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Managing People

Making Sure Your Employees Succeed

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It's common knowledge that helping employees set and reach goals is a critical part of every manager's job. Employees want to see how their work contributes to larger corporate objectives, and setting the right targets makes this connection explicit for them, and for you, as their manager. Goal-setting is particularly important as a mechanism for providing ongoing and year-end feedback. By establishing and monitoring targets, you can give your employees real-time input on their performance while motivating them to achieve more.

What the Experts Say

So, how involved should you be in helping employees establish and achieve their goals? Since failure to meet goals can have consequences for you, your employee, and your team, as well as the broader organization, you need to balance your involvement with the employee's ownership over the process. Linda Hill, the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School and co-author of *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*, says "A manager's job is to provide 'supportive autonomy' that's appropriate to the person's level of capability." The key is to be hands-on while giving your people the room they need to succeed on their own. Here are some principles to follow as you navigate how to best support your people in reaching their objectives.

Connect employee goals to larger company goals

For goals to be meaningful and effective in motivating employees, they must be tied to larger organizational ambitions. Employees who don't understand the roles they play in company success are more likely to become disengaged. "Achieving goals is often about making tradeoffs when things don't go as planned. [Employees] need to understand the bigger picture to make those tradeoffs when things go wrong," says Hill. No matter what level the employee is at, he should be able to articulate exactly how his efforts feed into the broader company strategy.

Make sure goals are attainable but challenging

Since employees are ultimately responsible for reaching their goals, they need to have a strong voice in setting them. Ask your employee to draft goals that directly contribute to the organization's mission. Once she's suggested initial goals, discuss whether her targets are both realistic and challenging enough. "Stretch targets emerge as a process of negotiation between the employee and the manager," says Srikant M. Datar, the Arthur Lowes Dickinson Professor of Accounting at Harvard University and contributor to the Goal Setting module of Harvard ManageMentor. Be careful though: your team members are likely to resent you if you insist on goals that are too challenging to accomplish. At the same time, you don't want to aim too low, either. If you are overly cautious, you will miss opportunities

and settle for mediocrity. "When done well, stretch goals create a lot of energy and momentum in an organization," says Datar. But, when done badly, they "do not achieve the goal of motivating employees and helping them achieve better performance as they were designed to do," he adds. Even worse, poorly set goals can be destructive to employees' morale and productivity, and to the organization's performance overall.

Create a plan for success

Once a goal is set, ask your employee to explain how he plans to meet it. Have him break goals down into tasks and set interim objectives, especially if it's a large or long-term project. Ask your employee: what are the appropriate milestones? What are possible risks and how do you plan to manage them? Because targets are rarely pursued in a vacuum, Hill suggests that you "help your people understand who they are dependent on to achieve those goals." Then problem solve with them on how to best influence those people to get the job done.

Monitor progress

Staying on top of employee progress will help head off any troubles early on. "We often get problems because we don't signal that we are partners in achieving goals," says Hill. Don't wait for review time or the end of a project to check in. Review both long-term and short-term goals on a weekly basis. Even your high-performing employees need ongoing feedback and coaching. Ask your employee what type of monitoring and feedback would be most helpful to her, especially if the task is particularly challenging or something she is doing for the first time.

When things go wrong

Very few of us reach our goals without some road bumps along the way. Build relationships with employees so that they feel comfortable coming to you if and when problems arise. If your employee encounters an unforeseen obstacle, the goal may need reworking. First, however, ask him to bring a potential solution to you so you can give him coaching and advice. If his efforts to solve the problem fail, you will need to get further involved.

What about personal goals?

Some managers neglect to think about what an employee is personally trying to accomplish in the context of work. "If I account for the interests of the whole person, not just the work person, I'm going to get more value from them," says Stewart D. Friedman, Practice Professor of Management at the Wharton School and author of *Total Leadership: Be a Better Leader, Have a Richer Life*. For example, if your employee has expressed an interest in teaching but that is not part of his job responsibilities, you may be able to find ways to sculpt his job to include opportunities to train peers or less experienced colleagues.

The first step is for you to understand what these goals are. Ask employees if they have any personal goals they want to share with you. Don't pressure them; they should only share these aspirations if they feel comfortable. Friedman suggests you then ask, 'What adjustments might we try that would help you achieve your goals?" This allows the employee to take ownership over the solution. Just as with work goals, you need to be sure personal goals contribute to your team, unit, or to the company. "It's got to be a shared commitment to experiment and mutual responsibility to check in on how it's going. It's got to be a win for both," says Friedman.

