

Managing Away Bad Habits

by James Waldroop and Timothy Butler



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Managing Away Bad Habits

by James Waldroop
and Timothy Butler

*We all know of star performers who are held
back by a seemingly fatal personality flaw.
But there are proven tactics that managers*

WE'VE ALL WORKED WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE star performers but have one serious personality shortcoming that makes life difficult for everyone, limits their effectiveness, and often proves to be their professional undoing. One person, for instance, constantly takes on too much work. Another scorns the behind-the-scenes politicking needed to win support for most projects. A third sees the downside in every proposed change. In the words of one executive we worked with, such people are "95% brilliant, 5% disaster."

We call these destructive behavior patterns "bad habits" as a shorthand way of referring to deep-rooted psychological flaws. In other words, we're not using the term to describe compulsions like smoking or nail biting. Nor are we applying it to people who—at one time or another—bully coworkers, struggle with self-doubt, or drive

*can use to help these otherwise
valuable people get beyond
their psychological limitations.*

themselves too hard. No one is perfect; we all wrestle with demons and make mistakes. Instead, we're using the term to talk about employees whose psychological makeup translates into consistently problematic behavior. Their "bad habits" are a central part of their personalities and inform the way they behave from day to day. At best, such people create their own glass ceilings, limiting their success and their contributions to the company. At worst, these otherwise highly competent and valuable people destroy their own careers.

Although the psychological flaws of such individuals run deep, their managers are not helpless. There are tested, effective ways to help people recognize and correct their bad habits. Over the course of almost 20 years of research and practice as business psychologists and executive coaches, we have identified 12 discrete patterns of behavior, or habits, that lead to these career troubles. Managers have a greater degree of leverage helping people whose behavior fits the following six patterns:

The Hero

Always pushes himself—and, by extension, subordinates—too hard to do too much for too long.

The Meritocrat

Believes that the best ideas can and will be determined objectively and thus will always prevail because of their clear merit; ignores the politics inherent in most situations.

The Bulldozer

Runs roughshod over others in a quest for power.

The Pessimist

Focuses on the downside of every change; always worries about what could go wrong rather than considering how things could improve.

The Rebel

Automatically fights against authority and convention.

The Home Run Hitter

Tries to do too much too soon—in other words, swings for the fences before he’s learned to hit singles.

Let’s be clear: we’re not urging managers to get advanced degrees in psychology or to put their employees on the couch. But like it or not, managing today involves more than shuffling the right bodies on the assembly line; it requires knowledge of minds and hearts. Your only choice is between being a good “psychologist” or a bad one.

Being a good psychologist doesn’t mean you have to explore your employees’ complicated past to figure out exactly why they act the way they do. In fact, if an employee tells you “it all began when I was abused as a child,” it’s time to call in a professional. But you can use proven tactics to help the hero, the bulldozer, the pessimist, and the others become much more effective employees.

Our emphasis is on the practical. We have written in the past about retaining top talent (see “Job Sculpting: The Art of Retaining Your Best People,” HBR September–

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October 1999). This article focuses on helping your star performers be most effective.

Helping people break through their self-created glass ceilings is one of the ultimate win-win scenarios you will encounter as a manager. When a member of your team reaches his or her potential, both the person and the organization are rewarded. We understand that this work requires precious time and energy on your part, but we’re confident that the benefit to your organization will provide a better return than many other investments you could have made with your time. (Sometimes, however, it’s better not to make the investment. Not everyone will respond, and it takes an ongoing effort. To perform a preliminary ROI analysis, see the sidebar “Is It Worth the Effort?”)

Root Causes

We have deliberately described the bad habits in our typology in simple, concrete terms. But it’s useful to know a bit about the fundamental psychological processes underlying these behaviors. They grow out of a mix of an individual’s genes and environmental influences, such as family and peer relationships. In one combination or another, these processes come together and lead some people into destructive behavior patterns. As a manager, you need only keep the processes in the back of your mind. Your goal isn’t to offer counseling but to help your employees control the specific behaviors threatening to destroy their careers. You’ll find that this objective is quite ambitious enough.

The four psychological processes underlying the bad habits are:

An inability to understand the world from the perspective of other people. An astonishing number of people have difficulty getting outside their own frame of reference and seeing through another person’s. In other words, they lack empathy. In a sense, they never moved beyond the narcissism that is normal in childhood; they never got the instruction from parents or others that helps most people learn to understand the world from other people’s perspectives. Having a well-developed sense of empathy is essential if one is to deal successfully with one’s peers, subordinates, managers, customers, and competitors.

