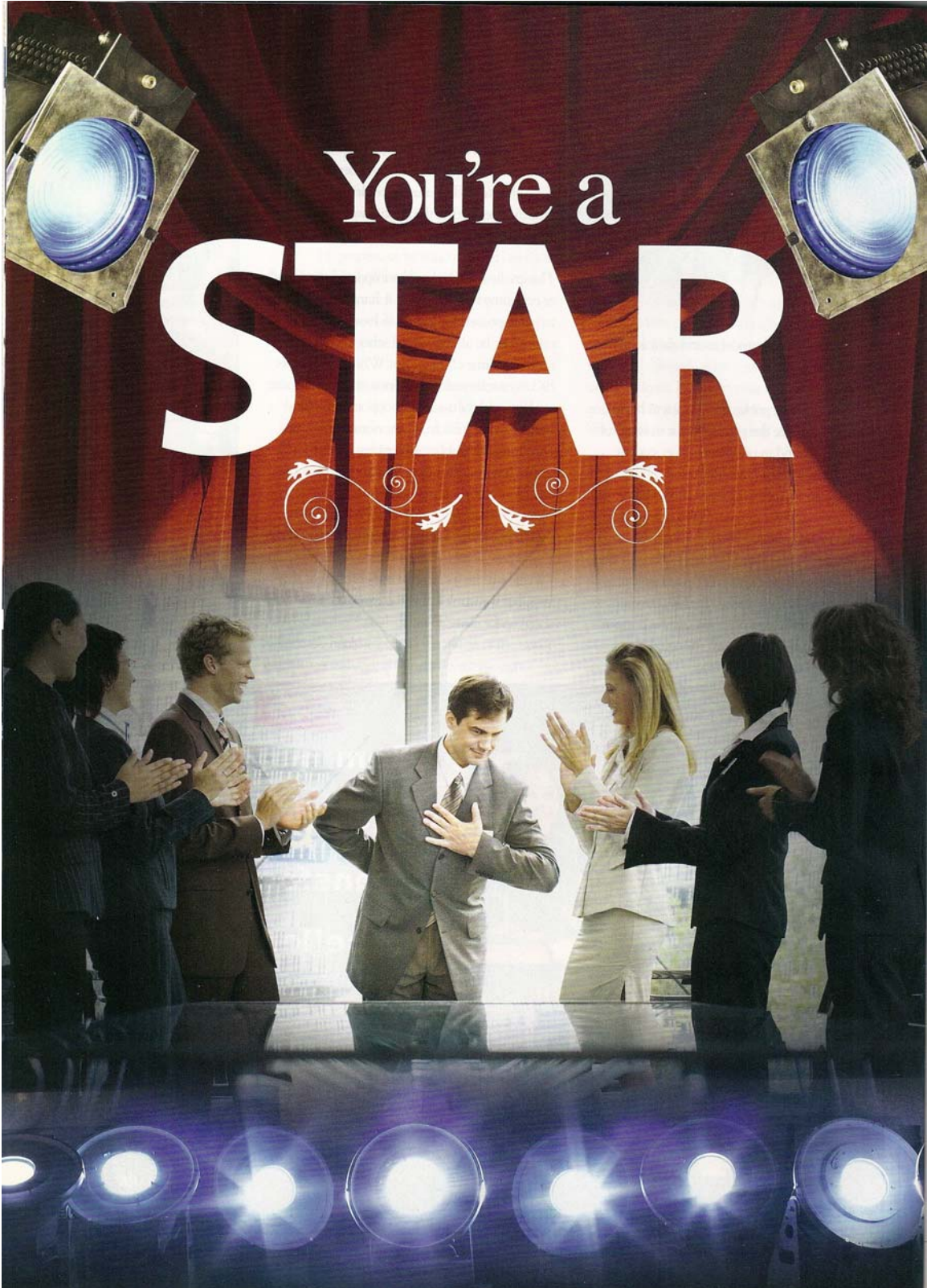


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Retaining superstar employees is more art than science, but companies can improve their odds by keeping high-potential employees motivated and rewarded.

Good looks, a winning smile, nice clothes, and the innate ability to kiss up don't make a superstar. Neither does technical proficiency combined with the interpersonal skills of a hermit.

Finding, nurturing, and retaining superstar employees can be more art than science, but workplace coaching experts say that companies can improve their odds by keeping high-potential employees motivated and rewarded while being mindful of the precedents and cultural changes that might derive from unequal treatment of employees.

"A company must know who its superstars are and what they're thinking," said Edith Onderick-Harvey, president of Change Dynamics Consulting in Andover, Mass. "They want to be engaged in the business and learn very quickly, but you don't want a team of superstars because they'd kill each other."

Keeping a superstar interested in the job is important, as is re-recruiting each one from time to time to keep a top employee from leaving. Even in a down market, superstars have high-demand skills that often transcend industries.

The Lone Ranger culture that permeates many organizations, that heroic ideal where superior skills trump all, actually can harm a company, suggested Noah Blumenthal, founder and president of Leading Principles, Inc., an executive coaching and consulting company in New Hyde Park, NY.

"Do superstars make good execs? Certainly," Blumenthal said. "But if the culture of an organization promotes on the basis of technical skills alone, competence quickly can turn into incompetence." Think of the oft-used example of the great salesperson who becomes a horrendous sales manager.

