

Get Your High Performers to Quit

5 ways to encourage your High Performers to quit

That's right. This article is about 5 ways to get your HIGH PERFORMERS to quit or transfer out of your team. I know, you are thinking, why would anyone deliberately try to drive away their best performers ... their "High Performers"? Well, let's begin by agreeing that no leader with any common sense goes to work every day and thinks, *what can I do today to encourage my best performers to quit or transfer?* Yet every day the actions and behaviors of leaders can accomplish just that.

So while our articulated intentions are NOT to drive out our High Performers, our actions speak much louder than our words or intentions. Interestingly enough only 1 of these leadership practices directly involves your High Performers. Yet all 5 of these leadership practices are directly controlled and influenced by you as their leader.

The 5 leadership practices that will drive your High Performers to leave are as follows:

- 1. As a leader you say that you are fair and treat all of your direct reports equally.**
- 2. As a leader you consciously and unconsciously tolerate and reinforce low performance**
- 3. As a leader you think and act like you can "fix" your Low Performers**
- 4. As a leader you think that High Performers within your team do not know or care about the Low Performers**
- 5. As a leader you do not think you can reward your High Performers for their contribution.**

Right now you might be thinking ... wait a minute I thought this article was about leadership practices that drive our High Performers to quit, but most of these 5 leadership practices are aimed at our Low Performers. Exactly my point!

Think about it ... What is the reward for being a High Performer? MORE Work! What is the reward for being a Low Performer? LESS Work with lower expectations!

When leaders cannot or will not address the challenges of their Low Performers, they will inevitably lose the respect and confidence of their High Performers. Think about it from your High Performer's perspective. *As a High Performer, why would I continue to work so hard when my boss avoid or ignore the 5000lb elephant in the room ...the low performers on our Team? Why should I, as a High Performer, work harder, smarter and longer than the one or two Low Performers on our Team?* As unfair as it might seem to you as a leader, your High Performers do not understand why their boss will not or cannot directly address the problem. Inevitably, High Performers come to a troubling question. What is wrong with the boss? This is the beginning of the erosion of their confidence, trust and respect in you as their leader

Losing respect for and then commitment to our boss does not happen overnight. Over time, once High Performers lose respect and confidence for as well as commitment to their boss they face an uncomfortable and troubling dilemma. High Performers begin to struggle with several options. *Should they continue to perform at a high level for a boss they do not respect nor have confidence in? Do they lower their performance and develop an attitude and productivity more like the Low Performers?* This is a tough option for most High Performers because subpar

performance may very well conflict with their internal work values. Or do they get out? ... This means they leave or transfer and try to find a boss they can respect and work hard for.

High Performers are always in demand and usually have great reputations, so finding a new job or boss is the easiest way for them to resolve their dilemma. So if you want to drive out your High Performers, utilizing these 5 leadership behaviors or practices will encourage and ensure that your High performers over time will lose respect confidence and commitment to you as their boss.

Let's take a look at each of these 5 leadership behaviors or practices. Keep in mind that I have never met a leader who proudly and consciously professes that they utilize these 5 leadership practices. I have also never met a leader who has identified driving out their High Performers as a goal. I have seen scores of leaders, however, who are either too busy to pay attention or unconsciously practice one or all of these behaviors. At the end of the day the results are High Performers who have lost respect for their leader and have either found new opportunities or have drifted into lower levels of performance.

Have you ever questioned why you boss doesn't address Low Performers? Have you ever had a boss that you have lost confidence in, commitment to or respect for? ... Why?

1. As a leader you say (and believe) that you are fair and treat all your direct reports equally.

In the name of fairness and to avoid charges of discrimination or bias we say that we treat all of our direct reports the "same way". NO YOU DO NOT. I know that is what we say and it may even be our intention, but our observable behavior sends a different message. You rely on your High Performers, you count on them to "do whatever it takes" to get the job done and be successful. You turn to them for help when the work or a project is strategically and tactically critical to you and your team's success. You count on them to use their judgment and experience. You do not feel that you need to supervise them very closely and check up on them and their work. You know that their work load is much higher than others on the team and you have high expectations for them.

Not so with your Low Performers. With your Low Performers, intentionally or unintentionally, you treat them almost the opposite of the way you treat your High Performers. You do not have high expectations for your Low Performers. You do not give them work or projects that are strategically and tactically critical to you and your team's success. You supervise them more closely, and over time you are more skeptical about their ability, commitment and performance. If you are honest with yourself, you know deep down that they have disappointed you in the past and you're not sure that you can trust them the same way you trust your High Performers.

