Overachieving leaders: when an "A" is not good enough

Barbara Kaufman

Barbara Kaufman is President of the ROI Consulting Group, Inc, Rancho Mirage, California, USA.

Examine a cross-section of top athletes, successful businessmen, highly acclaimed scientists or nationally recognized journalists, and you are likely to discover one common denominator: the motivation to achieve. Because this orientation is highly rewarded in Western culture, it is also deeply rooted, very powerful and an omnipresent force in the corporate world. However, there is a dark side consequence that is evident in leaders who persist in not just achieving, but overachieving. That consequence is a decreased resiliency that emerges as a result of their drive for perfectionism. Not only can they be harmful to themselves, overachievers often have a negative impact on others. That is because subordinates and colleagues who work with these types of individuals tend to develop a sense of alienation and loss of ownership over their work. Equally important, high achievers underutilize the talents and skills of others and create an experience that results in stagnant professional development patterns, which can lead to increased attrition.

Collectively, these long-term consequences can offset the overachiever's individual successes, impact talent management strategies and take a toll on overall organizational performance. Fortunately, with expanded awareness and some minor interventions, organizations can help overachievers channel their strengths and reap more of what they want, success.

Spotting an overachiever

David McClelland, the late Harvard psychologist with seminal work in achievement, defines achievement as meeting or exceeding a standard of excellence. Overachievers, as defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, are those who consistently seek to achieve or perform at higher levels than expected. Accordingly, overachievers like to be in charge so they can direct the efforts of others. They set very high standards, excel at achieving goals and are passionate about their work. Typically, they perform exceptionally well in the face of a daunting task or crisis and naturally gravitate towards challenging projects. They are only satisfied with an A + no matter how tactical or insignificant the task is, and they are always seeking ways to improve their performance. To identify an overachiever, consider the following litmus test:

- Does the individual focus more on goals and outcomes rather than the talents of staff who will be responsible for implementing?
- Does the individual present a problem simultaneously with the solution, rather than allowing staff to wrestle with solutions?
- Is the individual reluctant to let go of tasks and resistant to coaching?
- Is the individual quick to criticize but stingy with positive feedback?
- Does the individual frequently question or dispute the worthiness of others for promotion?
- Does the individual lack strong working relationships with subordinates and peers?

- Do others describe the individual using these adjectives: driven, ambitious, stubborn, perfectionist, singularly-focused, selfish, pragmatic, career-oriented, go-getter, results-oriented, quick to action, critical, hard-working, unavailable, only interested in results, obsessed with productivity, intense, detail-oriented?
- Does the individual's department have a high rate of attrition?

These individuals are easy to spot. In fact, if candid, overachievers can see these characteristics in themselves.

The impact of overachieving

By commanding exceptionally high standards of excellence, even higher than organizational expectations, overachievers often make it very difficult for anyone else to meet their standards of perfection. Over time, this drive for perfection contributes to a leadership style that is directive and controlling rather than collaborative and empowering of staff. In many cases, overachievers resort to extreme multitasking and prefer to do everything themselves. Not surprisingly, the high level of success achieved through individual heroics elicits much applause and opens doors for increasingly senior roles. But, senior leadership roles are more about relationship building than accomplishing tasks, and this is where the trouble begins.

Initially, overachieving behaviors may be tolerated, even encouraged, because the person delivers results, and their ability to achieve is considered an offset to other leadership weaknesses. In many cases, the overachiever has positional power. Direct reports or colleagues seek to avoid getting on the individual's wrong side, which could damage future career opportunities and result in unfavorable selection for future projects. Too often, overachievers are called upon in times of crisis. This reinforces their behavior and makes it difficult for them to suddenly back-off and become more empowering and collaborative once the crisis is over. In any case, not enough is done to reveal the negative consequences of an unbridled achievement motivator. Nor do many organizations help overachievers recognize the value of leadership style flexibility and develop new tools for working collaboratively.

To complicate matters, as a society, we are producing more overachievers than ever before. In a continuation of McClelland's work on social motives, researchers have found that the achievement motivator is surpassing other motivators for managers and executives. As a motivating force, achievement has seen a steady increase while power (being strong and influencing others) has declined and affiliation (maintaining close personal relationships) has remained level (Spreier *et al.*, 2006). Interestingly, this shift parallels a cultural change with an increased emphasis placed on achievement from a very early age. Preschoolers are enrolled in just the right ''academies'' and toddlers play competitive sports. High school students are reminded that acceptance into a good college requires that they do everything (perform community service, hold class officer positions, letter in sports and excel in AP level classes) and do it well. Our youth are so accustomed to getting an ''A + '' that they are devastated to get anything less! Fast forward and it is easy to understand why more managers and executives are motivated by achievement rather than influencing and working with others.

