



Does the problem lie with the "difficult" high performer, or with you?

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A lot of the talk surrounding so-called difficult high performers assumes the employee's personality is the problem, but according to Profiles International regional director Mark Purbrick, it's more likely to be the way they're being managed.

Purbrick, who is also the managing director of Peoplogica, says people often don't know how to manage difficult high performers, so they blame problems on personality.

"[But] if they were difficult to everybody, and especially the clients, then they wouldn't be top performers, because they wouldn't be delivering," he says.

"If you look at it that way, it's not that people have difficult personalities or challenging personalities, the problem is the managers don't know how to manage a top performer.

"If they are top performers, you're the one that's failed if they're difficult."

In order to figure out how to manage these people, managers first need to figure out *why* the individual is a top performer to begin with, Purbrick says.

"If you don't understand why they're top performers, how can you possibly work out how to manage them to retain them and to break through any glass ceilings that may be there to get them to perform at an even higher level?"

Substandard performance

The same principle applies to addressing substandard performance, Purbrick says.

"You need to [ask] why are these people we employed exactly the same way, using exactly the same methods - resume, interview and reference checking - [not] top performers? Why is it they are not measuring up?"

"If you don't understand that how can you possibly fix the problem?"

However, these questions often go unasked. Instead, managers invest in solutions - for example, generic training courses - that don't work.

"And [since] a top performer is about two to three times more productive than a poor performer, a serious amount of money is being lost."

Meanwhile, workers who are performing well without issues are neglected.

"Their managers say, 'They'll be OK, I'm fixing up all the ones that aren't working properly,' so they get very little of their managers time, there's very little structure involved in one-on-ones and feedback and everything else that goes with it, and so what happens? One day they'll just leave and they'll go to your competitor."

What makes a top performer a top performer?

Purbrick says that understanding what makes top performers top performers can help in addressing substandard performance.

Managers should ask questions like: "Why is it that other individuals do not perform at the level of top performers?" and, "Why are they different?"

Whether the issue is poor performance or "difficult" behaviour, managers should develop customised coaching based on the reason behind the problem. The coaching should be accompanied by structured one-on-one meetings, which focus on:

- the employee's wins for the month - what they're really proud of;
- their losses for the month - decisions that didn't turn out as they'd hoped;
- whether they feel they are fulfilling their primary role expectations and if not, how their manager can provide assistance; and
- whether their manager is providing them with the direction, leadership and coaching they expect and need.

"The one-on-ones should not be about performance or the KPIs; the one-on-ones should be about the employee health," Purbrick says.

"Make sure they are not under stress... make sure that as an organisation and manager you are providing them with what they need to do their job at the highest level."

Can't live with them, can't live without them

According to research conducted by Profiles International, "difficult" high performers are a widespread problem in today's workplace.

A study of more than 700 participants found:

- more than half of those surveyed claimed one in four high performers in their organisation were difficult to work with;
- sales and operations were identified as the departments with the highest numbers of difficult high performers;
- some 72 per cent disagreed that it is OK for managers to give special treatment to difficult characters just because they are high performers;
- half of managers could not identify what makes a high performer successful;
- some 68 per cent of managers did not understand why "difficult" high performers behave the way they do; and
- some 78 per cent of managers did not know how to manage these employees effectively.

In Profiles International's [leader's guide to managing problem employees](#), managers are warned that, no matter who the employee is, if their behaviour goes too far and remains unaddressed, it could seriously damage staff morale.

Retaining one misbehaving person could badly affect all of the remaining employees, who are "the backbone of your company", it warns.

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