As their leader you try to coach and mentor you're Low Performers. Sometimes they seem to "get it" for a day or two and then they slowly slide back to their old behavior, leaving you as their boss frustrated and sometimes ready to give-up. Do not misunderstand, Low Performers are not stupid, they have learned throughout their lives how to do just enough to get by. Low Performers usually are not overt trouble makers and they often give new meaning to the phrase "just doing enough to get by" or flying under the radar. They seem to have a deep understanding of just how little work they need to do to avoid getting in trouble.

If you have Low Performers on your team, how many times have you thought that their performance and attitude are dragging your team down?

2. As a leader you consciously and unconsciously tolerate and reinforce low performance

As a leader your behavior sets the performance bar. When it involves our Low Performers we expect less, get less in return and tolerate, yes, even reinforce, low performance. If we are brutally honest with ourselves as leaders, we expect less from our Low Performers. We don't want them or the team to look bad or fail. Common sense says why give Low Performers the high risk assignments when there is a high possibility/probability that they will not be nearly as effectively as your High Performers.

Consciously or unconsciously we lower the bar and the expectations for our Low Performers. WE expect a little less from them so we give them less challenging assignments, maybe even less work to do. We expect less, give them less work, and get less in return. To me this leadership behavior demonstrates that we tolerate or even reinforce low performance. Be honest, what are your expectations and behavior towards your Low Performers? Don't you have to supervise low performers more closely? Don't their behaviors frustrate you as a leader?

As a leader, you create self-fulfilling prophecies. Because we want to be fair and give our Low Performers every possible chance to succeed, we tolerate the output we get from them. As leaders we may even set them up for success albeit at a lower performance output level. I am not saying all of our leadership behavior with respect to our Low Performers is conscious.

Most leaders genuinely try to improve the performance of their Low Performers. That's because as leaders, we think we are responsible for the performance of everyone on the team. But let's be honest, at the end of the day you have confidence and are dependent upon your High Performers. You are worried, guarded, less confident and maybe even wary about the output and behavior of your Low Performers. This leads us to Practice #3 but before we go there, ask yourself the following question. *In the past 6 to 8 months when I had a critical assignment, when was the last time I gave that assignment to one of my Low Performers?* If you shudder at the question or your response how can you say you are objective and fair in practice?

Do you, as a leader, have different performance expectations for your High, Good and Poor Performers? Do you think that your expectations consciously or unconsciously reinforce the performance level of your team?

3. As a leader you think and act like you can "fix" your Low Performers

When did it get embedded in our heads that as leaders, one of our critical duties is to fix low performers? When did we all become junior Sigmund Freud's and believe that we could, as leaders, change the behaviors and attitudes of our Low Performers? These are not meant as blame frame questions. This fix-them response is a driving force in most leaders. I know I have been there; like you as a leader, I have tried (usually in vain) to "fix my problem children."

You have, let's say, 8 direct reports. We can assume that on average you have 2 to 3 High Performers, 3 to 4 Good Performers and hopefully, only 1 or 2 Low Performers. If your 2 to 3 High Performers are the "go to" players then your 3 to 4 Good Performers are the individuals that are in the trenches day to day accomplishing good and necessary work. Unfortunately on average that means you may have 1 or 2 Poor Performers. Understanding what is driving their

low performance is very complex. Understanding what you as a leader can do to provide effective results oriented leadership is critical.

How would you rank your current direct reports?

In my experience, Low Performers tend to fall into one of two categories. The first category is the easiest to deal with. You have Low Performers who want to perform at a high level but they do not know how. In short, they want to do good work but they don't know how. The straightforward solution is to get these folks the training they need and provide them with supportive coaching and mentoring based on reasonably high expectations. Folks who perform at a higher level after being trained are not "problem children". These are the folks that you, as a leader, can grow and develop into Good or even High Performers. These are not the folks that are the catalyst often resulting in High Performers leaving. Unfortunately most Low Performers are not in this category.

This means that the majority of your Low Performers are in fact your "problem children." I do not use term "problem children" to be disparaging; rather, I think it describes their behavior fairly well. We could write chapters about why Low Performers/problem children are they way they are. Suffice it to say that what is important to you as a leader is to recognize that most Low Performers are perfectly content with their performance, low emotional maturity and frankly do not want to be "fixed" by you or anyone else.

How much time, energy and effort have you as a leader invested in trying to "fix" your Low Performers?

4. As a leader you think that no one within your team knows or cares about the Low Performers.

I think sometimes as leaders our intentions and hopes blind us. We intend and are committed to building and facilitating a real high performance TEAM. Our intention is to treat all of our direct reports fairly and objectively. We fully intend to address any and all performance issues. We hope that by addressing performance issues quietly and discreetly the team will not notice that we may have 1 or 2 Low Performers ... Good intentions and nice try, BUT it does not work that way.

