

Be Careful Who You Call a Rock Star!

Description

Sometimes we have employees who excel at one small part of a job, but they behave inappropriately or otherwise do things that donâ??t live up to company standards. In the past few weeks, this subject has come up twice. On two separate occasions, company owners came to me and expressed concerns about a particular employee who was great in certain areas but not so great in others.

In both cases, I asked them to describe the person. Both described them as high performers. In fact, one of the owners actually said, â??He is a rock star.â?• I asked why, and they shared that the employee gets projects done on time and on budget. I then said, â??That sounds good to me, so what is the issue?â?• The owner told me that people donâ??t want to work with this employee, and they were (rightfully) worried this could cause them to lose talent.

I asked, â??Does your company have standards of behavior?â?• They said that yes, they do. I explained that it seemed clear to me this employee is violating standards. Itâ??s okay to say he is a â??rock starâ?• in specific areas; however, it is crucial to address the fact that he must live the standards in all areas. Otherwise, no matter how good he is in some areas, he cannot continue to work there if he does not follow the standards of behavior.

This has been a common problem in certain areas, like sales, for example. There was a time when it almost didnâ??t matter if a high producer was a bully or manipulative or behaved badly in other ways. As long as the metrics were good, leaders might ignore or downplay the behavior issues. The same thing sometimes happened in healthcare with talented physicians who showed toxic behavior. In todayâ??s workplace, â??Her numbers are goodâ?• or â??He is our most talented surgeonâ?• is no longer good enough. Expectations have shifted.

For starters, how you get along with others has become very important. Collaboration has never been more essential. There is much more emphasis on soft skills and emotional intelligence, and especially their impact on engagement and the employee experience. The owner I just described was right to be worried about the loss of talent. At a time when competition is so tough, one cannot afford to have good performers leave over a toxic leader or coworker.

As with so many things, communicating this begins with an awareness of our language: how we describe our employees and how we talk about what great performance looks like.

Recently I was with top leaders of a very large company. I was there because there were less-than-stellar results in some key areas. They have 12 managers in the areas that are not achieving the desired results. I asked one of the people, â??Which of the 12 are the poor performers?â?• They replied, â??They are all excellent.â?• My answer was, â??Based on results, some are not.â?•

Letâ??s not confuse effort with lack of results. This is very common. Before I present, I review the organizationâ??s data. Some is not good. Yet, often a leader will say, â??Quint, I want to introduce you to a great team.â?• I understand the impulse to do this, but it is not accurate, and it sends the wrong signal to those who need to improve.

A CEO of a large company introduced me, and right before he did, he told the group what an excellent organization they are. Then he introduced me. I waited till he sat down. I leaned over and shared, â??It will be hard for me to explain how they can be better when you just told them they were excellent.â?• He got back up and said to the group, â??I was wrong a minute ago. We have some areas that are excellent, many areas that are good, and a few areas whose results are disappointing. We need to be excellent everywhere.â?• It made a huge impact on the group.

So, what are the takeaways? One, stop excusing or ignoring bad behavior in so-called high performers. Does what they are good at outweigh what they are not good at? It is nice if someone is smart and at times does a great job. However, the downside they bring may not be worth the upside. We need to focus on creating a workplace that attracts and retains talent, and this means dealing with toxic employees and making it clear we wonâ??t tolerate bad behavior.

Another message is that we need to be clear and specific when we describe performance. Mixed signals and generalities are confusing. If we want people to improve their performance, we need to spell out where the improvement is needed. Donâ??t say that an individual or group is â??greatâ?• or â??excellentâ?• if they are in only a few areas. While we can and should recognize good performance, we donâ??t want to discourage people from growing and improving in other areas.

Finally, we need to remember that, as leaders, people look to us to see what right looks like. When we pretend that people are doing a great job when they arenâ??t, we lower the bar for everyone. Not only will poor performers keep doing what theyâ??re doing, the performance of others may move down to their level as well.

What we permit, we promote. We need to promote ongoing improvement and growthâ??not just for others but also for ourselves. And that starts with using language that reflects this value.

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