Consequences of overachieving

If left unchecked, the constant motivation to overachieve can chip away at trust, damage morale and reduce workplace productivity. In the extreme, overachievers sabotage the very achievement they are seeking by micromanaging their staff and failing to develop organizational talent. Classic overachievers are unwilling to delegate, impatient and hyper-critical of anything less than perfect performance. Such behavior is in direct conflict with the qualities of a great leader. One great leader, General George S. Patton, knew how to balance the need to achieve with the need to empower. His advice still applies today: ''Never tell people *how* to do things. Tell them *what* to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.''

Great leaders understand that leadership is about strategy, not tactics. Leadership is about accomplishing things through others. When leaders encourage each team member to perform at their highest level, they are in a better position to steer and direct the efforts of many towards the organization's goals. As Peter Drucker reminds us, ''management is about doing things right while leadership is about doing the right things.'' Overtime, overachieving behaviors are destructive and will erode a person's leadership image and influence with staff, peers and superiors.

When staff are underutilized and left out of the loop, they feel underappreciated and powerless to make a contribution. Many wonder ''why am I even here?'' Even worse, from an organizational perspective, the consequence is underdeveloped employees that miss key opportunities to develop experience and knowledge for future roles. Because overachievers often rely on a leadership style of command and control rather than collaboration, both innovation and professional growth are stifled.

Some overachievers insist on functioning as individual contributors rather than leaders of a team. They independently develop and direct the strategy while performing the tasks alone or assigning them without communicating the end goal. Acting on little information, team members execute tasks but have no ownership in the work or the outcome. The dark side of this behavior is twofold. The overachiever is exhausted and faces professional burnout, while the staff feels underappreciated and experiences low morale. In the end, the result is demolished trust, low morale, reduced productivity and eroded confidence in management.

To illustrate the destructive consequences of an overachiever, consider a few examples. In one organization a classic overachiever hired an assistant for a number two position. The new hire had impeccable credentials, years of industry experience and was unanimously viewed as a great match for the organization. But, the overachiever failed to provide the appropriate level of authority and refused to delegate responsibilities. Worse, the overachiever pulled responsibility away by frequently jumping in to solve client issues and never mentoring the assistant who had direct responsibility for the client's satisfaction. The assistant, who was the perfect candidate just six months ago, could do nothing right from the overachiever's perspective. Needless to say, the assistant grew weary, resigned and the cycle started again.

A more familiar example comes from the tenure of Carly Fiorina as CEO of Hewlett-Packard (HP), the first woman to lead a *Fortune* 20 company and a classic overachiever. Under her leadership, HP acquired Compaq in a controversial merger and created the world's largest personal computer manufacturer. This move occurred despite protests from both shareholders and board members. The most outspoken opponent was board member Walter Hewlett, the son of company co-founder. In January 2005, the Hewlett-Packard board of directors discussed with Fiorina a list of issues that the board had regarding the company's performance. The board proposed a plan to shift some of her authority to HP division heads, but Fiorina resisted. Less than a month later, Fiorina was forced to resign.

To this day, Fiorina's legacy at HP receives mixed reviews. Tim Irwin, PhD summarizes Fiorina's weaknesses in his book *Derailment in Slow Motion* with the following statement: ''Despite Carly Fiorina's stellar track record of success-and popularity, when it came time to lead the giant engine of Hewlett-Packard she displayed an errant overconfidence in her ability to run the train solo. She needed others but didn't appear to know it. She lacked insight in both self-and other awareness. She failed to see her own limitations that she could not successfully lead HP without the support and alignment of others. She also failed to judge how her independence would alienate the very people she needed to succeed'' (Irwin, 2009).

In the extreme, consider Enron's CEO Jeffrey Skilling, another classic overachiever who made headlines. Skilling was so driven by results that he disregarded basic principles of good leadership. Instead, he took reckless short-cuts, falsified information, was blatantly dishonest and even pitted one manager against manager another within the Enron organization. Did he achieve short term success? Absolutely. But, the long term consequences of his dark-sided need to achieve cost him, and many others, both future and fortune.

Break the cycle

More difficult than recognizing and understanding the overarching drive to achieve is channeling that drive effectively. First, understand that these individuals may not see themselves as overachievers but rather as high achievers. They may be wearing cognitive blinders regarding any negative impact of their performance and dispute any assertion regarding a need to empower others or develop more leadership style flexibility. That's why it is important to recognize how easily the over achievement drive can become aroused. Then, and only then, can people learn to better manage that drive without diminishing the passion and excitement that can flow from those with high expectations.

To mitigate the negative consequences of overachieving, overachievers should consider these key strategies:

■ Before taking on a task, overachievers should ask, ''What is the risk of not achieving an A + ?'' If the risk is minimal, empower a team member and focus on more strategic work.

