

Leadership

Leaders dream of diamonds

By Rick Maier

We all dream of buying something cheap at a garage sale and finding out that it's really a priceless treasure. And we cringe at the thought of paying good money for something that turns out to be a piece of junk. These thrills and risks of open market trading are similar to two conditions you find in leading a team of people at work.

The first condition is the chance that a great leader exists in your organization and you don't know it - the diamond in the rough. The second is that an employee who performs poorly - the slug - lurks within your team, and you're the only person who doesn't know who it is.

The diamond

Picture an employee who puts in 8 hours of solid performance every day. She doesn't say much at work; she's one of those steady, unspectacular team members that every organization depends on.

But as soon as she gets home she turns into a human dynamo - coaching her son's soccer team, chairing the search for a new minister at church, and presiding over her homeowner's association.

Why isn't this person more of a leader at work? Maybe she needs more skills training, or a little more direction. Her daily routine might not provide enough challenge. Maybe you and her direct supervisor make it too easy for her to just follow.

My favorite leadership experiences have been spotting and developing diamonds in the rough. With a little work they can really sparkle - just provide some direction and get out of the way.

The best method to identify these diamonds is to offer them a variety of opportunities to "strut their stuff" - lead meetings, run projects, organize events, represent your company at community service organizations or head up other important efforts outside their normal job responsibilities.

Diamonds make excellent leaders because they've "grown up" through the ranks. Promote a diamond and you don't have to take a chance on hiring some hot shot from the outside who demands a big comp package and may not fit into the organization.

The slug

List the last five people that have quit or been fired from your organization. If you can shrug each of them off as people that you don't miss, who weren't any good anyway,

then you've got a problem. Your team may be infested with underachievers, or slugs, and you don't realize it.

What could you do to improve your hiring process to catch these people before they join the organization? What measures did you take to help them improve their performance? Maybe these five people are gone, but how many more underachievers are left?

Poor productivity not only eats up your profits, it reduces the quality of your service. And there are few things more damaging to a team's morale than a "bad apple", especially if management isn't doing anything about it.

Do you know who your slugs are? What are you doing about them? Dealing with underachievers is one of the toughest leadership challenges, so it's no surprise that it often doesn't get done.

Take action

Diamonds and slugs exist in any good size team. And they will most likely stay undercover until you do something. What will it be?

Challenge people to get out of their comfort zones and take on a variety of activities in addition to their normal jobs. Set clear expectations and measure what everyone does. Walk around, talk to your team, and eventually you will receive tips about who is performing well and who is pulling down the team's performance.

Be on the lookout for diamonds and slugs. Don't let underachievers suck the energy out of your organization, and don't let potential leaders go undeveloped.

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