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## **ARTICLE** **DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES**

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*by Rebecca Knight*

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Managing your star performers should be no sweat, right? After all, they're delivering results and exceeding targets. But don't think you can just get out of their way and let them excel. They require just as much attention as everyone else. How do you manage someone who is knocking it out of the park? How do you keep stars excited about their work? And what risks should you watch out for?

## What the Experts Say

Having a supremely talented employee on your team is a boss's dream. But it can be a real challenge, too, according to Linda Hill, professor at Harvard Business School and coauthor of *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*. You need to make sure your star has enough on her plate

to stay fully engaged — but not so much that she gets burned out. And you need to “offer positive feedback” — but **not in ways that are counterproductive** to the person’s growth and development. Group dynamics are another concern when you have a standout performer on your team, says Mary Shapiro, who teaches organizational behavior at Simmons College and wrote the *HBR Guide to Leading Teams*. “Real resentment can build, due to the perception that the boss is favoring the rock star,” she says. Whether your star performer has just joined your team or has been working for you for a while, here are some tips on how to manage her.

### **Think about development**

One of the hardest things about managing a supremely competent and confident employee is making sure he’s **sufficiently challenged** in the job. The antidote to this problem is “**classic talent development**,” Shapiro says. First, “ask your employee, ‘Where do you want to go next, and what experiences do I need to give you to make sure you get there?’” Then, find opportunities to help the person acquire new skills and sharpen old ones. Hill recommends that you help the employee get “exposure to other parts of the organization” that will “broaden his perspective.” And, of course, “don’t neglect the B players,” Hill adds. Otherwise, you’re not building the capacity of the team, and “over time, people become de-skilled.” Everyone on your team “deserves to be developed.”

### **Offer autonomy**

Another way to ensure your star employee stays engaged and excited about coming to work is to “give her more autonomy,” Shapiro says. “Demonstrate trust by delegating authority and responsibility” over certain projects and tasks. And **don’t micromanage**. “Give her discretion in how she does the work.” If a formal promotion is not possible, or your employee is not quite **ready for one**, think creatively about ways to sharpen her leadership skills. “Give her training responsibilities,” she adds. “Ask your rock star to work with other people on the team to mentor them and develop them.”

### **Don’t go overboard with positive feedback**

Generally speaking, “stars tend to be **very needy**” and require more praise and reassurance than your average employee, Hill says. But you don’t want to “get into the habit of feeding an ego.” She recommends giving your stars “the appropriate amount of feedback” by “acknowledging their contributions.” If your star executed a project beautifully or made **a stellar presentation**, say so. But you needn’t go overboard. “Help him learn to monitor himself,” she says, “and to acknowledge the contributions of other members of the team who are helping him be successful.” Shapiro agrees, noting that some stars don’t expect or want constant praise. “Don’t assume you know what motivates them.”

### **Manage your star’s workload — and everybody else’s**

An important part of your job as a boss is **making sure the work is divided fairly**. This can be a challenge when you’re managing someone who is head and shoulders above everyone else. “You want to give [all] the tasks to the rock star, because you know the rock star will get the job done,” Shapiro says. But while “it’s convenient for you,” overwork will lead to burnout. To keep that from

happening, she recommends doing “a careful analysis of what’s on [your star’s] plate” to identify tasks and projects that can be removed “to make capacity for other projects.” It’s likely that your “rock star will be reluctant to let anything go,” but you must hold firm. “Be explicit and say that you want to give her more bandwidth so that she has the brainpower, energy, and time to be at her best.” And [beware of team burnout](#), Hill says. “Superstars are known as pacesetters,” she says. “It can be exciting and inspiring for other people to work with them, but often others can’t keep up.” You need to “make sure the workload is reasonable” for everyone.

### **Be mindful of group dynamics**

Superstars can [generate team tension](#). Perhaps they expect performance equal to theirs from others, or peers are jealous of their abilities and treat them differently than everyone else. You can’t control others’ emotions, but you do have a say in the way they act. First, and most important, “[don’t play favorites](#),” Hill says. Next, talk to your team members about group dynamics and their individual behavior. Your goal is to “make sure they’re treating [the star] appropriately.” Shapiro agrees: “You need to have one-on-one conversations with everyone. Ask, ‘What motivates you and how can I help?’”

### **Encourage your star to build relationships**

You’ll need to talk to your star, too. Many high performers have trouble developing trusting relationships, Hill says. “They’re quick studies, so they don’t ask questions and don’t try to build bridges — mostly because they don’t have to.” It’s your job to encourage them to [network](#) and to “help them develop their capacity to engage with others and learn the power of collaboration.” Explain that “to contribute to organizations today, you need to be able to work with other people in different functions.” Then “be a partner in helping the person integrate with the group.” Demonstrate “how his work benefits from other points of view.” And use role-play to teach him how to successfully work with peers.