A failure to recognize when and how to use power. Many people feel a deep ambivalence about the utility and value of power. These feelings often stem from unconscious fears of our capacity for destructiveness. The fact is, many people confuse using power with abusing it. As a result, they either avoid gaining power altogether or they acquire it but then fail to use it—and power is a “use it or lose it” phenomenon. Of course, there are some people who are all too happy to obtain power, which they then wield like a cudgel instead of a

Is It Worth the Effort?

Before trying to help one of your flawed stars correct his bad habits, you need to make a crucial decision: is the person valuable enough to warrant the investment? In other words, Should you try to help him or should you “manage him out”?

To answer that question, consider the possible outcomes. The best-case and worst-case scenarios are fairly obvious. The most likely result, however, is that the person will take your cue and make an effort to change but will never altogether eradicate the problematic behavior. What is your threshold for a “good enough” recovery? At what point does the cost-benefit ratio move in your favor? Bear in mind that if you expect perfection, you are setting everyone up for failure.

You also need to ask yourself if you are the right person to try to

help the employee change. Even if you recognize one of the behavior patterns in someone who reports to you, you may not feel comfortable dealing with it. Maybe you don’t have the time or the energy; perhaps the person works off-site. In either case, you can get help from your HR department or from a highly experienced business psychologist or executive coach, both entirely acceptable responses.

If you want to go ahead on your own, plan the initial meeting carefully. Make sure you schedule enough time to discuss the situation thoroughly. You don’t want to open up this topic unless you have the time to explore it fully.

It’s important that you express clearly the reasons you believe your star performer falls into a particular behavior pattern. Make some notes

beforehand so you can be specific and direct. Fresh, concrete evidence is best. For example, “In our meeting with Don, you interrupted him several times when he was explaining his concerns about your plan” or “I’ve asked you on three occasions now to sit down with Theresa and discuss her workload, but you haven’t; you just keep piling it on her.” You should also suggest some specific ideas to help the person change the behavior; these ideas will be fleshed out and modified during the conversation, but it’s important to have a starting point. Finally, make time for a follow-up meeting soon after the initial discussion, preferably about a week later. Your work to help someone change a behavior pattern isn’t a onetime operation. Bad habits take years to develop, and they won’t change overnight.

surgeon’s knife. In short, a great many businesspeople haven’t done the hard work of figuring out how to use power effectively.

A failure to come to terms with authority. Most of us are ambivalent about authority. As children, for example, we often rebel against our parents even as we want to remain under their protection. Some people get stuck at one of the extremes. At one end are those who defy authority in every possible instance and in every possible way. At the other end are those who are overly deferential: “If top management says it’s true, it must be.” Most people fall somewhere in between. For example, in our experience, people like the idea of having a mentor but rebel when they actually have one.

A negative self-image. Poor self-esteem can come from various factors. Some people feel pressure from our achievement-driven culture to accomplish more—and to do it faster—than their peers. The possibility of failure is always looming. Other people’s self-esteem deficiencies stem from mild to moderate levels of depression. Whatever the deep-seated reasons, building a career on

a foundation of poor self-esteem is equivalent to erecting a skyscraper on sandy soil.

And yet, this psychological flaw undermines the confidence of a surprising number of businesspeople, from first-time managers to CEOs. One CEO of a successful high-tech firm who had unconsciously set himself up to be fired later admitted that he just never felt like he belonged “with the real grown-ups.” It’s not that he—or anyone—should always feel invincible. The goal is to be able to act effectively while accepting your inevitable shortcomings and life’s disappointments.

That goal, in fact, is what drives our advice on how to help flawed performers overcome their bad habits. We’ll look closely at each behavior pattern in turn.

The Hero

The hero is often the last person a manager wants to change. After all, why would you want to tamper with the behavior of someone who gets more done in a day than anyone else does in a week? The answer is that

over the long term, the hero's constant pushing adds real costs to the bottom line—even if those costs are obscured by short-term results. If you look carefully at the hero's trail, you'll probably find the footprints of valuable people who left the company after trying to keep up with the hero's superhuman exertions. Within the company, you'll find burned-out coworkers. And the hero himself may be thoroughly spent, too.

People who habitually push themselves and others to the breaking point do so for various reasons. Some heroes become addicted to success at a very early age; others push and push as a way of dealing with their own shaky self-esteem. An "I'm gonna show them" mentality vis-à-vis authority is common. Clearly, heroes lack the empathy needed to understand what others are going through to keep up the pace.

