

Executive Briefings

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Managing Your Star Workers

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This summer, the fastest, strongest and most skilled athletes are on a rigorous training schedule in preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing. Similarly, corporations should be critically eyeing their own ranks to assess where their internal superstars stand and provide them with appropriate, tailored training and coaching.

“It’s no different than having superstar athletes,” said Bonnie Hagemann, CEO of Executive Development Associates, which creates custom-designed executive development strategies, systems and programs. “[Superstar workers] need training, development, goals and [rewards]. And I think one of the things that people really miss when they’re managing superstars is just that consistent, candid and encouraging feedback.”

According to Jack Welch, former chairman and CEO of General Electric, a high performer is an individual who energizes others, makes tough decisions and delivers on promises. While these superstars work quickly to produce high-quality work, they are not without weakness — they may not be the best collaborators, which is a key skill in today’s workplace. As a result, high-potential workers must have a custom development program that hits on both strengths and weaknesses.

“They’re superstars; they’re the ones who are out front. [So] sometimes they don’t know how to play on a team,” Hagemann said. “You build on strengths, but you also want to fix any potential derailers. They’ve got to have consistent and encouraging, but direct and candid, feedback. If you say, ‘Look, your goal for the next year is to make sure that your five peers are rooting for you when you get the next promotion,’ then they’ll go get that goal.”

Because high-potential employees demand high levels of energy, it’s not feasible or realistic to have an entire organization of superstars.

“Every organization needs some superstars,” Hagemann said. “But personally, I don’t believe in having a whole organization of superstars. I believe in having some superstars [who] plow new ground and pull the organization forward. But you need a lot of other good solid workers to bring the organization along and to make sure that all of those initiatives that get put in place by the superstars are executed.”

From the start, organizations should determine whether they want or need a superstar for specific positions.

“When I’m doing executive coaching, I’ll say, ‘Do you want a thoroughbred, or do you want a good quarter horse?’” Hagemann said. “If you want someone who’s jumpy and hard to manage but can run like the wind, then you may want a superstar. But if you want someone who will be a good team player and work with the organization, you probably want a quarter horse. It is two different needs.”

Superstars need room to roam, so specify loose boundaries for them.

“Give them some boundaries,” Hagemann said. “Once you give them boundaries, make them broad enough so that they have a lot of room to run, and then let them run. Give them a low amount of detail, like paperwork, because that’s just going to slow them down and make them frustrated.”

Once a superstar is on board, organizations should harness their passion while cultivating their capabilities.

“You don’t want to take away their fire, but at the same time, they need to be honed because they might come in a little raw,” Hagemann said. “Because they’re so high energy and they want to please their leaders, you can [floor] them pretty easily. If you get knocked down on your butt, you get back up and you get right back on the trail. You have to teach them that.”



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