How to Keep A Players Productive

by Steven Berglas
Just because they think they’re great doesn’t mean they’re not.

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After graduating from Harvard Business School with highest honors, Jane rapidly moved up the corporate ladder at a large advertising firm, racking up promotions and responsibilities all along the way. By the time she became the company’s creative director, she was, in everyone’s estimation, an “A player”—one of the organization’s most gifted and productive employees. But although she received an extraordinarily generous pay package and had what some people considered to be one of the most stimulating jobs in the company, Jane was talking to headhunters behind the scenes.

Jane’s problem was that she felt underappreciated. She consistently overperformed, and her boss said she did great work. This was the highest accolade he ever gave anyone, but Jane needed more. She worked harder and harder, but more fulsome praise never came her way. Her boss’s inability to amply reward her achievement was exasperating. Eventually, she was lured away to a competing company that, by her own admission, offered less challenging work. Both Jane and the advertising firm she left behind lost out.

Not all A players are as vulnerable as Jane. Some superstars soar to stunning heights needing little or no special attention. They have the natural self-confidence and brilliance to stay at the top of their game with elegance and grace. Of course, these are your most prized employees, and they pose their own challenges and risks. (See the sidebar “Nobody’s Perfect.”) But as every manager knows, megastars with manageable egos are rare. Far more common are people like Jane who are striving to satisfy an inner need for recognition that is often a sign of irrationally low self-esteem. If you do not carefully manage the often unconscious needs of these A players for kudos and appreciation, they will burn out in a way that is damaging to themselves and unproductive for you.

Certainly, managers aren’t therapists or executive coaches, and they don’t have to be. But it will help your organization if you try to understand what makes your A players tick. In my work with more than 30 CEOs, a
dozen COOs, and nearly as many law firm managing partners, I have observed persistent patterns among superachievers that can give you valuable insight into how to manage them and their careers. In the following article, I will explore the psychology and behaviors of A players and suggest some ways that you can turn your high performers into even more effective stars.

The Superior Worm
When we think of A players, a fairly consistent picture comes to mind for most of us. A players are the people with the “right stuff.” They are the most fiercely ambitious, wildly capable, and intelligent people in any organization. Yet despite their veneer of self-satisfaction, smugness, and even bluster, a significant number of your spectacular performers suffer from a lack of confidence. Ron Daniel, a former managing director of McKinsey & Company, the blue-chip management consulting firm, made the point when he told Fortune that “The real competition out there isn’t for clients, it’s for people. And we look to hire people who are first, very smart; second, insecure and thus driven by their insecurity; and third, competitive.” Translated, many A players are insecure overachievers. They’re often the people who went to the right schools and who pushed themselves to win all the prizes. But if they are so smart and competitive, why are they so insecure?

In my observation of many A players, I have concluded that childhood really matters. Often these high performers come from demanding backgrounds where unconditional approval was withheld. Getting As, for example, did not meet with admiration from parents. The achievement was typically followed up with the message, “You can do better,” which is never rewarding and often damaging. From your star’s perspective, feedback of this sort obligated him to work endlessly to reach an unattainable goal. The psychologist Anna Freud (Sigmund Freud’s daughter) and others who studied children raised in this manner discovered that these individuals end up with extraordinarily punishing superegos. At first, the pressure comes from outside authority figures; later, A players impose it on themselves and on others. Winston Churchill, who adored his often abusive father, is a case in point. As an adult, Churchill ended each day with a merciless ritual: “I try myself by court martial to see if I have done anything effective during the day.”

Churchill is not alone. A players often assume the parental role and end up voluntarily pushing themselves to extremes, producing more and better work in every endeavor they undertake. I once knew a high achiever from a prominent law firm. When he got his annual review, he turned out to be the leading performer among his cohorts. His superiors described his work as excellent and superb, but rather than rejoice in having received such amazing accolades, the attorney worried aloud to his wife that his work was sometimes described as merely excellent rather than superb. This intense concern with the precise language of praise sounds strange and self-absorbed to most people, particularly when a prized employee is essentially drawing the distinction between an A+ and an A++ evaluation. But vulnerable stars are highly attentive to the language of the person judging them precisely because they spent their childhoods looking intently for clues about whether or not they had fulfilled parental expectations.