When goals aren't met

There will be times, even with the best support, when employees fail to meet their targets. "Hold people accountable. You can't say 'Gee, that's too bad.' You need to figure out what went wrong and why," says Hill. Discuss with your employee what happened and what each of you think went wrong. If the problem was within his control, ask him to apply the possible solutions you've discussed, take another stab at reaching the goal, and check in with you more frequently. If it was something that was outside of his power or the goal was too ambitious, acknowledge the disappointment but don't dwell on it. "Do the diagnosis, get the learning, and move on," says Hill.

It's possible that you may have contributed to the problem. Be willing to reflect on your role in the failure. Were you too hands off and failed to check in frequently enough? Did you not review his work in a

timely way? Have an open discussion about what you can do next time. "If you don't hold yourself accountable, they're going to have trouble with you," says Hill.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Connect individuals' goals to broader organization objectives
- Show employees that you are a partner in achieving their goals
- Learn about and incorporate employees' personal interests into their professional goals

Don't:

- Allow employees to set goals alone
- Take a hands-off approach to high performers — they need input and feedback to meet their goals as well
- Ignore failures — be sure people have the opportunity to learn when they don't achieve goals

Case Study #1: Being a partner in goal attainment

Meghan Lantier is known at Bliss PR for being a natural people developer. As the vice president of the firm's financial services practice, Meghan manages several senior account executives, including Shauna Ellerson*. Meghan has overseen Shauna's work since Shauna started at Bliss four and a half years ago. Since the beginning, they have set goals through a collaborative process: Shauna develops draft goals, Meghan comes up with ones she believes Shauna needs to focus on, and then they identify the overlap between them. "I want to make sure they are manageable but stretched too," says Meghan. The two regularly check in on these goals. Meghan takes a hands-on approach, providing Shauna with regular input. They also sit down together at least four times a year to have a more formal discussion about Shauna's ambitions.

One of Shauna's goals is to become more of a thought leader on one of their largest financial services accounts. She has mastered the day-to-day work of managing the client and now needs to focus on the

bigger picture. Shauna has been working on this goal for several months now by speaking up more in client meetings and providing more input into the content, not just the process, of their work. "We don't need a goal review session. I give her constant feedback in the context of the work," says Meghan.

Meghan also knows that ultimately Shauna is responsible for her own achievements. "I'm fully invested in making it work but I realized the limitations I have as a manager to make it happen," she says. It hasn't been necessary to talk about the consequences if Shauna fails to meet the goal — there are natural consequences in Bliss's high-performing culture. If you don't succeed, you don't get the better assignments.

Not her real name; changed since publication

Case Study #2: Supporting personal goals
Amy Werner took a job at the New York City-based search firm On-Ramps just over three years ago. Amy joined at an integral time in the firm's growth and quickly became a key asset to the small firm. Sarah Grayson, one of the firm's founding partners, manages Amy and explains, "Amy has a lot of institutional knowledge and is a high performer." When she first began she was working toward a degree in social work but taking classes at nights and on the weekends. A year and a half into the job, Amy's school schedule became more complicated. Her internship requirements made working a traditional, full-time schedule difficult. Because of her star performance, Sarah and her fellow partners were keen to keep her on board while encouraging her to complete her degree. Amy remained full time but now works two days a week in the office, completing the rest of her hours on nights and weekends. As Amy says, "They have been nothing but supportive."

The firm has a semi-annual review process where goals are set and discussed; they also do more frequent check-ins on goals during weekly meetings. Amy and Sarah have talked a lot about how On-Ramps can support Amy not only by providing a flexible schedule but by thinking about the intersection of her studies and her work. They've found that there are lots of transferable skills between her job as a search associate and her work as a social worker, such as

interviewing and client management. In explaining why they are so supportive of Amy's educational activities, Sarah says, "We wouldn't have done this for a low performer. We have to ask ourselves, 'What would it take to hire another Amy?'" Amy will be finishing her master's degree in May and she and Sarah have begun to discuss what's next for her. Both hope that there is a way to combine her skills in search and her interest in social work to create a job that is ideal for both her and On-Ramps.

Portions of this article were adapted from the Goal Setting module of Harvard ManageMentor. Learn more about setting and achieving goals.

This content was adapted for inclusion in the *HBR Guide to Giving Effective Feedback.*

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