

Ten Ways to Keep Virtuosos Engaged

By

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During tough economic times retaining average talent presents no problem. People want a paycheck. But in good times and bad, keeping truly gifted talent remains an ongoing challenge. Finding the specialists that offer what you need poses the first problem; keeping them in your doors the second.

Large companies face this problem, but their sheer number of employees mitigates it considerably—not true for smaller firms. When small companies hire well, they thrive for a given time but constantly worry that the exit of a key person will set them back. They can't stack up talent in the corners like so much firewood. Instead, they have to find creative ways to keep exceptional employees engaged and motivated, even when there's little room for advancement or promotion. Here are ten ways they can do that:

1. Compensate fairly. Don't pay an average wage unless you want average performers. Exceptional performers know their worth and resent those who don't recognize it too. If you offer them the same pay that everyone gets, fail to give them merit raises, or otherwise keep too tight a grip on the purse strings, they will leave out of disgust for your poor decision making as much as a desire for higher compensation.
2. Model the management behavior you want others to emulate. Give feedback; delegate; and conduct performance reviews. Don't micromanage. Communicate, set timeframes, establish goals, and get out of the way. Talk to them about *what* needs to be done, but let them decide *how* they will go about it. Delegate everything that you don't have to do yourself. Let them make all decisions for which they are qualified. Give them entire projects, not just parts of them.

“A” players want to play on the “A” team, so no matter how small the organization, run it like the top-notch company it needs to be. Set a clear strategy with specific key performance indicators for each person. Measure results and hold people accountable.

Establish trust as a two-way street. People who don't trust their leaders lose their motivation first and their desire to work for the un-trusted leader next. Be consistent in your behavior, mood, and policies. Conduct your personal life with the same integrity that you do business, and trust others.

3. Help solo performers learn to manage. Send them to management training, provide opportunities for them to develop management skills, and hire them a coach. Give them feedback about their management style and practices, not just their technical abilities. Tie rewards to developing others. Give them real responsibility for results, hiring, and spending money.

Not all virtuosos want to manage others, however. By nature, virtuosos often tend to be solo performers—wishing to create their own destinies rather than counting on others to define their success. If you can offer both tracks, you stand a better chance of addressing the preferences of the individual.

4. Virtuosos want access—to you, your top clients, investors, and anyone else who is important to the organization. Take them to meetings outside the organization. Introduce them to the important people in your world, and give them opportunities to develop relationships with these people. Even when their current job does not demand this access, provide it.
5. Virtuosos thrive most from doing a job exceptionally well. Provide opportunities for them to specialize and improve. Top performers tend to learn quickly and eagerly, so the benefits will quickly become apparent. When you provide opportunities for them to leverage strengths, they get excited and feel motivated.
6. Offer tuition reimbursement for those who want to specialize or cross train. If you notice you need specialized help in marketing, finance, or some other function, instead of hiring a new person or a consultant, consider sending your top performers back to school. You may pay \$20,000 in tuition for two years, but that is much more cost effective than the alternatives, and you'll build both enthusiasm and loyalty from the star.
7. Let them cross train with other departments. This costs nothing and pays mightily. For example, nearly everyone needs to know more about finance. When you have a need, consider moving someone into the finance function for a period of time. Also, rotate positions of power. For example most small firms don't need an HR director. People can train easily for this function without formal schooling and assume its responsibilities rather quickly.
8. Virtuosos expect recognition. When you don't provide it, they feel cheated and devalued. Stars require praise, but unless you offer it sincerely and specifically, they will dismiss it. When you provide it, they repay you with loyalty and exceptional performance.

9. Allow for life balance. Top performers tend to be overachievers in all aspects of their lives. Just as they expect to do exceptional work when they are on the job, they insist on outstanding relationships in their private lives. Clever people know the difference between critical and unimportant uses of their time. If you insist on long hours, rigid schedules, and busy work, they will disengage.

10. Surround your best with other top talent. Star performers, by their very nature, come through your door motivated and ready to engage. They want to contribute to the success of an important organization and work with other “A” players. Make your organization a place where the clever choose to work, and your stars will become your best magnets for other top performers—and all will stay engaged.

How often have we heard, “Our people are our greatest asset”? The facts tell a different story. Only *some* people—the virtuosos—are true assets. The point is to spot them, nurture them...and know when to leave them alone. These people will make the difference between surviving and thriving—between outrunning your competition and tripping at the finish line.

No matter what you do, however, you will suffer some attrition of your virtuosos. They tend to be a restless lot, constantly on the hunt for greener pastures and more excitement. They learn rapidly and bore easily. Therefore, you **MUST** be prepared to lose top talent in a small business. If you don't have a Plan B, then you don't have a Plan A.