What do people get out of such self-defeating behavior? The psychologist Alfred Adler, the man who brought inferiority and superiority complexes into our everyday language, offered an explanation almost 100 years ago. Adler argued that the most fundamental human need is for superiority, a need that arises from universal feelings of inferiority experienced by us all in early childhood when we are helpless and dependent on others. If we manage these feelings appropriately, we go on to lead well-adjusted lives. But if powerful authority figures thwart our efforts to overcome these feelings, then complexes develop, causing narcissistic grandiosity that can linger for the rest of our lives. Adler asserted that if a person suffers either from an inferiority or a superiority complex (which for Adler were opposite sides of the same coin), then whatever he achieves it will never be enough. As I once heard it put: “Some people go through life feeling superior; others go through life feeling like worms. Narcissists go through life feeling like superior worms.” One might assume that A players’ feelings of superiority are a tremendous boon to them since, among other things, these feelings help them to communicate enormous self-confidence to others. But the plight of the overachiever who feels like a superior worm is
that he must live with the constant anxiety that he might in fact be inferior to others. Only when you can help your stars address their inflated senses of superiority can they begin to deal with underlying issues of poor self-worth.

**Can't Say No**

One of the biggest challenges for A players is their inability to set boundaries for themselves. Ordinary people usually know how to step back from situations where vague requests make them uncomfortable; but insecure overachievers typically exceed expectations because they are prepared to operate outside their comfort zones in their efforts to win recognition. When given an ambiguous request such as "I need directions to Rome," they will not only provide a map of all roads leading to Rome but also give you all air routes, water routes, and railway routes as well—just as any overachiever would. I know one superstar who was asked to find a few examples of the best insurance policies that the company had produced in the last five years. He didn't conclude his research until he had reviewed every policy the company had written in the last 25 years. While overextensions such as these may be impressive, they are not always a productive use of time. Additionally, when word of such efforts spreads across the organization, it can cause unnecessary disruption as other high performers feel that they, too, have to overachieve to such extremes to get the attention they need.

If you think about your stars' unconscious motivations, this overeagerness to please makes a lot of sense. People raised in an environment where praise was carefully metered out typically do not try to challenge the rules; they follow them. When presented with a request

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**Nobody's Perfect**

Because I am hired by companies to work with super talented A players who have problems, I do not typically coach what I call the "well-oiled wheels." These A players move through organizations with grace, achievement, and, most significantly, little inner torment. I doubt that these individuals have ever seen the inside of a psychiatrist's office and trust they never will. However, this does not mean they do not have specific needs or areas of professional development that require nurturing. Although those needs are few and easily addressed, it is wise to make doing so a top priority since these are the A players you can least afford to lose to the competition.

**Smart but not savvy.** Because your well-oiled A players will not behave in ways that call for you to mentor them like insecure A players (unlike insecure overachievers, they don’t violate boundaries), you may forget that they will be on a career trajectory that puts them in business settings that demand social skills they may not be prepared to handle. Like a child who skips grades in elementary school and is a 13-year-old high school senior with no idea how to act at a prom, an A player might be moved along a career path in ways that prevent him from developing interpersonal skills. In law, the practice of having associates serve as second chairs provides novice litigators guidance about how to develop social skills needed to behave in court. Having a well-oiled A player be your second chair whenever you meet with customers or clients will allow him to observe the manner in which a professional deals effectively with others. As a result, he will gain invaluable skills.