To change a hero's behavior, start by expressing your appreciation for his accomplishments. But don't linger on that point—quickly segue into a discussion about the costs of burnout. Talk with the hero about recognizing the signs of overload in himself and in his team members. Make it clear that this is a very serious problem—that the hero has consistently taken things to a point at which more is not better. He needs to put on the brakes.

The hero must learn how important it is to take regular readings of his team's temperature. There are obvious physical cues: bags under the eyes, stifled yawns. In meetings, heroes need to learn to pay attention to body language, facial expressions, and energy levels that subtly indicate resistance or dismay.

As the hero's manager, you may want to help him make a checklist of warning signs that the temperature is getting too hot. The list might include the times that he and others are leaving voice messages and e-mails, the number of cars in the parking lot after 9 PM, rising levels of illness among employees (especially the number of people who come in even when they're sick), and reports of marital troubles. The hero should fill out the list weekly and discuss it with you.

Heroes have to think more about winning the war and less about the individual battles. A good general knows when to pull back to fight another day. Accordingly, you should reward the hero for actions that demonstrate a long-term focus and reprimand him for going to short-term extremes. We know of one case, for example, in which a hero was taken to task for making his team come in over the Fourth of July weekend. Empha-



There are six behavior patterns—the hero, the meritocrat, the bulldozer, the pessimist, the rebel, and the home run hitter—that constrain highly competent and valuable performers. As a manager, you can use concrete tactics to help such people become much more effective employees.

size that you need your hero to make strategic decisions; he should delegate the implementation whenever possible. You might encourage him to hire an assistant with both the confidence and the mandate to rein him in when he is driving too hard.

If your hero regularly intrudes on subordinates' time at home, you may need to ban him from contacting them at night or on weekends. If that seems unduly strict, you could require him to make explicit that he doesn't expect a response until the next day or after the weekend.

Finally, it is essential that someone take on the official role of observing the hero. The goal in dealing with this bad habit is to turn down the volume without switching it off. That's why you need someone with normal hearing to help the hero adjust the level. You could decide to do this yourself at least part of the time. Even so, it's a good idea to solicit another view. You can help your hero choose a trusted coworker to carry out this task. At least initially, that person should help the hero take his team's



ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID LAFLEUR

temperature. Most people are reluctant to tell the hero directly that they're tired and need a break.

Changing heroes' behavior is a delicate proposition. After all, you want heroes to continue to do all the good things they've been doing. At the same time, you have to let them know that there's nothing heroic about driving themselves and others into the ground. Careful "fine tuning" of these important contributors is essential.

The Meritocrat

Meritocrats earnestly believe that the world is a fair market in which the best ideas will always win on their own merit. Such people typically excelled at school. They were the outstanding test takers who were consistently rewarded for getting the highest score; thus they have a naive reliance on the authority of objective, measurable facts. They never accepted that in the real world, ideas have to be sold, negotiated, and shaped to meet political and organizational realities. You have to be willing to horse-trade and to accept solutions that don't give you everything you want. People who don't accept these basic facts won't be as effective as they could be—in any situation.

Hal, for example, was an equities analyst at a New York investment bank. He was a quantitative whiz—he could tear apart a balance sheet faster and better than anyone else on the floor. But he would seethe when people challenged his analysis of a company or ignored his recommendations, especially when they acted only on their gut feel for the market. Likewise, when less bright but more politically savvy peers were promoted ahead of him, Hal was infuriated. These reactions, of course, were part of the reason he wasn't promoted. Hal's meritocratic behavior sabotaged his career.

To help a meritocrat, you should first offer sympathy. Go ahead and agree that it's really an awful waste of time to have to persuade people to support ideas of clear merit, to have to trade your quid for their quo, to tiptoe around certain sleeping dogs while throwing meat to others—and most of all, that it's too bad that we even have to spend our time having this discussion. In an ideal world, personal feelings and loyalties would have no place in decision making.

The next step is to raise a very difficult, but very important, question: how effective do you want to be? We've done this ourselves by using Jimmy Carter as an example. Carter, we say, was a highly principled and

intelligent president who stayed unswervingly true to his ideals. And yet even the most die-hard Democrat would agree that Ronald Reagan was more effective than Carter at winning congressional and public support for his agenda. We ask, “Do you want to be 100% pure, like Carter, or do you want to be effective, like Reagan? You must choose one or the other.”

Why even bother having this conversation? Because meritocrats are typically among your hardest-working, brightest, and most well-educated people. A manager needs to help them see that it is possible to operate in gray areas, accomplish a great deal, and still emerge relatively unsullied—say, 90% pure.

