

WORKPLACE CULTURE: HIGH PERFORMANCE HEADACHES

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Teams that have the capacity to perform at higher levels often also come with a unique set of challenges that can make the maintenance of a positive culture complex. Proactive leadership in these environments is critical to maintaining culture and preventing burnout.

Most leaders dream of having high performance teams that have the capacity to deliver results that exceed expectations. Though, once we achieve building or acquiring a high-performance team, we quickly realize that this presents a complex set of challenges. The maintenance of an engaged and positive culture can be particularly difficult with increasing levels of performance, pace, and workload.

To maintain balance, engagement, and positivity in a high-performing culture we need to first understand what drives the heart of a high performer. We will refer to these high performers as the champions of our work environment. Those that are willing to move faster, do more, process information quicker, and work harder to achieve amazing results.

UNDERSTANDING THE HEART OF A CHAMPION

The heart of a champion is driven to succeed. They are not intimidated by the size or complexity of an idea, concept, or task. The champion understands that hard work is necessary to achieve goals and is willing to put in that work to be successful. These traits can set them apart from the rest of the team and create unique cultural challenges in the concepts of teamwork and the achievement of team success. There are twelve key characteristics of a champion that differentiate them from others in their environment. As you interact with your team, look for these traits to identify your champions:

1. Increased ability to cope with stress or anxiety;
2. Confidence;
3. Mental toughness;
4. Tactile Intelligence; (deeper understanding of flow and process)
5. Ability to block out distractions;
6. Competitiveness;
7. Hard-work ethic;
8. Ability to set and achieve goals;
9. Coachability;
10. Ability to be hopeful in achieving goals;
11. Perfectionism;
12. Optimism.

TEAM PRESSURE AND SUPPORT

While the high-performance impact of champions in an environment typically leads to great successes, there can also be an underlying cultural impact on the team. As a leader, you'll need to watch for the signs of high-performance cultural impact on your whole team to intervene with culture begins to feel the pressure. Some unique challenges that are presented to team culture related to high performance are:

1. New team member orientation to a fast paced environment. When new team members are introduced to a high-performance environment, the pace can be overwhelming. You'll need to give special attention to how they are introduced to this pace with the opportunity to ramp up to the pace of the rest

of the team. Failure to do this may turn off a new entrant, and risk unnecessary turnover due to the pressure of performance too quickly in the environment.

2. Champions tend to inadvertently place pressure on the team. Because a champion is naturally driven to succeed, you may find that others in the environment are feeling a lot of pressure to keep up. When you notice a disparity in work styles, open communication about how you can best combine work styles to both continue to achieve success and be cognizant of differences in how success and the pace of work are perceived.
3. Support cultural drivers along with high performers. High performers, though great for producing results, are not always the culture influencers in your environment. Create balance by making sure you are praising, supporting, and recognizing performance in both culture influence and work output.

IDENTIFYING HIGH PERFORMANCE BURNOUT

Pay attention to the risk of burnout in a high performing environment. High performers are strong individuals and teams that push through barriers of fatigue that others will not. This puts them at a higher risk for burnout. Champions, as a unique challenge, may feel pressure to not appear “weak” or “depressed.” And others in the environment that feel the pressure to keep up with champions may also feel an unspoken pressure to not show signs of what they perceive to be “weakness” in their high performing environment. It is your duty as a leader to be hyper-aware of the signs of burnout to intervene and open communication to protect your champions and high performing environments from falling into a burnout state. Here are ten signs that burnout is beginning to happen in a high performing environment:

1. A cynical nature begins to develop within your team;
2. Signs of depression begin to exhibit in some or all the members of the team;
3. Complaining increases about things that previously did not bring complaints;
4. Turnover begins to occur, particularly with statements like “I just couldn't take it anymore”;
5. People begin to shrug responsibilities or cut corners;
6. People express the environment or pace feels “out of control;”
7. Team members say they lack work-life balance, or their workload is impacting their home life;
8. People are too fatigued to have personal hobbies (too tired to exercise, play with their own pets/kids, read, or even vacation)
9. Signs of lethargy or inexplicable illness due to fatigue;
10. Feelings of guilt, regret, or remorse if they don't exceed expectations constantly.

BURNOUT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

Medical health professionals are experiencing higher rates of burnout than other industries. This is true for the veterinary profession as well as human medical professions. Because of the time we spend worrying about the health of our patients, we often overlook ourselves in the process. This is even more prevalent in high performing environments. The pace, exposure to critical conversations, repetition, and emotional fatigue can become overwhelming. The champions natural drive to succeed often results in an unspoken fatigue due to their ability to push through pressure and stress to produce great results. In the veterinary industry, often the pressure of patient care combined with the pressures of business results can exacerbate this and cause a burnout state to occur in the hospital culture. As a leader, if you identify this is occurring it is critical that you take immediate steps to recover the culture from this state. In fact, it is recommended you implement the following techniques before you see signs of burnout to prevent a burnout state from occurring in your workplace culture:

1. Teach your team boundaries. Personal and professional boundaries will be important in helping your team achieve the balance needed to sustain high performance. Champions, by nature, will want to be very

responsive and complete in all their efforts. This may mean they have a propensity to check email and complete work tasks outside of appropriate times. Coach and guide your high performers to setting appropriate work life balance boundaries to allow them with decompression and recovery time to sustain their performance levels.

2. Help them discover or rediscover the joys of their profession. Veterinary medicine offers some unique and beautiful moments that should be highlighted in the maintenance of your high performing culture. Help your team focus on a special patient, a unique encounter, a life-saving moment, on the cuteness of our patients, and on the bond they share as a team to be able to do what they do each day. This may mean a reduction in the discussion of metrics to help them focus or refocus on the positive “feel good” aspects of their profession. Champions make and set records, but don't always take time to focus on the special moments. As a leader, help them do that to recover them from burnout or to prevent burnout.
3. Encourage the use of paid time off. High performers sometimes feel guilty about taking time off. This is a big contributor to a burnout state in the culture. Encourage the use of paid time off to decompress, reinvigorate, focus on family or hobbies, and to recharge. In a high-performing environment it is common to hear people express guilt for the production or productivity loss their absence might create. As a leader, redirect their focus to the positive aspects of time off. Ultimately, a rested champion can sustain higher levels of performance. It is up to you to help them protect their ability to rest.

CONCLUSION

As you evaluate the needs of your high performing environment, keep a close eye on the impact of performance on culture. Protect your environment by being proactive about identifying the signs of burnout, fatigue, or performance related feelings of guilt or pressure. High performance environments have unique needs that require your leadership to sustain the type of culture necessary to match the performance results.