**Tolerant but not collegial.** Although well-oiled A players are not hostile toward juniors the way insecure A players are, it is doubtful that they consider B and C players their colleagues. Like insecure A players, they, too, were teachers’ pets throughout their formative years and were more comfortable relating to authority figures. Consequently, as they become ready to assume managerial positions, they find that they are unable to form peer networks at the very point in their careers when doing so matters most. Given their lack of inner turmoil, however, well-oiled A players will usually have little difficulty serving as mentors to others. For this reason, I advise using them whenever possible to coach C players who need help mastering tasks. The literature on mentoring demonstrates that one result of mentoring is the development of an intimate bond between mentor and mentee. Soon, your A players will develop a network of friendly work relationships as a result of their tutoring.

**Ambitious but not challenged.** The only occasions when I have been called in to coach well-oiled A players is when they were suffering burnout born of midcareer boredom. All fast-track careers slow down. You rise rapidly, your pay goes up quickly, you sprint ahead of the cohort with whom you were hired. But after a point, the curve starts to flatten. (For more on this topic, see Robert Morison, Tamara Erickson, and Ken Dychtwald, "Managing Middlescence," HBR March 2006.) That is the exhilarating nature of a horse race: running from the gate, jockeying for position around the first turn, and then running for the lead. However, if you are three furlongs ahead of the pack, the long, long straightaway down the backstretch is mind-numbing. For A players accustomed to action and rewards, this long backstretch is fraught with danger; there’s less that is new, and boredom can set in. The only answer to this dilemma is to provide these individuals with challenges. It is almost impossible to overload well-oiled A players if you collaborate with them on defining the nature of a challenge. They will approach such growth opportunities with passion. If you don't provide them, someone else will.
that he thinks is unreasonable or unclear, the A player is most likely just to back down and try to comply rather than to question authority. That makes your superstar particularly dependent on powerful figures in situations that subject him to unclear directions or sudden shifts in the rules. Since A players have tried to appease influential people all their lives in order to “know” how to behave, they are not prepared to follow through appropriately on requests that are not straightforward.

For a case in point, consider Jack, a rising star at a prestigious consulting firm, and an A player in terms of his dazzling brilliance and drive. (Not all A players are men, but the problem A players I have worked with are mostly men.) When one of the directors asked Jack to chair an important research project that the firm was conducting, Jack pushed his team to produce a report that was considerably in excess of anything the other research teams had done. When he hinted to the director that he didn't get the recognition he deserved, his supervisor responded, “Nobody asked you to do all that work.” A more savvy boss would have understood that Jack’s inability to set boundaries was a problem he needed help with, and he certainly would not have added fuel to the fire.

In some situations, of course, that kind of overachievement is built into a company’s business model. Blue-chip law firms, management consultancies, and investment banks offer huge salaries and great opportunities for A players in exchange for agonizingly back-breaking work. But in these professional firms, everyone recognizes the deal. Such companies rely on churning out A players and constantly replacing them with recruits from the top business and graduate schools, who are more than eager to join these prestigious firms. It makes for a highly productive workforce. In the best of all possible worlds, the experienced A player moves on to greener pastures before he suffers burnout. When he goes, the firm has benefited from the services of a spectacular achiever, and the A player leaves with another superb credential on his CV.

This business model, however, does not apply to the vast majority of companies that find it hard to attract A players and that need to retain them in order to fight for, and maintain, competitive edge. In these organizations, the failure of stars to set boundaries will almost certainly lead them to walk out in frustration or rage. Unfortunately, unless your company is a McKinsey or a Goldman Sachs, you will have to struggle more to replace these star performers.

**The Dissing Dan**

The A Player is usually very comfortable keeping company with his boss, which is obviously an asset to him in his career (and to his boss). He is likely to have developed this ease with authority figures early in life, by first appeasing a demanding parent. Later, the star usually becomes a teacher’s pet who grows into a company man or woman and maintains a capacity for pleasing those who are higher up.

