

Managing Overachievers



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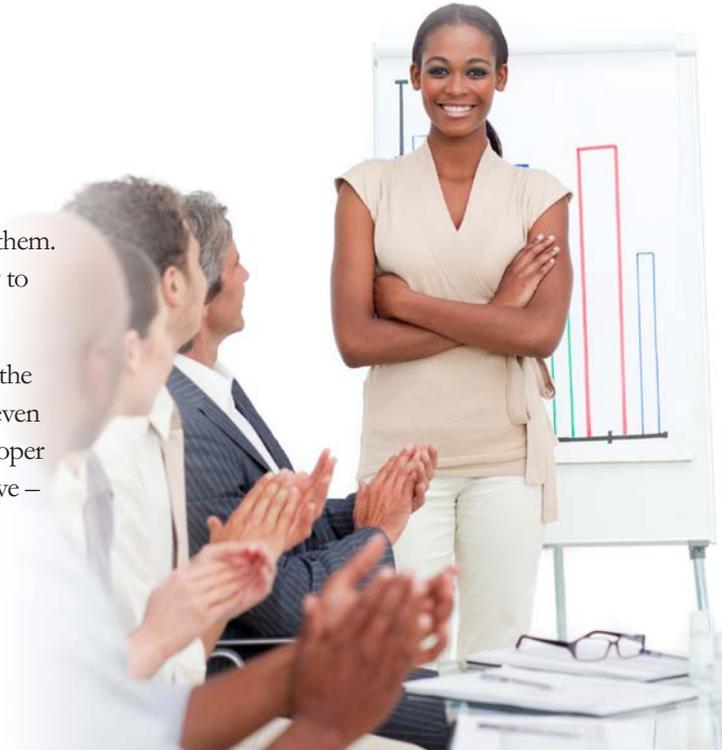


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Superstars. Overachievers. High Performers.

Whatever you call them, you know your company needs them. They have the drive, determination, and energy necessary to effectively tackle huge projects.

But they're not like other employees. Overachievers have the tendency to set unrealistic goals, work insane hours, and even take unnecessary risks to succeed on the job. Without proper guidance, these superstars can quickly lose their perspective – and their ability to perform.





So What's a Savvy Manager to Do?

To start, read through this guide. It will help you take full advantage of all the benefits overachievers can provide by managing them differently. In it you will:

- Discover how to identify overachievers on the job or during the interview.
- Learn more about the mindset of the overachiever.
- Spot the warning signs of difficulties overachievers face, and develop strategies for turning self-destructive tendencies into positive outcomes.
- Find out how to unleash the overachiever's true potential, and keep them working for you.



Key Ways to Identify Overachievers

How do you know when you're dealing with an overachiever? Look for these telltale signs in your current employees, or while interviewing your next job candidate:

Positive Traits:

1

He is driven to perform.

- He will take extra initiative and go beyond the boundaries of his job description to solve problems.
- His work history and references will undoubtedly show he has the skills and motivation to get things done.
- He has extremely high expectations for himself.
- He focuses on results.

2

He demonstrates good judgement.

- Sharp problem-solving skills, foresight, and business acumen help him make good business decisions – even when in unfamiliar territory.

3

He takes risks.

- “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” is a personal mantra for the overachiever.
- He does his homework, accepts change easily, and takes calculated risks to achieve goals.



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Key Ways to Identify Overachievers



Negative Traits:

4 He doesn't generally like to follow standard protocol for work processes and job functions.

- He often takes shortcuts and leaves the details to someone else.
- Because he is results-oriented, he won't sit quietly and do a job just because he's told to. He needs to know how his efforts affect the "big picture."

5 He can be hypercritical, impatient, and intolerant of people and situations.

- He may be prone to habitual faultfinding in co-workers.
- He doesn't understand why everyone else doesn't see the "big picture" like he does.
- He may have problems interacting socially and prefer not to work as part of a team.
- He is used to getting what he wants.



Understanding the Mind of the Overachiever

To effectively manage an overachiever, you must first appreciate where he's coming from. Only when you understand the personality type and motivations of this employee will you get the best out of him.

Here are a few insights to help you understand the overachiever's mindset:

1 He gets a high from completing tasks above and beyond expectations.

- This sensation becomes harder to come by as time passes; he will seek bigger challenges to recapture it.

2 He bores easily.

- To combat tedium, he will typically seek a new position (be it with your company or a competitor) every two to three years.

3 He tends to focus intently on one task.

- An overachiever may appear to work with “blinders on,” missing important details or neglecting other responsibilities. In his mind, nothing can stand between him and his goal. Alternately, he may appear scattered and unable to concentrate; but, this is really just a sign he's too focused on the task at hand.



Understanding the Mind of the Overachiever

4 He is sensitive.

- He is keenly self-aware and may internalize criticism to a greater extent than the typical employee.

5 He is a forward thinker.

- He focuses on the “big picture” as it relates to projects and his career: to thrive, he needs to know how what he’s doing now will impact the future.

6 He is intrinsically motivated.

- While money may be important, a high performer is fueled from within. His need to attain personal and organizational goals is often as great a reward as compensation.