Give the meritocrat a little time to absorb this message, but don’t let him drown in self-pity. Instead, jump to something concrete: “So, let’s turn to that great initiative you mentioned to me last week. Let’s do it. Who do we need to get on board to accomplish your goal? Whose opposition do we need to neutralize? What trade-offs do we have to make? How can we sell the idea to the final decision maker? Is there anything we should ask for now with the intention of giving up later?” And so on.

The point is to communicate that the business of actually getting things done is exciting and challenging—it’s playing a game where the results really matter. Nothing is quite as satisfying as feeling personally effective, and that is what the meritocrat—with all his line-in-the-sand bravado—is likely to have missed out on. Once he has a taste of success, he’ll usually want another—and the second time around it will all come more naturally to him.

Like the hero, the meritocrat has to learn much more about his team. For each member, he needs to ask himself, What does this person work for—big money, prestige, intellectual challenge, acquisition of power? What does this person most like to do—solve problems, think about the big picture, call the shots? And how does this person work—with attention to detail, by intuition, by networking, or alone in a quiet space? Only when the meritocrat understands and takes into account individual differences can he figure out how to get people to support his goals and make their strongest contribution to a project.

Understanding and accepting the personal factors that influence decision making is difficult at first. As the meritocrat’s manager, you need to help him begin to see them objectively, as no different from any other factors being considered. Not everyone will come around to that view, of course. Some will prefer to move on to other places in search of a true meritocracy. Ultimately, how-

ever, the thrill of victory will be enough to persuade all but the most intractable meritocrats to change their behavior.

The Bulldozer

Bulldozers are people who decided early on that the world is a hostile place where you should do unto others before they do unto you—plus 10%. They intimidate and alienate everyone in their path. They don’t trust others, and others don’t trust them. At the same time, they’re extremely loyal to their bosses, and they get things done—which is why they’re worth trying to help.

Bulldozers are often reluctant to change a style that, by their lights, is highly effective. So to change a bulldozer, you have to become one yourself. Start by asking him if he has any idea how many enemies he has created within the company. Follow this with a powerful line we’ve used in our consulting: “If I put it to a vote, there’s no question—you’d be fired.”

A bulldozer will protest that you’re being unfair. The right response is: “Look, I don’t care if you think you’re the gentlest person on earth. It doesn’t even matter if I agree, because other people don’t. And it’s like being a stand-up comedian—if you think you’re funny but the audience doesn’t, you’re not.”

It helps to have some concrete evidence: “Did you notice in the meeting yesterday that after you finished questioning Joanne, no one said a word?” or “Here are some ways people describe you: cruel, mean-spirited, somebody I would never turn my back on.” (We’ve heard all these comments made about bulldozers.) To get past a bulldozer’s denial, it’s often necessary to deliver the ultimate message: “I’m not going to baby you. You’re costing me too much. Change or find another job.”

The threat of being fired is usually quite motivating. If the bulldozer now indicates that he’s willing to listen, the next step is to begin a campaign of rapprochement. Tell the bulldozer to make a list of his victims—people he has angered in the company. If he stumbles—if the list is too short—help him complete it. The bulldozer should then rank them from most damaged to least. Choosing the least-offended person first—in other words, the easiest to confront—the two of you should then script out (literally, on paper) an apology that *must* contain the words “I’m sorry.”

Trivial as this may sound, it is essential that apologies be made for past misdeeds; and it will not be easy. To get your bulldozer used to saying the magic words, offer to role-play the part of the person he is going to try to make

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peace with. The odds are that the list of people deserving apologies is a long one, so he will get plenty of practice, but the first step is always the hardest. Offering apologies en masse won't smooth over all the damage, but it's a necessary first step.

The ultimate goal, of course, is to get the bulldozer to avoid causing damage in the first place. To do that, he has to become more aware of when he is about to roll over someone—what muscles tense up, what thoughts start to run through his head—so he can stop himself. He may have to take a break during a meeting or, in a conversation with an individual, pretend to have just remembered a call he has to make. These simple tactics actually work.

Your initial confrontation of a bulldozer needs to be strong and direct. It's also important to confront a bulldozer as soon as possible after seeing him in action; he'll start to recognize internal cues if you can point out external actions when they are still fresh in his mind. (This goes for all the bad habits. Like the clues in a crime scene, people's memories fade quickly. Time is your enemy when you're trying to help someone reconstruct what happened.) As with a hero, it's a good idea at the beginning to agree on someone the bulldozer trusts to monitor his behavior. If the bulldozer shows a willingness to change, he'll be able to build roads for you without flattening people in his way.

