

Fast Trackers

Fast trackers are vital to any organization. Self-motivated, they don't limit themselves to simply performing their jobs. Instead, they're continually on the lookout for solutions, improvements, and areas to develop.

But no fast tracker, no matter how bright, has all the skills and knowledge necessary for success within your organization. So it's your job to groom him for success.

You want to ensure that they get the promotions they deserve, but you also want to make sure that they are capable of taking on new responsibilities associated with new positions without faltering. That means that you have to ascertain not only your fast tracker's strong and weak points, but also the qualities and areas of expertise that are crucial to success within your organization.

When you realize that you have an employee who is particularly bright and energetic—and who you know is slated for the fast track—what can you do to make sure that he succeeds and contributes as fully as possible to the success of your company? Start out by taking the following steps designed to maximize fast trackers' talents.

- Stress the importance of developing good interpersonal skills. "No matter how bright and motivated you are, getting the job done almost always means getting the job done through other people," points out Lee Dyer, Ph.D., professor, and academic director of the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies at Cornell University's New York State School of Industrial Labor Relations in Ithaca, NY. Most fast trackers realize this, and are sensitive to the feelings of peers and subordinates. But problems can crop up in peers' perception of them.

Jealousy is a common reaction to seeing someone moving ahead faster than anyone else. So fast trackers have to be particularly careful not to confirm jealous feelings by appearing arrogant, abrasive, or overly self-confident.

What if a fast tracker's actions do confirm his peers' worst feelings about him? Then maybe he isn't really a fast tracker at all.

"The arrogant ones are shooting stars, as opposed to rising flames," says Babette Heimbuch, president of First Federal Savings Bank in Santa Monica, CA. "They tend to rise very quickly and then they're gone, whereas less arrogant fast trackers tend to be more stable and long term, and actually contribute more to the company."

- Stay in close contact with fast trackers. The brightest of the bright still need your feedback if they're going to be successful within the context of your organization. Pinpoint where your fast trackers excel, where their weaknesses are, and what you can do to overcome them. Explain, in concrete terms, the significance of your observations.

"Too many companies have a tendency to label somebody 'fast track,' and then the assumption is that somehow that person walks on water, and all you have to do is leave him out there and everything will be just fine," says Dyer. "It's the old 'The cream will rise to the top' argument. But that's not the way the world ordinarily works. People have to be continually tested, challenged, and observed. You have to work very hard to help them develop in areas that they're not particularly strong in."

- Play the role of advocate in guiding fast trackers' careers. Fast trackers are generally bright, ambitious people who want to know where they stand and what they have to do in order to get where they want to go. So keep them informed about your corporate culture, and about any strategic changes that are taking place. Introduce them to key people within the company, and fill them in on important background details. And if one of your fast trackers is a marketing genius but knows nothing about finance—and nobody in your company has ever been promoted beyond a certain level without strong financial skills—encourage him to take courses that will remedy that deficiency.

The best policy is to be honest and straightforward about promotional opportunities. People who have a lot on the ball usually know it, and won't wait around indefinitely for an opportunity to arise—specially if they have no idea what their chances are.

"Watch out for your fast trackers' careers, and make sure that they are at least considered for opportunities that become available," recommends Dyer. Adds Heimbuch, "You really have to keep on the lookout for them and their future, because they need to grow; it's part of their basic personality."

- Provide fast trackers with challenging work. Don't allow them to become bored or to stagnate; they won't be able to tolerate it for long.

"It has been my experience that most people come to work for the challenge, enjoyment, and recognition, rather than for the money and promotions," says Don Wood, vice president of branch administration at Maryland National Bank. "Fast trackers are bright, aggressive people who have certain things to prove, and therefore the more challenges one can give them, the better off they are and the better off the organization is."

Keeping fast trackers challenged also allows you to test and observe their abilities, and help them gain the experience they'll need down the line.

- Counteract the effect of limited promotional opportunities. A series of rapid promotions early on often punctuates a fast tracker's career. After a while, however, promotions tend to become few and far between. Perhaps fast trackers can't be promoted because they simply can't climb any higher until someone (you, perhaps?) moves on; in other words, they reach a plateau.

Whatever the reason, they may feel that they are no longer being promoted as quickly as they should be. Dyer suggests that, if you realize that this is the case with one of your star employees, review the individual's experience and offer new challenges designed to fill in the gaps. You may ask this person to head up a task force or special project, for example. You may even reassign an employee to a post that will round out his experience.

- Provide plenty of psychic rewards. "I believe very strongly that in order to get people to do the best possible job, you've got to give a lot of recognition and a lot of praise for what's been done," says Dave Cloutier, group project manager for PageMaker at Aldus Corp., a Seattle, WA-based software company. In fact, he goes on to say that for him, the challenge is to keep recognition "fresh and real; to avoid the hype that builds up in most reward programs, and to really touch the nerve that you want to touch in a person."

To this end, Cloutier recognizes even the small successes his people achieve—in team or department meetings—and at the same time purposely downplays their mistakes. After all, as he puts it, if people are trying really hard, "they ought to be making lots of mistakes."

- Create an environment that allows for failure. "You have people out there who are bright, aggressive, creative, and willing to take risks, but you destroy that if you start punishing them for failure," warns Wood. "Too often, that stifles creativity and independent thinking."
- Be open to new ideas. "Fast trackers often come in with the idea that if they just change the system to be in agreement with how they see the world, things will be fine," says Cloutier.

"And doggone it," he adds, "in some ways that's a good attitude to have. You want to support, nurture, and encourage that attitude. The biggest failure, in my mind, is people who have quit trying; people who say, 'All right, I've given it my best shot, and darn it, the world's not going to change. I give up. As a manager, I don't ever want to be responsible for having created the kind of environment that causes that in my people."

"I got some advice from a boss of mine many years ago that I've always abided by," adds Cloutier. "He said, 'Try and look at your job from my perspective, and when you're doing that, try to create an opportunity for yourself. If you can find something that's broader, that's more interesting, and that helps both of us grow in our jobs, let me know'."

SOME THOUGHTS ON MENTORING

The concept of mentoring has become a bit of a fad in recent years—to the point where some large firms have established formalized programs. The idea behind such efforts is certainly commendable, although I have serious reservations that the programs, no matter how well-meaning, can ultimately succeed.

On an informal basis, having a mentor can definitely be beneficial to a junior person moving up in the organization. The Japanese call their version of a mentor the "godfather" (but not in the Mafia sense). An older, retired person "adopts" a younger person who works at the same company from which the older person has just retired.

In the Japanese system, the senior people meet with their young proteges informally and instruct them in the best way to dress, how to conduct a productive business conversation, and other basic workplace skills.

In this country, however, employees seeking mentors are more likely to turn on an informal basis to managers still on staff. If the senior level person responds, he then takes an interest in the protege's career development, guiding the young person through the often treacherous

political waters. As one sage recently observed, "They help them climb the greasy pole." For all intents and purposes, this relationship can span years.

Formalized programs are patterned in much the same way, only here the company initiates and oversees the process.

First, high-potential young people are identified as likely candidates. They are then matched up—usually under the auspices of the human resources department—with appropriate senior level people.

Most formalized programs run for a predetermined period of time, at the end of which mentors are assigned a new set of proteges.

One company with which I consulted created a unique program to facilitate identification with the maturity and wisdom of previous managers. The company established a seminar for newly appointed supervisors to be conducted by recent retirees. The theme of the meeting was focused on the glories and mistakes they had made.

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