

How to take top PERFORMERS to the next level

What top performers really need

In my role as an executive coach, I usually work with successful executives who strive to become even better. Typically, these executives are intelligent and dedicated people who want success not just for their company, but for themselves as well. They are smart enough to know that to consistently produce top results, they need to keep learning, particularly in the field of leadership. They are aware that the way they did things yesterday might not be good enough to ensure success tomorrow.

However, there may be some potential pitfalls in their belief system:

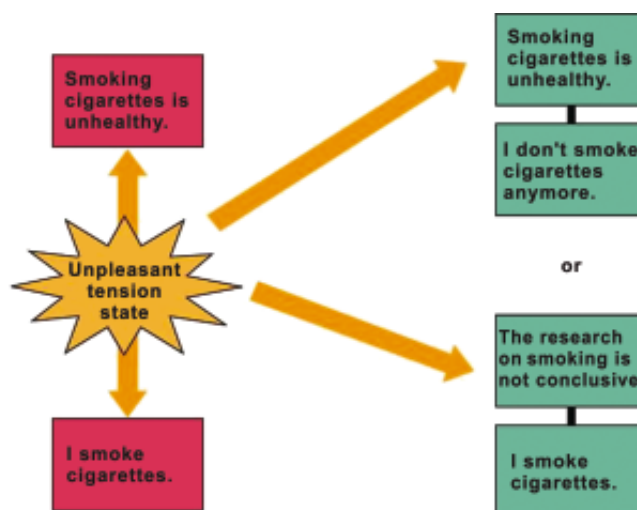
1. The belief that what I did in the past is still the right thing to do at present.
2. The belief that correlation is causality.
3. The belief that only people who are more successful than I am can provide valid feedback.

1. “What I did in the past is still the right thing to do at present”

Highly successful people can be stubborn about the way they do things. This can lead to what psychologists call *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon that refers to the discomfort one feels when faced with a discrepancy between what one already knows or believes, and new information or interpretations.

As high performers are used to choosing what they do and how they do it, they will be less likely to dismiss their own choices in the future even when there is clear evidence that another alternative would be more successful. This is especially true if their original choice resulted in a successful outcome through painful or even humiliating experiences.

This figure illustrates a classic example of cognitive dissonance frequently experienced by smokers:



When confronted with unpleasant evidence, smokers need to make a decision whether or not the information is valid enough to make them change their behavior.

How to overcome this type of cognitive dissonance

As with any change we want to achieve, the first step is always to create awareness. Without awareness, nothing changes. However, awareness alone doesn't do the job in the case of cognitive dissonance. The way we create awareness is crucial. If we tell someone that he is wrong, we put him on the defensive and he is likely to dismiss the new evidence. A more effective way to do it is to acknowledge the fact that his past behavior produced good results. We might even go so far to add something like, "We discovered this new way of doing things which seems really interesting and wondered whether



you would be open to try this out and let us know whether it produces better results.” This way, we grant at least partial ownership of the idea to the executive, making it more likely for him to adopt the necessary change.

2. “I am successful because ...”

Highly successful people are usually aware of their good performance. The longer they have been achieving outstanding results, the more they tend to believe that certain behaviors and attitudes lead to positive results.

However, my experience in coaching shows that frequently the opposite is true. They are successful *despite* some of their behaviors and attitudes. This means that they mix up correlation (the fact that they are successful and behave in a certain way) with causality (that certain behaviors are the reason for being successful).

One of my clients, a country manager leading one of the best-performing international subsidiaries, believed that one of the reasons he was outstandingly successful was that he supervised everybody very closely.

When this belief was identified, we analyzed the true reasons for his outstanding success and discovered that there were other, more important key factors that helped produce great results. We also involved some key employees to get their opinion on how the company’s performance could be taken to the next level. To the surprise of the country manager, they said that they felt limited by the rigid controls in place and would be more engaged – and would eventually produce better results – if they enjoyed more freedom and autonomy. The country manager respected these people as key contributors to the subsidiary’s success so he was

willing to reconsider his attitude and change his behavior accordingly.

3. “Only people who are more successful than I am can provide valid feedback”

Oftentimes, high achievers have a strong need to be right. This is not surprising because they are frequently acknowledged for their successes. These acknowledgements, along with actual results, reinforce their belief that what they are doing must be the right thing to do.

As a consequence, top performers are very critical towards suggestions, let alone criticism, from people they don’t perceive as their equals. This leads us to another problem: tests with groups of high performers have shown that the majority of them tend to overrate their own overall performance and underrate the performance of their peers. This was true even for cases where their peers produced equally good, if not better, results.

Hence, it is important to provide top performers with a qualified mentor or coach – a person who can get their full respect. The purpose is to help provide top performers with the necessary constructive feedback and guidance to induce positive changes.

Summary: Working with top performers is not always easy because their outstanding success reinforces certain beliefs that could hinder them from taking their performance to the next level. With the correct approach, these challenges can be overcome. It might not be easy, but it is certainly worth our while.

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