

# Simply the best

High performance has become an emotive concept since this autumn's meltdown of financial markets.

Whereas 18 months ago the label of 'high performer' was aspirational and carried prestige, in recent months it can be seen as indicative of a career built on ruthlessness and exploitation – even if that is untrue and especially if the words 'in the City' are added.

This twist of fate has shocked those who have been watching the rapid growth of talent management programmes over the past three years. After being hunted down and wooed enthusiastically by fast-growing companies, high performers could now find they are overlooked by the same organisations that are now caught up in restructuring or fighting for survival. These employers are more likely to be concerned with outplacement rather than investing in the future.

At human capital management consultancy Penna, Sally Baxter, deputy managing director and executive coaching specialist, thinks it is time to redress the balance.

"In the current climate, the focus tends to be on those who are on redundancy lists, allowing people to leave with dignity. However, in times like these, it is equally important to look after high performers," she says.

Baxter points to research\* by colleague Rosa Milne, which concludes that those furthest away from decision-making at the time of restructure are more likely to suffer the effects of 'survivor syndrome'.

"Engaging high performers at all levels is critical to prevent commitment, self-esteem, and trust, diving," Baxter says.

"High performers can play a large part in the results of the restructure, encouraging their peers to do likewise. Don't

Coaching high performers is quite a challenge – and one that has got harder now that the economic chips are down.

assume the best will naturally support or stay with you," she says.

"For instance, in the financial services sector we're seeing some organisations taking advantage of the present climate by recruiting the best in the market. Companies will be able to recruit some extremely competent people who wouldn't normally be available."

## Transitory

There is a sense that the population of high performers is likely to become more transitory and that organisations which are scouting around for talent are likely to find themselves recruiting top players with existing coaching arrangements. This need not be a problem if the existing coaching meets the objectives of the coachee and the new organisation, according to Ali Gill, founder of talent management specialist Get Feedback.

"Coaching is a personal journey," she says. "The crux is that the coachee is in control of a personal experience."

But of course the organisation still has an obligation to check the reputation and ability of the coach and to operate due diligence, says Gill.

Developing high-fliers need not be an activity restricted to external coaches: internal coach mentoring can be a valuable asset to the newly promoted or recently identified high performer, says Bob Garvey, professor of coaching and mentoring at Sheffield Hallam University.

He says there are many different ways of running such programmes but that it

is crucial to offer the internal coach some training and to establish the ground rules and expectations. "What matters is the purpose – who and what it's for," says Garvey.

He adds that most organisations are still using development centres to identify high performers and to attach the coaching to talent management programmes.

Baxter has also noticed a requirement for internal coach training. "This is especially where organisations want to support high performers further down the organisation," she says. "It is effective if done well and expectations and boundaries are set up front."

But whatever the status of the coach, they have to have credibility and have to be able to give perspective to a high performer, says Robin Linnecar, partner of coaching consultancy Praesta.

## Context

What he means is that the coach has to help the high performer to find a context and has to play to the high performer's strengths. This is important because many high performers have been propelled forward by other people – they have been picked out.

"They may never have actually had to drive their own career," says Linnecar, who points out that a coach should be looking to help such people find self-awareness and take ownership of their own career.

High-fliers can be prone to thinking that the task is all and, according to Linnecar, a coach is useful for helping the coachee find a cultural fit and to learn persuasive techniques.

"In business, you have got to take people with you," he says. "But dropping hints and tips is not the way of high performers, who will take things on themselves and not work through other people."

At Lane4, partner Paul Jewitt-Harris has coached a lot of high performers who have reached the top due to a skill, such as being an efficient salesman or lawyer.

Ironically, when they are promoted, their own performance dips.

"A high performer might be a fantastic lawyer, but he or she could find themselves promoted to be head of a practice group and need help with their people skills, because what it takes to be a great lawyer is not the same as what it takes to be a great team leader," he says.



Robin Linnecar, Praesta



Sally Baxter, Penna



Ruth Paris, High Flyer



## WHAT DOES PERFORMANCE REALLY MEAN?

At Sheffield Hallam University, Bob Garvey (pictured, right), professor of coaching and mentoring, is in the early stages of researching the concept and how it is used.

He has found that it is often used in a punitive way or to set standards. "It often has to be measured against something," he says.

He is looking at what performance means within the context of the performing arts and how this can be related to the corporate world.

Garvey has been struck by the shared trust that performers need to give a good performance, and

by the shared language, often based on metaphors, which they develop.

"A lot revolves around an assumption of technical ability," he says.

"There are issues of concentration and behaviour in which they give and receive feedback to each other."

Garvey has particularly noticed the respect that performers, in say a professional orchestra, show to each other, which perhaps differs from the cut-throat corporate world. "People at that level of performing do not attack each other."





## Sensitivity

The sensitivity needed to coach top performing people cannot be underestimated, according to Ruth Paris of the High Flyer consultancy.

"It's higher voltage than other coaching and it's exciting because there is a sense of people taking off," she says.

Paris, who has also worked as a counsellor, has found through her own studies of business behaviours that some performers are actually quite 'needy' because they don't understand the boundaries for behaviour in business. "They are very quick-thinking, high-energy types who are willing to take risks externally in the business context," she says. "But through coaching they can become willing to take risks internally. Coaching gives them a safe place to explore."

Baxter says it is crucial to find the right balance when coaching high performers. "It is important to focus on 'stretch' rather than 'gaps', to help them aspire to what can be and live to their full potential," she says.

"Example coaching questions are: What can they do more of? How can they do this with ease? What do they need to let go of in stepping up? What is their purpose and sense of personal aspiration?"

"For the newly appointed high performer, rapid impact coaching can really help them integrate into their new world, be they internally or externally appointed."

"If they are externally appointed, a dangerous assumption to make is that as a high performer in a previous organisation, the new recruit will be a high performer in the new organisation."

Baxter says that what can scupper a new recruit is not the size or complexity of the role, but cultural differences and political landscape that longer-serving people may take for granted. If 'left to swim', a new recruit can become highly stressed and at worst resign, thereby adding to the recruitment bill of the company. She advises that coaching be integrated with the company's induction plan and internal mentors to increase the chance of success.

by Stephanie Sparrow

It's higher voltage than other coaching and it's exciting because there is a sense of people taking off

Please contact us...

If you have a coaching story to tell  
training.editor  
@rbi.co.uk

\* Survivor Syndrome: putting the attitudes and emotions of survivors of organisational restructuring into context