Kissing up

Unfortunately, executives often don't make the best judges of talent, said Steven Xavier, founder and CEO of the Cornerstone Executive Development Group, Inc. in Thousand Oaks, Calif. "Senior-level managers often get a twinkle in their eye about Jane or John, and, although the person looks capable, he or she

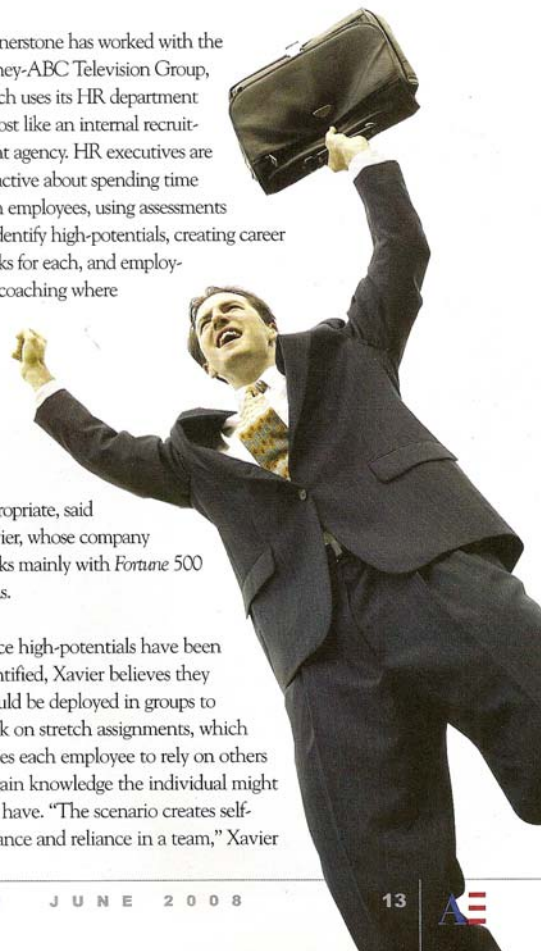
kisses up and kicks down," Xavier said. "Managers don't observe them working in the trenches and pick high-potential employees for their beauty, not their ability."

Xavier believes the HR department should be a strategic partner in the identification of superstars because of the amount of data on employees the department collects. Performance reviews, 360 feedback, personal observations, and other metrics can be used to identify those who belong on the fast track.

Cornerstone has worked with the Disney-ABC Television Group, which uses its HR department almost like an internal recruitment agency. HR executives are proactive about spending time with employees, using assessments to identify high-potentials, creating career tracks for each, and employing coaching where

appropriate, said Xavier, whose company works mainly with *Fortune* 500 firms.

Once high-potentials have been identified, Xavier believes they should be deployed in groups to work on stretch assignments, which forces each employee to rely on others to gain knowledge the individual might not have. "The scenario creates self-reliance and reliance in a team," Xavier



said. "It helps them become externally competitive but internally collaborative."

Culture score

Leaders must work hard to create a spirit of collaboration between superstars and other team members, noted Blumenthal. "If you really need strong teamwork, fire them," Blumenthal said of superstars. "When a well-functioning team is necessary for your work, a prima donna can destroy the chemistry you need. The skills they bring are more than offset by the culture they create."

The executive coach suggests setting the tone early, involving superstars in the decisionmaking process so they understand where executives will and will not bend. A performance management system with clear expectations that places a heavy weight on culture will help superstars toe the line or ship out.

Blumenthal suggests making 20% of a superstar's year-end review and bonus dependent on a culture score for teamwork and collaboration. That same score should constitute 50% of the criteria for a promotion. "The higher up in your organization a prima donna gets, the more prima donnas will be developed by that person," Blumenthal said. "So if they won't change, keep them low on the totem pole."

The annual Deloitte LLP Ethics and Workplace survey shows that management must take care when offering flexible work programs to avoid alienating younger workers. The survey indicates a strong relationship between greater openness and transparency by leadership and ethical behavior at work but a wide age disparity

over whether one's career would be hampered by formal flex options such as telecommuting, flex time, or part-time work.

More than one-half of workers between 18 and 24 believe taking advantage of these programs would hurt their career advancement, versus 37% to 39% of respondents in the older age groups. The survey underscores the importance of a strong company culture to nurture superstars, high-potentials, and everyone else within the organization.

"A superstar can raise the bar for the organization as a whole and has the potential to help others become more motivated and less satisfied with the status quo," said Gayle Lantz, president of WorkMatters, Inc., an organizational development and executive coaching firm in Birmingham, Ala. Lantz has worked with such organizations as NASA, Microsoft Corp., and Compass Bank.

Although many companies take a hands-off approach with superstars, Lantz said that autonomy will not bring the engagement that a superstar needs to thrive. Leaders and senior executives set the tone within an organization, and strong leaders are better suited to nurture the next generation of managers.

However, superstars should not be treated any differently than "regular" employees, said Onderick-Harvey. "Superstars are often the best thinkers, the best action-oriented people, so engage them in solving pressing business problems," Onderick-Harvey said. "But don't foist that person's regular work onto someone else."

An organization should realize that even superstars have weaknesses and areas that need development, and managers should temper praise with honest assessments about those shortcomings.

"Talent management goes beyond superstars, but they should be part of the plan," Onderick-Harvey said. "Superstars are part of the talent pipeline that a company should tap in a more formal way, identifying high-potentials at the corporate level and grooming them for future growth—if that's what the superstar wants." ■

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