The Pessimist

Pessimists have nothing but the best intentions. Their goal is to preserve the organization from the harm that could come to it because of ill-advised change. The problem is, pessimists think *every* change is ill advised.

Pessimists' worries are sometimes justified—they're based on a knowledge of mistakes that others have made in the past. More frequently, though, pessimists simply stifle creativity and block fruitful opportunities. They also tend to micromanage, looking over everyone's shoulders lest a mistake be made.

Pessimists are motivated primarily by a fear of shame—of being wrong or inadequate. And avoidance of shame can spread insidiously throughout an organization's culture, becoming an unconscious modus operandi that has disastrous results for the company's capacity to innovate and take risks.

Fortunately, there are tactics that managers can use to change the pessimist's nay-saying. Begin by telling the pessimist that you're on his side in looking at proposals for change with appropriate caution. That positioning lets you avoid a pointless wrangle over the pros and cons

of any particular initiative. Then point out that, as in the children's story of the boy who cried wolf, you're afraid that the impact of his alarms is diminishing. Moreover, he's giving the other members of his group a free ride: "They don't have to worry, and they certainly don't have to express their reservations. They've delegated that to you." The message is, it's okay to worry, but it's important that your fears do more than guard the status quo; they should have a constructive edge.

One way to make the pessimist's worry into a more effective tool is to teach him how to evaluate risk better. Pessimists not only ignore the potential upside of

change, they also usually fail to consider the downside of doing nothing. Tell your pessimist that in the future, when a change initiative is proposed, he should draw a two-by-two matrix that looks at the pros and cons of making the change as well as the pros and cons of doing nothing. By making this systematic consideration of initiatives into

a routine, the pessimist will be forced into a more objective risk analysis.

As a final step, you could offer to protect the pessimist from every kind of risk except one. Consider this example. One of our clients, an executive at a commercial bank, used almost those exact words to help a subordinate who said no at every opportunity. Our client finally said to him, "Look, we've got to take some risk when we lend money—that's why we get interest!" He helped the subordinate think about risk in a new way by telling him this: "If you try something new and fail, I'll take the blame. If you try something new and succeed, you'll get the credit. But if I find that you're refusing to take risks or getting in the way of others who have good ideas, you'll be held accountable." The pessimist got the message and learned to look at risk with more clarity.

In chess, fighting every game to a draw is not the objective; the goal is to checkmate your opponent. The pessimist must understand that you are playing to win, not to stay even. There are no draws in today's economy.

The Rebel

Teenagers imagine that they are rebelling by wearing funky clothes and getting outrageous haircuts. In reality, most are simply conforming to the look of their peers. Workplace rebels can also be quite conventional in their knee-jerk reactions against the status quo. Although they fancy themselves as revolutionaries, most of their protests against "the system" don't go beyond simple grouching—they rarely take action to change the things that bother them.

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Rebels are easy to recognize. They're the ones who always ask the inappropriate questions in meetings, constantly make jokes about the company's management, and publicly question the motives behind any major change. Their cubicles are papered with Dilbert cartoons, and their adherence to company rules is always just to the letter, never to the spirit. In short, rebels do enough to threaten morale that an effort to correct their behavior, assuming that they are otherwise valuable to the company, is a necessity.

What rebels enjoy most is a game of tug of war. So your first tactic is to refuse to play. Don't lose your temper; don't respond to provocation. You can then use two approaches to help the rebel break out of his negative behavior pattern.

The first is to co-opt the rebel by making him responsible for a relatively high-profile task that requires him to win the cooperation of others. In essence, you pull him out of the heckling audience and push him on stage, into the spotlight. The chance to take on an interesting and important project is, essentially, a bribe. Some rebels will see it as such but will take it anyway. Others will stubbornly refuse—in which case, on to the second approach.

Begin by asking the rebel, in a neutral tone and without warning, if he's thinking about quitting. When he—in a state of shock now—says no, tell him that you were wondering because he always seems to be butting up against the limits, venting his frustration, and putting the organization down. If he responds with "No, that's just my way of talking; I'm only kidding around," come back forcefully: "I don't buy that. And in any event, the things you say hurt people and the morale of the group. That needs to stop."