7 He hates to be wrong.

- Making a mistake deals a crushing blow to an overachiever’s self-esteem. Consequently, he does not always respond well to criticism.

8 He thinks he needs little or no guidance or management.

- As a rule, the overachiever likes to self-manage. He may have trouble working within the confines of strict management or rigid hierarchy.



Difficulties the Overachiever May Face

While an overachiever can be a great asset to your organization, his obsession with success can spiral out of control. When his extraordinary efforts to achieve don't pay off, he may develop unhealthy habits that undermine his success.

Few high performers experience complete breakdowns. Still, it's important to recognize the warning signs — and know how to intervene — so an overachiever's behavior doesn't become destructive. Here are some common symptoms and suggestions for how to respond:

1 Addiction to Work.

- **Warning signs:** Constantly thinking and talking about work; skipping meals or breaks while at work; refusing to take earned vacation.
- **How to respond:** Help him establish and keep track of his priorities; reward the outcomes of his work — not the hours he puts in; suggest meeting with a counselor or taking a self-test at www.workaholics-anonymous.org/knowing.html.

2 Depression.

- **Warning signs:** Excessive self-criticism; unusually quiet or morose behavior; taking excessive sick days or avoiding meetings and company functions after a setback at work.
- **How to respond:** The warning signs of depression should never be taken lightly. You need to address the issue directly with the employee, and have human resources refer him to a professional psychologist for help.



Difficulties the Overachiever May Face

3 Unscrupulous Conduct.

- **Warning signs:** Skipping important paperwork or failing to comply with industry regulations; even worse, there may be no signs at all. If an overachiever is crossing legal and ethical boundaries to reach goals, he will most likely be secretive about it. Case in point: Enron.
- **How to respond:** If you suspect unethical behavior, monitor the situation and keep a written record. Once you have sufficient evidence, approach the employee with a witness (another manager or someone from HR). Review the situation, give him a copy of your policies and procedures, and ask if he read them when joining the company. Document the event and warn the employee. This process is usually enough to correct the unscrupulous behavior.

4 Hypercritical Behavior.

- **Warning signs:** Blatant disregard for others' opinions; actively looking for faults in co-workers; negative comments about fellow employees far outweighing positive ones.
- **How to respond:** Bring in outside help to counsel the employee on tough workplace challenges, and help him develop new skills for counteracting negativity. Options include hiring a “management coach” (i.e., professional counselor) or establishing a mentor to meet regularly with the overachiever.



10 Tips for Effectively Managing Overachievers

To get the most out of an overachiever, you must develop positive management skills that will turn his self-destructive inclinations into positive outcomes. Consider using the following tactics to keep him focused, happy, and working for you:



1 Nip negative behaviors in the bud.

- It's better to confront a small problem now than to wait and see if it goes away on its own. If you discuss problematic behavior when it's just beginning to develop into a pattern, you can address it without releasing a wave of emotional build-up.

2 Enforce breaks and vacations.

- Because he has a tendency to be a workaholic, it's important for you to make sure he takes the breaks he – and everyone else – needs. So instead of singling him out, make breaks and vacations a requirement for all your employees. Time away from work, however brief, re-energizes everyone.

3 Keep the lines of communication open.

- Because he is both more sensitive and critical, an overachiever may need to vent more than other employees. Maintain an “open door” policy in your organization. If you give him an opportunity to voice his frustrations and concerns, he will be less likely to stir up conflict with his fellow employees.



10 Tips for Effectively Managing Overachievers

4 Remove obstacles.

- Red tape prevents the overachiever from delivering the results he – and you – need. Obstacles at work, whether real or perceived, could prompt your overachiever to quit. Give him freedom to operate and pave the way for his success.

5 Help him learn from his mistakes.

- An overachiever is very hard on himself when he fails. So if he can't find the “silver lining” on his own, point out what he's learned from a mistake or failed project. Let him know that failure isn't the end of the world. Your encouragement will rally the overachiever out of a cycle of self-criticism, and help him regain his confidence.

6 Give him opportunities to shine.

- One great way to keep your overachiever happy is to find ways to tie his long-term goals into current assignments. Make sure you give him projects that highlight his capabilities – otherwise he won't stay.

7 Help him become a better team player.

- While your overachiever may prefer to work alone, collaboration is, at times, essential. Help him bridge the divide with another employee by teaming them up to solve a problem. Sit down with them both and have each ask the other how they would handle the problem. This sharing technique has a two-fold benefit: the overachiever will learn that co-workers have good ideas too, and the other employee will appreciate the chance to be heard.



10 Tips for Effectively Managing Overachievers

8 Involve him in decisions and planning.

- Overachievers don't like being told what to do. So rather than telling him how to fix a problem in his work, ask him what he would do to solve it. Get the best results from him by giving him the space and flexibility he needs.

9 Provide the emotional support he needs.

- Praise your overachiever for a job well done. He may pretend to ignore the pat on the back, but will respect you much more if you acknowledge his contributions.

10 Follow through on your word.

- An overachiever is used to fulfilling his commitments – and he expects the same from you. He is not easily fooled, and is quick to spot insincerity. So make it a priority to keep your word with him. Do what you say you're going to do. You will earn his trust and respect, and help ensure his commitment to your organization.



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