Sadly, such people usually don't get to capitalize on the goodwill they earn with their bosses because their hidden vulnerabilities often make them hostile to those hierarchically below them (whom they usually regard as being less able). Indeed, spectacular performers will often actively shun interactions with juniors if not directed to work with them in an amicable manner. Even then, they may not. This attitude creates havoc for the superstar as he interacts with subordinates. Often, he views them with disdain and finds endless reasons to criticize their work. In turn, they get defensive and fight back against the criticism, which only serves to make him react even more arrogantly in an attempt to bolster his ego. He will, for example, not only point out a current flaw but also go back months to chronicle a litany of mistakes that suggest his colleagues are routinely second-rate. This creates a vicious cycle that has derailed many a star performer’s career because in time superiors recognize that the A player is repeatedly manufacturing ill will in otherwise functional teams.

Consider a vice president in an advertising agency who acquired the nickname Dissing Dan because of his disrespect for his subordinates. A high performer greatly valued by his superiors, Dan would subtly dismiss junior members of the company, undercutting them with irony and wit. At the team’s weekly meeting, for example, Dan dominated the show, criticizing the ideas of other team members. Immediately after the meetings, however, he dashed off memos to the executive vice presidents, claiming the ideas of other team members. Immediately after the meetings, however, he dashed off memos to the executive vice presidents, claiming the team’s best ideas for himself.

Thanks to Dan, every senior manager in the company kept abreast of the newest thinking
in the company. But when it became obvious to his teammates that he was grabbing credit for their work, they demanded a new leader. Dan was allowed to complete his current project, but his reputation for being condescending to the “little people” had spread across the company and many subordinates refused to work with him. In the end, his contemptuous attitude toward juniors turned out to be less a problem for managers than a career killer for him. When an opportunity for advancement presented itself, Dan was passed over and his career stalled.

Managing Their Insecurities

The good news for bosses coping with complicated A players is that managing superstars is not as difficult as it seems. The biggest challenge is simply recognizing that these driven stars have these hidden vulnerabilities. Once you’ve understood their unexpected weaknesses and needs, you can apply some straightforward guidelines and techniques to help them overcome their limitations.

Let them triumph. In dealing with stars, you should always begin by searching your own emotions about them. It can be hard to manage people with the talent, intellect, and imagination that A players possess and not be envious of them. Their apparent self-confidence makes the task even harder. But you have to recognize and control your own emotions if you want to manage your high achievers effectively. In their desire to impress, A players can easily push your buttons. I recall sitting in a finance committee meeting once where a dazzling high achiever, the comptroller, kept interrupting the CFO to inject his expertise. When the meeting ended, the comptroller looked toward the CFO for kudos. Instead, the CFO turned to me and said, “It’s hard to appreciate genius, even when you know that you need genius to get the job done.”

That’s not to say you should let your A players ride roughshod over you. There are times when you have to push back: You’re the manager, and it’s up to you to set an overall strategy for your company or unit and to make sure that each individual is contributing to the benefit of all. The challenge is working out just when your concessions to the stars will help or hurt the team. Usually, you can give in quite a lot before you have to stop conceding. The best sports coaches, for example, often give in to the stars on practically all the little things, and the stars show their appreciation by being extra willing to follow the coach’s strategy. In business, satisfied stars will reward you by attracting other stars to the team. Everyone wants to be associated with winning people or teams. In this way, your top performers can become the organization’s best salespeople if you can successfully manage their grandiose needs.

Praise personally, praise often. Because they did not get the right sort of praise at an appropriate stage in their emotional development, your stars have difficulty internalizing the good things they hear, and so they need to hear them spoken again and again. Of course, you will grow weary of having to reassure your most valuable player every day that he is number one and will be tempted to dish out the same old “atta boy.” But generic praise will not do. A players are not fooled by false accolades; they crave discerning praise in order to attain their unconscious goal of genuine self-esteem. As a manager, the onus falls on you to personalize your praise if it is to be effective.

