

Challenge your high performers (then step away).

## Description

How often do you push employees out of the nest and let them really test their leadership wings? If you're like a lot of leaders, you may be reluctant to give people too much responsibility—especially when the stakes are high. Even if you're not typically a micromanager, you may not be inclined to put people in situations where they might fail.

The problem is, too much coddling and hand-holding holds people back. Our intentions are good. We are waiting for the perfect time to give them opportunity, but there is rarely a perfect time or the timeframe is too long. A couple of weeks ago, I read an [article](#) in the *Harvard Business Review* titled “Unexpected Companies Produce Some of the Best CEOs.” Authors Elena Lytkina Botelho and Sanja Kos wrote about some of the things “stealth CEO factories” do to develop their talent. One point that stood out to me was that these companies challenge strong performers early with opportunities.

For instance, a company might send a new leader out to negotiate a complex deal. The authors call this a “career catapult” because it has the potential to quickly move good leaders to the top.

The good leaders will rise to the occasion.

When I read this part of the article, it reminded me of what I've always called “park ranger leadership.” This style of leadership is the polar opposite of a career catapult. It's when leaders regularly swoop in and rescue employees if they get “lost in the wilderness.” When leaders act like full-time park rangers, it cripples employees. They never develop the confidence or the sense of ownership they need to solve problems, to grow, and to become leaders themselves.

Here are a few reasons why you should challenge employees with tough opportunities:

1. Challenging people teaches critical thinking and hones the ability to problem-solve.
2. It shows employees that you trust and believe in them. People tend to rise to the occasion and do their best work under such conditions. They feel valued and appreciated.
3. It gets them focused on the right things. They start to think like entrepreneurs and owners.
4. It frees up leaders to do their own work. When you're not having to solve problems and put out fires, you can concentrate on strategizing, developing new business, and other higher-level tasks.
5. It gives them the confidence they need to try for future wins. When employees experience what success feels like, they will want to re-create it, again and again.
6. Good people want to be challenged. They know that this is the only way to grow and advance. They appreciate that you're invested in developing them.
7. It becomes a hallmark of your company culture. Making sure people are challenged (and that they reap the rewards of rising to those challenges) will help you attract and retain the best people.
8. It teaches people that it's okay to take risks and it's okay to fail. When we regularly let employees take on tough challenges, there will be some misses. The good news is that companies where it's okay to take risks and make mistakes are companies that thrive in the long run.

9. It builds your leadership bench. You'll know who has "the right stuff" when they consistently meet challenges. The more great potential leaders you have, the better.

A caveat: Challenging people *doesn't* mean we don't give them the tools they need to do the job. We do want to set people up for success. If we give someone the opportunity to step into a leadership position, we make sure they're trained in the fundamentals. But then we step away and let them fly (or fall) on their own merits. Only when people are truly tested can they stretch themselves and grow. There can be no true victory if there's no possibility of failing.

What's most interesting about this, to me, is that challenging employees also challenges leaders. It can be tough for many leaders to let go of the need to control everything and let people do things their way. Handing over the responsibility can cause the ego to kick up a dust storm! We may find ourselves thinking that *of course* we can do it better. We know a better way. But guess what? Maybe our way is not better. We don't know it all. We couldn't possibly.

Giving people big challenges and then stepping away is a growth opportunity for them, but also for leaders. It forces us to hold up the mirror and take a look at our own humility (or lack thereof). When we're truly humble leaders, we are happy to let others be in the spotlight. We are grateful that we're in a position to help others develop their strengths.

Really, we have a human responsibility to step back and let our employees shine. If we're able to do that—even if we feel some fear and more than a few misgivings—we're on our way to being great leaders.

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