### **Don’t be selfish**

No one wants to lose a superstar employee, but when you’re dealing with someone who’s very “competent and capable,” it may be a “signal that she’s ready for more than you can offer” in a particular role, Shapiro says. Don’t lose her to another company, though. Consider the priorities of your entire organization and whether there’s a fit for her outside of your team. Be prepared “to fight battles on two fronts,” Shapiro adds. “Talk to your boss about finding your star a position in the company so that she moves up, while also making sure she’s replaced” with someone who will succeed in the role. It’s a “common trade-off and management dilemma,” adds Hill. “But you can’t hoard talent.”

### **Principles to Remember**

#### **Do:**

- Offer praise and reassurance, but also encourage your star to acknowledge the contributions of others.
- Demonstrate trust by delegating responsibility over certain projects and letting your star decide how she does the work.
- Make sure the team’s workload is reasonable. Superstars are pacesetters and not everyone can keep up.

**Don’t:**

- Overload your star employee — otherwise you risk burning him out. Analyze what’s on his plate and identify which projects can be removed.
- Neglect the rest of your team. Find ways to develop each of your direct reports.
- Hoard talent. If your employee is ready to advance, you must advocate for her promotion.

**Case Study #1: Encourage your star to seek out learning opportunities both inside and outside your organization**

Jon Stein, the CEO and founder of Betterment, the online financial adviser, says that he’s been “lucky to have a number of stars” on his team over the years.

Laura\*, in particular, stands out. She joined the New York City-based company as an executive assistant five years ago. She lacked experience but “she showed a lot of promise and drive,” Jon recalls.

During their weekly meetings, Jon gave Laura “positive feedback on the things she had done well” but also made sure to talk about areas where she could improve.

The two often discussed different ways for her to take on more. It wasn’t always easy to find “new challenges for her,” he says. “We would set the bar ever higher with stretch goals, and it would soon become clear she could deliver.”

So Jon encouraged Laura to think about her long-term prospects, “painting multiple potential career paths” for her: One day she might manage learning and development at the company, or maybe she could lead the facilities group. He then directed her to experiences that would prepare her for each of these possible roles. “I wanted to give Laura the opportunity to try new things,” he says.

At the same time, Jon coached Laura on networking. He encouraged her to “build a solid peer group of more experienced people outside of the company” to accelerate her learning. “Now, whenever she has a question, she can find an answer relatively quickly. People come to her with questions, too. She has done a lot to lead and expand her network.”

Giving Laura more responsibility for various corporate functions was “gradual,” Jon says.

Today Laura manages a team of 15 employees and has responsibility over facilities and human resources, among other areas. “She’s done a great job,” Jon says.

And yet he says he is always mindful about not giving Laura special treatment. Weekly one-on-one meetings between managers and direct reports are standard practice at the company. And regular employee feedback is part of the Betterment culture. “I don’t play favorites,” he says. “I don’t want to give her opportunities that others don’t get.”

### **Case Study # 2: Find out what motivates your star, and empower her to advance**

Jay Schaufeld, senior vice president of human resources at ownerIQ, the Boston-based digital marketing company, says that managing star performers is a “great luxury” but comes with “some added challenges” too. “There is no playbook,” he says.

A few years ago Jay ran the HR department of an independent boutique consultancy. There, he supervised Rose\*, “an absolute rock star” who excelled at her job. “She was a few years out of school; she had high aspirations and was high potential,” Jay recalls. “I saw a lot of her in me and me in her.”

When Rose first started working for him, Jay did everything he could to “publicly recognize” her accomplishments and include her in executive-level meetings. “I loosely assumed that Rose wanted a lot of fanfare and exposure to the leadership team,” he says.

It wasn’t until he finally asked her “What motivates you?” that he realized the error of his ways. “Rose told me that while she appreciated it, all the meetings were killing her,” he says. “What she wanted instead was air cover to be more involved in corporate initiatives that moved the organization forward.”

Together, they brainstormed possible projects for Rose. He then gave her the autonomy to implement those plans.

Jay also inquired about Rose’s professional goals for the future. “Internal advancement was very important to her, so we established career goals and milestones at the organization,” he says. “We also talked about other paths.”

One possible option for Rose was to become a certified HR professional. The certification would allow her to work as a billable consultant as opposed to working in corporate HR.

“Selfishly, I wanted Rose to stay in our organization,” says Jay. “But I also recognized that gaining the certification would open up new career opportunities for her. I wanted to demonstrate that we were investing in her and that I was committed to her advancement. That was important for her to see.”

After a Fortune 10 company acquired their organization, Jay moved on. Rose, who now has the certification, is still there, working on the integration. “I would absolutely love to work with her again in the future,” he says.

*\*Names have been changed*

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