BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

The Problem with Being a Top Performer

Research demonstrates the ways coworkers punish star employees

By Francesca Gino on July 5, 2017

Credit: Ezra Bailey Getty Images

The top performers in their fields—from LeBron James to Oprah Winfrey to Bill Gates—seem to have it all. Through a combination of talent, drive, and hard work, they lead their organizations to the next level. In fact, according to a recent estimate, top performers produce 20 to 30 times more than the average employee in their fields.

Many of us aspire to reap the accolades, respect, and influence that come with being one of the very best. But new research demonstrates that performing at high levels can also come with some heavy costs: It can make our peers resent us and try to undermine our good work. And there's more: the "social penalty" that star

A story from Hollywood provides an apt illustration. Tom Hanks won back-to-back Best Actor Academy Awards in 1993 and 1994 for his performances in the films *Philadelphia* and *Forrest Gump*. Many critics made the argument that Hanks performed equally well in many of his subsequent movies, such as *Apollo 13*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Castaway*. But Hanks didn't receive enough votes from his fellow actors to be nominated for any of these movies. The lack of nominations, as various critics and fans alike concluded, seemed an intentional slight that robbed Hanks of awards he deserved. The actor's peers may have failed to nominate him for a third Oscar because of the envy and resentment they knew they would likely experience if he won yet another Academy Award.

This hypothesis might sound far-fetched, but it's actually common for peers to punish top performers. For instance, there is a long history of factory workers punishing peers for working "too fast." Peers tend not to like colleagues who are "rate-busters" because may increase management's expectations of how much can be accomplished within a certain time, or for a certain pay. High performers can seem threatening.

Decades of research on social comparisons show that when we size ourselves up relative to people who are better than we are (or as good as we are) on a particular dimension, we are likely to experience discomfort, envy, or fear. These emotions, in turn, affect our decisions and our interactions with others.

One salient dimension in such social comparisons is wealth. Lamar Pierce (of Olin Business School) and I used data from the vehicle emissions testing market to study how inspectors' perceptions of customers' wealth can affect inspectors' ethicality. That is, we studied when inspectors pass cars that should have failed the emissions test – a behavior that is both unethical and illegal, but that inspectors may view as a form of helping. We predicted that inspectors, who generally have a moderate salary and means, would experience empathy toward customers similar to them in income (i.e., those driving standard cars) and envy toward customers who are clearly wealthier than them (i.e., those driving luxury cars). In turn, we expected these emotions to lead to illicit helping and hurting behavior, respectively.

And, indeed, we found that for a significant number of inspectors, fraud levels

behavior and found that people were more willing to illicitly help peers who drove standard rather than luxury cars and that empathy and envy, respectively, explained this effect.

How does our envy of high-performing colleagues play out at work? Elizabeth Campbell of the University of Minnesota and her coauthors looked at this question in a new study of 350 stylists working in 105 Taiwanese salons. The salons share many characteristics of workgroups in other organizational contexts: they are a socially dynamic, open environment where colleagues must work both individually and interdependently to succeed. The results showed that peers were more likely to belittle, insult, and damage the reputation of high rather than low performers. In addition, the more collaborative the team was, the more peers mistreated high performers.

To further examine how group members react to top performance, the research team conducted a controlled experiment on 284 U.S. business majors. They randomly assigned the students to work virtually on either a more cooperative or a more competitive group. Groups completed various tasks that tested their critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills. One member of each team (actually a computerized script rather than a real participant) performed either similarly to his peers or much higher.

The results showed that star performers triggered different reactions from their peers depending on the resources available to the team. If resources were limited, peers felt threatened by and competitive toward high performers and thus undermined them. If resources were shared, peers benefitted from working with a star and thus socially supported the high performer.

We've seen that when we compare ourselves to others and fall short, envy can lead us to undermine them. But Campbell and colleagues' study suggests something even more sinister: peers resent and lash out against star achievers strategically—that is, only when it is not in their best interest to support them.

Hot shots who deliver high levels of performance on a regular basis are valuable.

of isolation, dissatisfaction, and disengagement, and intervene early to assure their investment pays off. Attention to these issues is particularly important, Campbell and colleagues' research suggests, in workplaces that value cooperation more than competition. By helping employees recognize that the benefits of collaborating with high performers can outweigh the threats, managers can assure that star performers are embraced rather than sabotaged.

Are you a scientist who specializes in neuroscience, cognitive science, or psychology? And have you read a recent peer-reviewed paper that you would like to write about? Please send suggestions to Mind Matters editor Gareth Cook. Gareth, a Pulitzer prize-winning journalist, is the series editor of Best American Infographics and can be reached at garethideas AT gmail.com or Twitter @garethideas.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Francesca Gino

Francesca Gino is a behavioral scientists and the Tandon Family Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. She is the author of *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

Recent Articles

Women May Find Management Positions Less Desirable

Dazzled by Creativity: Why We Excuse Dishonest Acts

Sarcasm Spurs Creative Thinking

LATEST NEWS

BEHAVIOR & SOCIETY

To Buy Happiness, Spend Money on Saving Time

8 hours ago — Karen Hopkin

MEDICINE

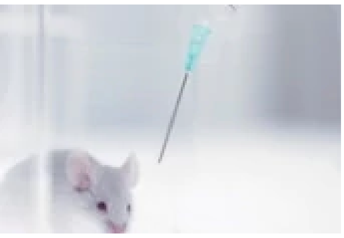
Should Fighting Antibiotic Resistance Always Include Finishing A Prescribed Medication?

9 hours ago — Dina Fine Maron

BIOLOGY

Brain's Stem Cells Slow Ageing in Mice

12 hours ago — Sara Reardon and Nature



CLIMATE

Watchdog Group: U.S. Electric Industry Knew of Climate Threat Decades Ago

15 hours ago — Richard Valdmanis and Reuters

MEDICINE

Biologics: The Pricey Drugs Transforming Medicine

15 hours ago — Ian Haydon and The Conversation US

SHARE LATEST

POLICY & ETHICS

Cost of Medical Care for Transgender Service Members Would Be Minimal, Studies Show

16 hours ago — Andrew Joseph and STAT