Personalizing praise means knowing not only when but what to honor when considering your star employee’s spectacular performance. You must celebrate the unique competencies and aspirations that the A player values in herself, and you must admire her in a way that she can appreciate. Whatever you do, you must make sure that your praise is authentic. This is crucial when dealing with A players because they view those who evaluate their work with a jaundiced eye. They crave praise, but unless it is sincere and tailored to them, they suspect that it is fabricated and dismiss it out of hand.

Communicating authenticity is relatively easy to do: Avoid hyperbole, clichés, and platitudes. But determining how best to tailor your praise is much more difficult. Each A player has dispositions that make her either receptive or unreceptive to various forms of social interactions. When a boss calls someone into his office to tell her that her job is safe, for example, it’s quite likely that the person will conclude that the boss had thought of firing her. You don’t need to be a trained psychotherapist to see this danger. However, you do have to recognize that you must spend extra time observing your star players and listening to their special needs. Some players want to be in the limelight, so praise them publicly. Others need
Superstar Burnout

“Burnout” is a term that is imprecise and difficult to define, but we know it when we see it. Christina Maslach, a pioneer in the field of burnout research, described the phenomenon as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism characterized by symptoms ranging from chronic fatigue and anger to a sense of feeling trapped in a job that has ceased to have personal meaning.

A players who feel burned out or underappreciated at one corporation often think they can solve the problem by changing jobs. Yet when your prized performer transfers to what he expects will be a problem-free arena—when he takes what psychologists call a “geographic cure”—he gambles that the new location will prove a panacea for all his past woes. Chances are good that he will take his problems with him. Indeed, geographic cures can even exacerbate the sufferer’s symptoms. If he moves to Eden and his symptoms don’t change as a result of that Garden’s magical influence, he can only infer that his disease has worsened!

Take the case of John, a broker from a Boston investment firm whom I treated when I was at Harvard Medical School. A hedge fund manager, John came to me when his wife threatened to leave him because of his long hours on the job. He acknowledged that she had a point. He was only 38, no longer felt gratified by his multimillion dollar income, and knew he was only working to earn kiss-off money. While he said he hoped psychotherapy could help him, he never invested in it fully. Instead, he and a team of colleagues formed their own hedge fund, which John thought would give him more control over his life. To mollify his wife, he began attending his son’s Little League games, promising to take a more active role in the things his boy loved.

Eighteen months after he finished psychotherapy and initiated a geographic cure from his old brokerage firm, John had to admit that his attempt to avoid burnout was a total failure. Starting his own hedge fund involved harder work and longer hours. His attempt to become a Little League dad had backfired, too. He suspected that things were flying out of control when he began looking into the idea of purchasing a home stadium for his son’s Little League team. Eventually, John began to abuse prescription drugs for relief from his anxieties. When his fellow partners staged an intervention, he was forced to enter rehab.

Like John, other A players who suffer burnout often start acting out, expressing their inner conflict in some form of destructive behavior—be it extramarital affairs, chemical dependencies, or gambling disorders. However disruptive this behavior may be for an organization, it can serve the sufferer well: The emotionally exhausted A player is no longer expected to live up to expectations until his problem is resolved. In addition, he may gain extra nurturing and attention from authority figures.
get themselves into the same difficulties in their next jobs—unless they are lucky enough to find a boss who knows how to manage them. (See the sidebar “Superstar Burnout.”)

A good way to set boundaries is to allow your A players to help you build work groups, structure a project, or tailor a business plan. Then—and this is the critical point—ask them how they would like to be rewarded for completing those subtasks. By working with a star in this manner, you are not handing over the reins of strategic management of your department. You are negotiating a kind of contract with him.

