

DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

4 Reasons Talented Employees Don't Reach Their Potential

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No matter how talented someone might be, there is no guarantee that their talents will translate into top performance. The science of [human potential](#) has generally illustrated that an individual's overarching competence cannot be fully understood unless we also account for their emotional make-up, preferences, and dispositions. No matter how smart, knowledgeable, and experienced you are, there is generally [a difference](#) between what you *can* do and what you *normally* do.

This is one of the reasons why talent identification efforts fail: when employers focus too much on candidates' potential — the best they could do *if* they were motivated to do their best — they forget that the critical outcome they should try to predict is what people are actually likely to do once they are in the job, in particular their *typical* performance. Just like you shouldn't assume that what you see in someone when you meet them on a first date is what you will keep on seeing when you are married to them five years later, there will probably be a difference between what you see in candidates when they are applying for a job and what you see from them when they have been in the job five years later (though [science](#) can help you predict this, too).

If you think you're under-performing at work, you're probably right: because few individuals give it their best and are 100% motivated throughout sustained and continuous periods of their tenure (my colleague Marc Effron has written an excellent [book](#) on this subject). In fact, even if you think that you *are* performing to the best of your capabilities, you're probably wrong, as there is generally [little overlap](#) between what people think of their talents and performance, and how they actually perform. In fact, it is often the case that top performers evaluate their own performance more critically and harshly, whereas those who perform poorly think they are making a fantastic contribution to the company: self-awareness, it seems, is a critical component of talent.

The truth is that most people are not even bothered to try their best after they have been on the job for more than six months, a time-frame known as the [honeymoon period](#). Although there are many reasons for this, here are four common causes of under-performance and how to address them:

- **Poor fit:** Talent is mainly personality in the right place, which explains why most people will do better in some jobs, cultures, and contexts than in others. Organizational psychologists call this “[person-job-fit](#),” and it is measured by quantifying the degree of alignment between a person’s attitudes, values, abilities, and dispositions on the one hand, and the characteristics of the job, role, and organization on the other. The problem is that even when organizations evaluate the candidate correctly, they are often not as good at evaluating the role, and particularly their own culture. This is why so many organizations see themselves as more inclusive, diverse, innovative, and prosocial than they actually are — it’s wishful thinking rather than accurate self-assessment. This obviously impacts a candidates’ perceptions of the role and organization, where it may take them a while to truly experience the culture and understand what the role truly entails and demands from them. What can you do about this? The only alternative is to do your homework and carefully vet the organization you are about to join, ensuring that you understand the job in question well to avoid being surprised. Luckily, sites such as [Glassdoor](#), which function as a sort of TripAdvisor of workplaces, and increasingly of leaders, can help you leverage the wisdom of crowds — but they are obviously not perfect. Asking detailed questions of your interviewers, speaking to employees, and figuring out whether you have much in common with high-performing incumbents in the same or similar role should help you predict fit. Of course, in some instances your main contribution to the organization or role may be to *not* fit in perfectly — this is the benefit of [cognitive diversity](#). However, it is safer to assume you will adjust and perform well when you see similarities between your profile and the profile of high-performing employees (in fact, this is how science-driven assessment tools are calibrated to increase predictive accuracy, namely by benchmarking against high-performing incumbents).
- **Disengagement:** A common side-effect of poor fit is disengagement, though it should be noted that there are also other reasons underlying the [prevalent](#) lack of enthusiasm and motivation found in typical workplaces. In fact, one of the most common drivers of disengagement is poor leadership. As I show in my latest book, *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders?*, management malfunction, particularly of the male variety, explains not just why so many people underperform at work, but also why talented and star employees quit their jobs, and even traditional employment altogether. The solution to this is not simple. You can’t just suddenly decide to replace your boss with a better leader — someone who [inspires](#) and mentors you, provides objective and constructive feedback on your performance, and gets you excited about work when you wake up every morning. Note that even if your boss is capable of doing all these things, *they* may not be engaged themselves, perhaps because they work for an incompetent leader (or someone who is not engaged). But even if you are not able to quit your boss, there are some proven hacks that will likely improve your engagement, and in turn your performance. For example, [finding time to be curious and learn](#) will make your job more meaningful. Connecting with your colleagues and nurturing the interpersonal aspect of work is also quite motivating. Finally, [telling your boss that you are not engaged](#) may also help, for they may be unaware of it and willing to do something to help you, especially if they value your talents.

- **Organizational politics:** Although modern workplaces are generally fairer and more data-driven in their talent management practices than ever before, there's still much progress to be made. Business leaders rejoice in the idea that their companies are meritocratic talent magnets, but the reality is that even when they are able to draw star performers into their companies, those stars will have to learn how to navigate the toxic and nepotistic side of any culture — including some basic degree of [organizational politics](#). Unsurprisingly, much career and executive coaching focuses on improving people's soft and political skills, and a person's political savvy has been found to promote their career success irrespective of their talents and technical skills. In general, the more contaminated and corrosive the culture of an organization, the more parasitic individuals will rise, much like bacteria thrive in contaminated environments. You can see this in any organization when there's a clear gap between individuals' career success and their actual performance and talents. You can deal with this by being aware of the politics and partaking in them, though hopefully without [selling your soul](#). In any event, it is naïve to think that you can let your talents speak for themselves. In fact, the more talented you are, the more enemies you will make — particularly in toxic and political organizations. And if things are hard to change, your best bet may be to change organizations, or at least units. Note that though all organizations are political, some are far less political than others.
- **Personal circumstances:** The final reason is almost too obvious to mention, but in today's ever-more-absorbing and 24/7 world of work, it's easy to forget that people also have a personal and private life, and that no matter how engaged and talented they are, personal drawbacks and setbacks will often interfere with their career success. This is why there is so much discussion of work-life balance (even today, when the boundaries between work and “life” have been eroded). Good bosses and supportive employers will want to understand your circumstances, and you can be sure they will have a vested interest in helping you deal with them so you can deliver in accordance with your talents, and feel grateful and committed to them in the long run.

In short, you can always assume that your talents are necessary, but not sufficient to excel and impress at work. Optimizing your job so that it fits with your interests, beliefs, and broader life activities, and being alert to the invisible social forces that govern the dynamics of organizations, will ultimately help you perform to the best of your capabilities.

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