

Are High-Flyer Management Skills Needed to Manage High Flyer Workers

By William J. Rothwell, Ph.D., SPHR

William J. Rothwell, Ph.D., is Professor in Charge of Workforce Education and Development on the University Park campus of The Pennsylvania State University. He is author of *Effective Succession Planning: Ensuring Leadership Continuity and Building Talent from Within* (AMACOM, 2001). He can be reached by e-mail at wjr9@psu.edu.

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The literature on management, much of it emanating from the U.S. since the first philosophy of management was published by Frederick W. Taylor in 1911, has long been written as though everyone should be managed the same. Management textbooks do not describe how to use different approaches to manage different kinds of workers. In fact, managers worry when they treat one worker differently from others. The bane of any manager is to be accused of personal favoritism. Worse yet is to be accused of discrimination that leads some people to receive more favorable advancement opportunities or rewards than others.

But in recent years large employers are classifying their workers according to current job performance and future potential for advancement. They assume that success at one level (and on one's current job) does not guarantee success at higher levels (and possible advancement opportunities). The reason: each level of management—from supervisor to manager to executive—requires different characteristics for success.

Individuals differ dramatically in their abilities to get results. The most productive workers, called exemplary employees or high flyers, may require special handling from their immediate supervisors. If they are not handled well, their departure from an organization could represent the equivalent of losing as many as 20 people! That hurts in today's downsized workplaces.

While the literature in management is relatively sparse on applying different management approaches to different employee groups, the literature on a related topic has been the focus of attention in education. Educators have practiced ability tracking in schools. While actual practices do not always live up to the theory, much has been learned about teaching gifted students, those with recognized talents that transcend their peers.

Now the question to consider is this: could the same characteristics applicable to teaching gifted children apply to managing high-flyer workers? The topic fires the imagination. It may mean that one-size-fits-all management approaches are not appropriate—and perhaps never were. Workers who consistently outperform their peers should be managed differently. It goes beyond simplistic situational leadership notions that base different management approaches primarily on workers' experience levels.

William Heath wrote a treatise in 1997 that summarized the research on teaching gifted children. His summary indicated that teachers of gifted children must exhibit:

- ◆ A thorough understanding of the subject they are teaching
- ◆ Self-confidence, self-esteem, and a strong sense of self
- ◆ A good sense of humor
- ◆ Excellent organizational skills
- ◆ Openness and flexibility in their approaches to teaching
- ◆ Strong communication skills
- ◆ A high level of intelligence
- ◆ An ability to delight in the learning process itself
- ◆ Curiosity and a willingness to experiment with dramatically new, and often previously untried, approaches
- ◆ A very high energy level
- ◆ Friendliness

- ◆ An ability to establish high standards and a near preoccupation with excellence bordering on perfectionism
- ◆ A willingness to be an advocate with higher-ups on behalf of learners
- ◆ Enthusiasm for what they do

There may be profound implications for the managers of high-flyers to be found in the research summarized above. It could mean that managers of high-flyer workers should possess characteristics akin to those identified for the teachers of gifted children. In short, high-flyer workers need managers who can demonstrate special skills necessary for managing such highly-productive, talented, and sometimes temperamental workers. While all managers should probably possess most of the same characteristics listed above, what may set effective from ineffective managers of high flyers apart from others is their ability to demonstrate these characteristics to an exceptional degree.

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Linkage
Burlington, MA
781.402.5555
info@linkageinc.com