As a leader, your direct reports have you under a microscope. They pay a lot of attention to what you do, as well as what you say. They appreciate and may even understand that what you say is your intention, while what you do, our actions, may send a different message. Your behavior is your applied leadership in action, what Noel Tichy labels "your teachable point of view". How many times have you heard it said that actions speak louder than words?

Think for a moment about the relationship you have with your own boss. If you are like most of us, you pay a lot of attention to your boss. You know your boss's hot buttons, how to influence your boss, how to approach your boss with problems. You also know what the relationship is like with their boss. It is usually clear what topics are easy to talk about and which subjects are a good idea to stay away from.

Your direct reports are no different. Because you are their boss, they pay close attention to what you say and what you do. If what you say or write does not align with what you do, your behavior, research shows that they will focus on your behavior. For example every organization I know of professes that team work is critical. Organizations say with loud voices that they prize

teamwork; teamwork is the way to success. But when it comes to performance appraisal time your review is done by your boss. I only know of a handful of organizations that say teamwork is important and then “walk the talk” by utilizing team performance reviews. In addition to paying attention to you, your direct reports pay attention to each other, especially when it comes to work load, productivity and who the boss trusts.

Your direct reports know and probably even talk about the team’s High Performers and Low Performers. It is naive to think that High Performers and Good Performers are not aware of and bothered by Low Performers. They likewise have a problem with a leader that does not directly deal with low performance, while continuing to expect high and good performance from them. They work hard; make great contributions and sense that you trust them to a much higher degree than Low Performers. From my experience, your direct reports may have a better handle on the behavior and productivity level of your Low Performers than you do. Pretending that you’re High and Good Performers do not know or care about low performance disrespects both their intelligence and contributions.

What about you, have you ever been on a team were the members of the team were oblivious to the performance of the team members? How does the performance of others influence your performance?

5. As a leader you do not think you can reward your High Performers for their contributions.

Let’s get something straight: High Performers are worth their weight in gold. They are your *go-to people*. You rely heavily on them and they know it. You and I also know that in most companies and organizations you cannot afford to financially pay your High Performers what they are really worth. Unlike the sports world, your superstar producers don’t get paid for their stellar performance.

Now to be fair, there are some industries and some jobs like a commissioned salesperson where compensation is driven almost exclusively by clear objective data. Unfortunately in most organizations the existing financial restraints impact the ability to reward and recognize High Performers.

Under the mantel of fairness and even as a motivator, raises and bonus dollars are often pooled. I know many leaders who are asked to distribute the pool equally among their direct reports or follow some “objective” formula based on rankings. Even if the distribution of merit or bonus compensation is based on actual performance, High Performers value the recognition of their performance above the small financial increase. We know from the research that money is at best a short term motivator. With the small sums of money involved, High Performers often feel underappreciated. Making sure that everyone gets a small part of the merit pool can even de-motivate your High Performers.

Each of your High Performers has a different personality and motivational mix. From my experience most High Performers are fairly emotionally mature and have a realistic business perspective. They know that money is tight and in reality they do not perform based solely on financial compensation.

My favorite expression is “You cannot pay your High Performers for what they are worth to you and by definition your Low Performers are already overpaid.” So how can you reward High

Performers if you can't financially reward them? The answer, and we have known this for a long time, is ASK THEM! Each of your High Performers will give you a slightly different answer.

When I have done just that ... asked them ... I found several common motivators such as;

- Give me more challenging assignments and provide the resources to support success,
- Increase my opportunities to formally and informally learn new things,
- Give me the freedom to make decisions on my own even if it results in a mistake,
- Give me honest and straightforward feedback, and
- Let other folks, including your boss, know what a good job I am doing

What always surprised me was that money was usually not that big of a deal. Usually what my High Performers wanted most was my recognition, support and encouragement. While that takes a leader's time, it does not require a lot of money.

As a leader what motivates you? When is the last time as a leader you had this discussion with your High and Good Performers?

No leader in their right mind wants to encourage their High Performers to quit, but these 5 leadership practices will ultimately drive them out. Then what kind of performers will you be leading?

Let's Talk! ...

What have been your common sense experiences leading High Performers and Good Performers?

How much time do you spend with your Low Performers vs. your High and Good Performers?

What motivates you to be a High Performer?

..... Share your thoughts. If you found this article interesting please feel free to pass it on. Stop by our web site stimsonassoc.com or e-mail me at paul@stimsonassoc.com ... let's keep the conversation going!