depend on to get their work done." Ask them to imagine their colleagues' views. "Say: 'What do you think matters to this person on your team? What do you think is that person's biggest concern? Is there any common ground? Do you share any pain points?'"

Be compassionate.

It's also prudent to show a little empathy yourself. After all, "this person is not all bad," says Rothbard. They're likely highly conscientious and "care deeply about getting the work done right." Think about the aspects of your

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high-performer's personality that you enjoy and admire, says Hill. "You might really like the fact that they're hard-driving," she says. "It brings a certain energy to your team." In one-on-ones, she advises compassion and sympathy. "Say, 'I understand your frustration. Not everyone is as hard-driving or as motivated as you.'" Perhaps you have, *ahem*, personal experience with this personality type. "Maybe you suffered from [a similar affliction] earlier in your career," she says. "Share that." Think back on meaningful advice you received at the time. "Then ask: 'How can I help you? How can we get better together?'"

Coach.

You also must try to help this person overcome their natural know-it-all tendencies. "Many times, these people have learned how to moderate their behavior with the boss," which makes them a lot easier for you to get along with, says Hill. Your objective is to get them to act that same way with their colleagues. "You need to encourage them to ask questions and not assume they know everything." She recommends coaching your employee on how to build relationships with peers by role-playing possible scenarios. Rothbard recommends helping your employee "get over their knee-jerk reaction of disdain and frustration" by helping them learn how to give people the benefit of the doubt. Encourage them not to jump to conclusions, she says.

Have patience.

Finally, don't expect your efforts to yield immediate results. Behavioral changes take time. Help your employee recognize that their colleagues' opinions of them won't shift overnight. "This person already has task competence; now they're working to improve their relational competence," says Rothbard. "They're learning how to let other people take responsibility and be held accountable." Encourage them to be patient as well — with themselves and others. "Make it clear that this is a skill and a task to be accomplished," Rothbard says. "They have to work on it to get better."

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Principles to Remember

Do

- Help your abrasive superstar see how their behavior could derail their career.
- Teach your employee techniques to help them become aware of people's emotional reactions.
- Demonstrate to your employee the value of asking questions.

Don't

- Shy away from giving this person tough feedback — they need to know how they're perceived by others.
- Enable egotism. Help your superstar understand their colleagues' perspectives.
- Be unsympathetic. Think back on helpful advice you've received and share it.

Advice in Practice

Case Study #1: Tell your employee how they're perceived and coach them on how to improve.

Earlier in his career, Keith Sbiral managed Brad* — an extremely bright, hard-driving, and talented employee whose habits and tendencies often rubbed his colleagues the wrong way.

"Brad was intellectually quite advanced," Keith says. "And his relationships in the office were challenged because he would take a very academic approach to problems as well as opportunities."

For instance, Brad very rarely talked directly to his colleagues; rather, he communicated his ideas mainly through lengthy and aggressively worded white papers and memos. Brad's peers saw him as aloof — and as someone who thought he was too good for them. Brad rarely asked for others' opinions or ideas. "His relationships were very strained," says Keith.

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As the manager, Keith knew he needed to do something about the situation. So he decided to pull Brad aside and address him "in a way that was complimentary and direct," he says. "I told him: 'Your skill level is very high for this organization and that presents you with a certain set of challenges.'"

Keith talked to Brad about how his colleagues perceived him. "And then I said, 'You are going to be more effective if you can learn how to pull others along with you.'"

It turned out that Brad was "aware something was amiss" and so was open to change. "The key," says Keith, "is that because Brad was a high achiever, he wanted to address any issues that would stand in his way [of getting promoted]."

Keith coached Brad on specific behaviors he could adopt that would improve his relationships with peers. "We talked about why it's important to walk across the hall and talk to colleagues face-to-face and to ask for their ideas and feedback. We talked about saying things like, 'Jane, this is what I think. What do you think?'"

Over time, Brad got better at managing his relationships. He is now well respected and admired by his peers.

Still, things didn't change overnight, says Keith, who today is a certified professional coach with Apochromatik in Chicago. "Coaching is a long process of learning and work for both the coach and the employee," he says. "But with time and effort come results."

Case Study #2: Be direct and share your personal experience.
Susan Jones,* who spent over a decade of her career as a leader at a major technology company, knows a thing or two about managing talented, hard-charging employees.

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"I have extensive experience managing dominant personalities, and I'm almost embarrassed to say that I was that person at certain stages in my career," says Susan.

One direct report in particular — we'll call him Phil — stands out. "He had no concern for how his behavior and actions affected his peers," she says. "But he was really smart, creative, and super effective in his job, so I was loathe to move him."

Phil's colleagues complained bitterly about him, and Susan knew she needed to do something. During a weekly one-on-one meeting, Susan told Phil about how his behavior was negatively impacting the team. She told him that he needed to change.

Susan also told Phil that his ability to move up was at risk. She outlined why it was important for him to develop allies and friends and to work on building consensus, rather than pushing his ideas through with brute force.

"We talked at length about the long-term implications of his interactions, for both the team, and for him as an individual," recalls Susan.

She also shared stories about her own challenges and experiences. "I was once a steamroller, and it could have gone south for me professionally," she says. "But I was very fortunate to have good mentors who redirected my behavior. I adjusted my approach, and my career benefited."

Susan was hopeful that Phil would hear her message, but unfortunately, nothing changed.

"It was such a frustrating situation. He was so smart, and performed beautifully against performance measures," she says. "But he alienated people along the way and couldn't see why it was relevant because he got his job done."

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Susan decided to leave the company, and today she is a career coach. She is not in touch with Phil but hears about him from time to time. "Professionally, he's moved through a series of lateral positions, primarily as a contractor, due to his inability to address his interpersonal challenges."

** Names have been changed*



Rebecca Knight is currently a senior correspondent at Insider covering careers and the workplace. Previously she was a freelance journalist and a lecturer at Wesleyan University. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Financial Times*.

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