

# how to deal with prima donnas

By Charles Moore

Top performing prima donnas have been the bane of many a leader; a deft touch is essential to handling them well and keeping the team happy.

All experienced leaders have been vexed by these people before: difficult, challenging employees who also happen to be brilliant at their jobs, and who are well aware of their value. In other words, prima donnas. Their work is flawless, perhaps inspired, and they carry a disproportionate amount of the team's load. The vast majority of leaders bend over backwards to appease such people, but others on the team could well detect double standards, causing a serious morale issue. What's more, promoting a prima donna to a leadership position could only create more problems.

"Top grading is absolutely important, but keep in mind that there are lots of people in the top 20 percent who should never be put in a leadership position," says Frederick W. Smith, Founder, Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of FedEx Corporation. "The key is for the organization and the individual both to understand and be satisfied with that position...many organizations get in trouble in this regard, because the only avenue they have for financially rewarding top performers is to move them into management positions."

Often, prima donnas' aggressive behavior helps feed the high self esteem that gives them the confidence to outperform and punch above their weight, but

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other team members can see their behavior as arrogant. An objective of leaders should therefore be to change this behavior and then wean prima donnas off this source of self esteem, whether through direct praise, recognition or by satisfying other needs. A careful approach is essential, in order to keep both the morale of the prima donna and the team intact.

However attractive procrastination may be, it is essential for leaders to address prima donna behavior as soon as it raises its head. The sooner a leader acts, the better the chances of success. When confronting prima donnas, describe the behavior that needs to change. Be specific, and have concrete examples ready: the individual must see that the feedback has its basis in fact.

Focusing on how change can help the individual's career development is also useful, as people want to know what their payoff will be for changed behavior.

Having laid out the problem as candidly as possible, explain why the issue is of concern, taking care to focus on specific behaviors, not the prima donna's personality in general. Having done so, try to find out the underlying reasons for the individual's behavior. Is it an issue of personality? Are their problems outside the office? In these discussions it may be a good idea to include a third party, preferably somebody the prima donna trusts and respects.

Be sure to convey that you are not merely forcing the individual to heed your will, but rather trying to improve the overall performance and morale of the team. Focusing on how change can help the individual's career development is also useful, as people want to know what their payoff will be for changed behavior. If an individual, for instance, consistently rubs key people the wrong way, point out that alienating such people could hurt the individual's success in the future.

"Leadership communication, to actually move people to act, must be both authentic and frequent," says David S. Pottruck, former President & Co-Chief Executive Officer of The Charles Schwab Corporation. "It is a rare combination of listening and speaking that lets others know you care, and inspires them with possibilities that they may not, without you, be able to see."

Finally, get the individual's ideas for solving the problem, and his commitment to doing so. Be sure to offer your support, and make available the resources that may be needed to effect change, such as external professional help or communications skills training. Finally, leaders need to work with the prima donna to develop an action plan, setting a specific date for follow up.

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While the temptation to indulge in favoritism is one to which many managers succumb, ultimately such a course is short sighted and detrimental to long term goals, particularly given the ever increasing emphasis on teamwork in today's world.

The final (and arguably the most important) element in dealing with prima donnas is the issue of special treatment. Consider this: in many corporations, who is likely to receive a harsher performance review, the team player who is a mediocre performer, or the prima donna who is a star performer? While the temptation to indulge in favoritism is one to which many managers succumb, ultimately such a course is short sighted and detrimental to long term goals, particularly given the ever increasing emphasis on teamwork in today's world. In such an environment, there will inevitably come a point when favoritism toward a prima donna is simply not worth it.

### Dealing With Prima Donnas

- Aggressive behavior can be a source of self esteem for prima donnas; leaders need to find other ways to fuel this self esteem.
- Act as soon as prima donna behavior becomes apparent – avoid procrastination.
- When speaking with a prima donna, offer specific examples of the behavior that needs to change – avoid making it an issue about the person's general personality.
- Stress how a change in behavior will help benefit the individual over the long run.
- Avoid favoritism: in today's team centric world, favoritism can be dangerous for morale.

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