■ Understand that not every project demands perfection. The overachieving leader can learn to help the team differentiate the tasks that only require a B or C and give the team permission to work at that level. This allows the sense of urgency to be focused on A + type projects.

■ Recognize the resiliency or burnout cost of requiring an A + on every task. The incremental effort to achieve that A + may not be justified, especially if it comes at the expense of creating adrenalin fueled crises or professional burnout.

■ Avoid redoing a subordinate's work without their involvement in order to deliver the expected results. Take the time to coach and develop staff so that they learn from their mistakes and play a more significant role in meeting organizational goals.

■ Resist the urge to personally develop all the strategies. Instead, the overachiever should identify the problem or opportunity and ask the team to develop recommendations.

■ Take the time to bring subordinates up to speed on strategic goals and other important initiatives. This will develop their strategic thinking skills, encourage a shared sense of responsibility for achieving goals and foster better working relationships.

■ Overachievers would be wise to accept this truth: there is more than one way to approach a challenging assignment. Be willing to listen to others' points of view and let go of the need to be right and manage every detail.

■ Purposefully develop flexible leadership styles. The most effective leaders know how to expand their repertoire of leadership styles depending on the situation, players, politics and organizational culture. Style flexibility is a learned behavior, not an innate trait.

A few of the most common red flags present in the form of attrition, low morale, underdeveloped staff and a reluctance to promote from within. Other red flags include a staff that has suddenly become disengaged, more willing to just take orders and less willing to generate new ideas. From both an organizational perspective as well as the overachiever's, recognize the red flags that occur when overachieving behavior requires some form of intervention. It will not be easy. Often, the overachiever's sense of self and performance is out of alignment with how others experience them. Overachievers tend to lack the peripheral vision needed to recognize the subtle signs that their behavior is not effective.

Some of the more effective ways to recognize these red flags early are through regularly scheduled climate surveys, employee satisfaction surveys and 360 degree evaluations. Adhere to these performance evaluations at every level of the organization and allow direct reports, colleagues, peers and other key constituents to describe what it is like to work for/with every individual. Use the performance management system to align organizational values of collaboration, empowering others and staff development. Also, encourage senior leadership to role model behavior by empowering others and nurturing a culture of candor in which feedback is valued and speaking truth to power is encouraged.

Equally important, help overachievers guard themselves against professional burnout. Before saying ''yes'' to any additional demands, overachievers should be expected to

perform a realistic assessment of work already in the pipeline along with what resources are available to accomplish those tasks. They need to learn to be politically savvy about saying ''no'' and renegotiating deadlines. Just because a high achiever has the background, experience or skill set to excel at something, does not mean the work falls within the individual's current portfolio. Before taking on any task, it is important for overachievers to slow down long enough to verify that the task falls within the expectations of the position in question. Finally, from a management perspective, do not enable someone else's poor performance by jumping in and saving them. The urge to take on work outside of a specified role is common for overachievers. However, it can contribute to others' stalled performance and a higher risk of burnout for the overachiever who insists on saving others from themselves.

Continually assess which tasks really make a difference by asking the question, ''If I get nothing else done, what are the three most important things I need to accomplish today, this week, this month or this year?'' The overachievers' syndrome of over-committing, excessive multitasking, adrenalin addiction and unwillingness to say ''no'' can affect careers in a negative way when subordinates begin to go public with their complaints or the overachiever finally has more work that can be accomplished working 24/7.

Implementing these strategies will help develop more leadership resiliency by suppressing the need to multi-task, perform everything alone, and ''do over'' the work of others. The result should be more white space on the calendar to think strategically about the next goal.

Balance is the key

As long as the dark side of overachieving behavior is recognized, understood and managed appropriately, being an overachiever can be a significant strength. Overachievers are typically extraordinary individuals whose passion can result in producing top quality and timely results that produce tremendous contributions to the organization's they serve. Such leaders are often charismatic with boards and clients, able to generate business, passionate about work and willing to work long hours.

Because overachievers strive to be their absolute best, the dark side of this motivating force can be influenced through constructive criticism, coaching and mentoring. No overachiever wants to be perceived as derailing in their performance. For individual leaders and organizations as a whole, this means identifying those tendencies to excessively respond to the achievement motivation, increasing the awareness of potentially destructive consequences, and equipping people with the tools necessary to develop more style flexibility. When organizations learn to recognize when overachieving behaviors are strengths and when they become an Achilles heel, organizations create healthier environments, which allow a greater number of employees to succeed in achieving organizational goals. From both an individual and corporate perspective, the goal is not to stifle overachieving behavior, but channel it.

References

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About the author

Barbara Kaufman, PhD, is President of ROI Consulting Group, Inc (www.roiconsulting group.com). An executive coach and educator, she specializes in leadership effectiveness and organizational development strategies for private and public sector leadership teams and boards. Barbara Kaufman can be contacted at: drbarbkaufman@earthlink.net