Then shift to a different gear: "But more to the point, you seem to think that a lot of things around here should be changed. True?" The rebel is likely to give some kind of affirmative response. At that point, throw down a challenge: "Well, right now you're about as effective a revolutionary as my three-year-old. All I have to do is tell him *not* to do what I actually want him to do, and he does it. And vice versa. Now, if you're going to battle the counterproductive aspects of the 'regime,' do you want to do it effectively, like a real guerrilla? Or do you just want to be the one who makes an impassioned speech before he gets dragged off to the firing squad?"

The latter is an unappealing option, so now you have the chance to help your rebel become a real leader of change. His first assignment should be to spend a week or two as a cultural anthropologist, noting all the subtle elements of your organization's culture: the way people

dress and speak to one another; how much they reveal about their personal lives; how they align in groups; how decisions are made officially and how they are really made; who has informal power and influence, and so on. You should require him to hand you a written report at the end of this period.

Once the rebel has gathered that information, ask him this: "If you were a real revolutionary fighting somewhere against a dictatorship, would it be better to stand out or to blend in?" The answer is clear, so push the rebel to the logical conclusion. "You have a choice. You can work to change things here or you can follow your old pattern and just be an irritant. If you choose the latter, your career will stall and your influence on the organization will never amount to much. I hope you make the other choice, because you're right—this place isn't perfect, and we need people like you to help improve it."

The story of Charlotte, a young manager who was hired at a large insurance company, illustrates our point. She was appalled by the condescending attitude that senior management displayed toward the rank and file. Her response was to tweak the nose of the institution by dressing much more casually than other managers and taking her lunches with the frontline workers. When her manager discussed her behavior with her, Charlotte determined that she wanted to work to change the company's culture. And she did. Instead of "acting out" by dressing down, she directly confronted peers about their superior attitudes. (Ultimately, however, she found the pace of change too slow and moved on to work in another industry.)

A rebel who genuinely cares about the company (and his career) will see the light. Instead of being negative just for its own sake, he'll turn his energies toward constructive criticism and the building of a better company. He won't change overnight, and for some time you'll have to keep a close eye on the situation through frequent meetings. The payoff will make it worthwhile, however.

The Home Run Hitter

The home run hitter is the person who is always imagining the roar of the crowd when the ball clears the outfield fence. In business terms, he imagines his picture on the cover of *Fortune* as the founder of the hottest dot-com, or he sees himself making partner in record time by landing the biggest client. The problem is—going back to baseball—the home run hitter tends to strike out a lot, swinging for the fence when a simple base hit (or even a

Home run hitters tend to strike out a lot, swinging for the fence when a simple base hit would have helped the team just as much.

walk) would have helped the team just as much. Put simply, home run hitters focus on things that are too big too soon.

As a home run hitter's manager, you need to deliver two messages. Number one, you appreciate his drive, ambition, and self-confidence. Number two, you want to move him up the curve as quickly as possible but at a pace that ensures his steady progress.


Your home run hitter should understand that you're not holding him back because his abilities are suspect. In fact, you already see him as very successful—and right on track. Of course he wants to be at the top now; that's only natural for a high achiever. But you have confidence that he will get there if he stays with the program.

The next step is to explain just what the program is. It might include spending time overseas, working more with particular clients, and getting involved with the company's Web initiatives. It's useful to look at people in positions that he aspires to and explain their career trajectories; that way, he'll understand that they didn't just walk in off the street and take over.

Home run hitters worry that they'll never get ahead, and they feel that their strenuous efforts to reach the top go unappreciated. Therefore, it's important to talk with them often about their career progression and to praise them frequently—for small accomplishments as well as for large ones. Those actions on your part will help reassure your home run hitter that, given a little

time, he'll have his shot at the big leagues.

John, for example, is a software engineer whose ambition and impatience were leading to bad choices. He was preparing to leave his current company—unwisely, we thought. We encouraged him to voice his concerns to his manager and to initiate more frequent “How am I doing?” meetings. Through those meetings, John gained a broader perspective, letting him see his manager's investment in his success. John just hadn't been able to visualize his career track. Armed with a new appreciation for the value of his work, he decided to stay with the company.

In an economy driven by the knowledge in people's heads, all good managers have to think like psychologists in order to maximize the potential of their people. You don't have to fix people's deep psychological problems, nor should you be trying. As a manager, your ultimate concern is with their actions and results. Although the tactics we recommend here won't work in every case (some people don't really want to change; others have damaged themselves too much within your organization to be salvageable), the approaches we describe are effective with many people. They can help turn your brilliantly flawed performers into spectacular achievers—to the benefit of themselves and your company. 

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