Are You a High-Performer?

Or is your team now planning to fire you?

by Howard M. Guttman

LEADERS LIVE ON THE edge, especially in tough times. Although they can't control all financial and other business outcomes, they should at least effectively command their teams, ensuring that they are *high-performing enterprises* whose members are fully engaged, working together transparently to achieve results for *us*.

Are you a *high-performance leader* (HPL) —or is your team plotting to fire you? HPLs are a breed apart. They're paid to produce results through and with others, so they ensure that their behavior energizes members of their team.

To find out how well you meet our criteria for high-performance leadership, answer these 10 questions:

1. I give my team members clear, measurable goals. 2. My team's goals / priorities are aligned with our business strategy. 3. My team members are clear about their roles and responsibilities. 4. My team members put *winning for the team* ahead of functional self-interest. 5. I put aside the leadership story that as the leader I am paid to make the decisions. 6. We have a clear, agreed-upon process in place for making decisions—who will make which decisions and how. 7. We have clear, agreed-upon protocols for resolving issues and conflict. 8. My team members hold one another—and me—accountable for results. 9. I adjust my leadership behavior—directing, coaching, collaborating, delegating—according to team members' and situational needs. 10. When I look at my team, I don't see *followers*; I see a *team of leaders*.

If you aren't a HPL, beware: Your team may be plotting to fire you. This past March, Mike D'Antoni "resigned" as head coach of the New York Knicks. He and star player Carmelo Anthony couldn't see eye to eye on *how basketball should be played*. The team's owner favored his player, and D'Antoni left. He is not alone. Marquee leaders such as Yahoo's Carol Bartz, Hewlett-Packard's Leo Apotheker, Ernst Lieb at Mercedes-Benz USA, and Olympus's Michael Woodford, to name a few, were sacked in moves that were some-times as surprising to the leaders as they were to the business community.

A Gallup survey found that *one in four employees would fire their boss if given* the chance. Among *actively disengaged* employees, the number jumps to half. Clearly, *no leader is immune from a coup d'état*, but smart leaders lower the odds.

We worked with a high-powered leader who had strong credentials and a clear vision, but remained focused on his own agenda and came across as directive and dogmatic, which didn't sit well with members of his top team, all of whom were seasoned pros. He rarely accepted differing points of view, and when he did he often would change course unilaterally and then deny having done so. As resentment built up, the stars left. Those who remained began to collude with one another, and eventually his team members decided to throw their leader overboard. They reached out to his boss and other executives. Soon, the leader was fired.

Cues and Clues for Leaders

HPLs come equipped with finely tuned sonar. They pay attention to *verbal cues*, especially when they come frequently: *I have another point of view; That's not what I understood before; You missed my point; Is this another change in direction?; Yes, but . . .; Don't you think that . . . ?; and Wouldn't it be better to . . . ?*

In addition, such leaders remain alert to **behavioral cues**, such as: team members no longer seeking them out for conversation; colleagues retreating to formalistic *Yes, sir* and *No, ma'am* responses; sidebar conversations proliferating; overt or covert resistance; and issues being tabled rather than resolved.

As a HPL, you avoid such symptoms at your peril. At the *first sign* of trouble, you need to identify the team members you trust. Use them to test your perceptions. Ask, "Are my optics on the money?" If so, carefully develop a strategy to bring the issue to light.

You might talk privately to those whom you suspect of being outliers. This is the time to tamp down defensiveness and probe dispassionately:

*"When you said I missed your point, what did you mean?"; "When you said *there's a change in direction*, help me with that."*

Often, a HPL will raise the issue to the group, focusing always on *behavior*: "Here's what I'm observing." Adept facilitation is a must. On one team of U.S. and European executives, the team leader grew alarmed at the growing mistrust and subversive behavior. He walked into his team's quarterly meeting in Paris, opened an empty suitcase, and insisted that the team *throw its dirty laundry into it*. Two hours later, the suitcase overflowed. But the leader was clueless about how to get his team to move on. The lack of closure persisted, and the infighting and subterfuge led several team members to complain about their leader's ineffectiveness to the executive committee. As results plummeted, the leader was reassigned to a lesser role on the headquarters staff.

Whatever the strategy, HPLs deliver a clear message: *Things are not working. Underground behavior is not acceptable. We need to change the way we're showing up*.

Beyond being sensitive to team dynamics, examine your own behavior. Ask yourself, "Could I be a co-conspirator in the dysfunction around me?"

10 Behaviors That Get Leaders Fired

• Treating your team members like subordinates or drones
• Practicing vest-pocket decision making, keeping your team off balance
• Stealing credit, being quick to blame
• Zoning off your thinking—concealing the whys—from your team
• Being dismissive—or worse, belittling opposing viewpoints
• Showing up as an ice king or queen, showing *no concern* on the human level
• Showing up as an industry / technical expert, rather than one based on referent or personal power—all IQ, no EQ
• Engaging in *feedattack* not *feedback*
• Creating fog, not clarity, especially regarding the rules of game
• Conveying the message that *this is my game*—and you better play it my way

Creating a *high-performance environment* provides the best hedge against what arguably is the most humiliating situation facing a leader: being sacked by those who should have been his or her most ardent supporters. **LE**

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ACTION: Create a high performance culture.