Another useful tactic to help your A players develop boundaries is a variation of a psychotherapeutic technique that forces an individual to gain insight into her behavior. Rather than overtly asking, “Why did you kill yourself over that?” a manager might say, “Who asked you to do all this work?” From a psychodynamic point of view, the answer to the question should be “my parents.” But since no one expects a superstar to have been through intensive psychotherapy, she’ll probably say, “Well, you did.” The skilled manager should then respond, “I’ll see to it that I never push you to such extreme performance standards again. I thought I had set the bar lower. What did I say that made you feel that I hadn’t?” In all such interventions, there must be dialogue about expectations. A manager has to communicate to his star performers that he doesn’t want them to burn out. In this way, a manager will help his A players understand that they don’t have to outperform themselves time and again. Indeed, it is precisely the perfectionist, overachieving A player who can benefit from G.K. Chesterton’s wise counsel: “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.” While such advice would be disastrous for your B and C players, it is motivating for your superstar who is already going above and beyond the call of duty.

**Make them play nice.** Bosses must create an environment where top performers have to cooperate with other people in order to achieve their goals. That will certainly mean building the notion of shared effort into an A player’s performance measures. At the same time, you must set realistic expectations for what you can achieve in this respect: Even seasoned psychotherapists recognize that the best that therapy has to offer is an amelioration of symptoms. Phobias, for example, are not cured; they are brought under control. Likewise, when dealing with A players, you should not expect them to feel warmly toward less-talented people.

The process that coaches call “surrendering the ‘me’ for the ‘we’” is not easy to convey to A players who have not participated in team activities before. For these individuals, a more effective means of getting them to play along may be to repeatedly highlight the failures of other superstars, such as those of NBA player Bob McAdoo, who, despite his exceptional talent and many awards, almost ended his sports career with a reputation for not being a team player. This approach exposes your A players to the downside of too much self-reliance without making it personal. You never want to hold an A player’s own shortcomings up for inspection in public because that would magnify his insecurities and drive him from your organization. But by carefully exposing a vulnerable star to what I call “sympathetic failure experiences,” you can create enough awareness in most high achievers to have them see the benefits of “using”—if not fully embracing—members of their team to their advantage. Here, again, do not expect a megastar to exhibit true camaraderie; this is not the goal of the intervention. You can, however, modify his overt behavior toward subordinates if he sees that the consequences of going it alone can be more painful than following, however begrudgingly, the agendas of a group effort.

This brings me to a final tactic that great sports coaches rely on to manage their superstars: They co-opt them. Great coaches often make star talent junior coaches to the team. This philosophy of asking stars to coach rather than mentor subordinates is that it does not ask an A player to come down to the level of a junior; rather, it raises your flawed star to your level and invites him to perform at a higher status. In their heart of hearts, narcissistic A players just don’t have a yen for advancing the careers of juniors in an organization. No one remembers the names of great mentors, so asking your megastars to become big brothers or big sisters to colleagues will not appear rewarding to them. They want to surround themselves with other A players and to be seen as first among them. They also aspire to succeed their bosses. Indeed, an overachiever might view his elevated position as a
signal that he is being groomed for the top spot. In fact, he may well be. If he performs well as a coach, that performance may improve his chances of subsequent promotions. When that logic computes into his calculus, he is usually more willing to “go along to get along” with the rest of the organization.

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Sooner or later, most managers will have to deal with an A player who is difficult to manage. You may be thinking, why not drop these stars and try to create a fully functioning team of A- and B+ players? The answer is not so simple. Even your flawed A players have an enormous amount to offer your organization. Research shows that 80% of a business’s profits are generated by 20% of its workers—in other words, by these high-achieving A players. Of course, sometimes your stars will not be worth all your time and effort, and you’ll have to encourage them to look for opportunities elsewhere—both for their own good and for the good of your organization. But in most cases, A players can make a huge difference to the bottom line. If you manage them well, you can multiply that value to your organization many times over.

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Stars who walk out of their jobs because of burnout nearly always get themselves into the same difficulties in their next jobs.
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