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MANAGING THE FALLING MVP

HERE'S HOW YOU CAN TURN
AROUND A FORMER STAR
EMPLOYEE'S PERFORMANCE

A manufacturing business has a 10-year-old machine that's central to its production line. Because of regular maintenance, this machine has performed splendidly over the years. Hundreds of millions of dollars of product have passed through it, and the expectation is that millions of dollars more will follow this path to the customer.

The company's production line was originally built around this machine, called "Old Bobby" after its first operator. One day Old Bobby begins to act up; rejects start to pile up and then a hose breaks loose, scalding the operator. Old Bobby goes from a dependable workhorse to a troublesome and cranky hunk of metal. What is the vice president of manufacturing to do?

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Dismantle Old Bobby and put it on the scrap heap, or bring in

the best mechanic and see if Old Bobby can be fixed? Most VPs would probably opt for the fix.

Now think about this: What if Old Bobby were actually an account manager, not a machine? What if Old Bobby was one of your most valuable performers (MVPs)? Would you fire him or fix him?

Fixing him is the better solution because you know how he works and the results he is capable of producing.

A new machine or person may come with great credentials but may not work out or fit in with your environment.

Here's how MVPs contribute to a business:

- Results. MVPs produce extraordinary results. This is an absolute prerequisite for a person

to be considered an MVP. Success is not a given; it is an opportunity.

- **Winning attitude.** MVPs like to keep score, and they like to compete. They thrive on challenge. It is important to them to know how well they are doing. They motivate others.
- **Improvement.** MVPs constantly try to improve products, processes and people, and to add tremendous value to the company. They vigorously question assumptions and pursue fresh thinking. They may annoy keepers of the status quo.
- **Good will.** MVPs represent the company well both internally and externally and consequently are spoken of highly by people who deal with them. MVPs epitomize the best employees and produce good will.
- **Attraction.** Great teams form

around them. MVPs are also able to attract other talented people to join the organization.

WHAT MAKES AN MVP FALL?

MVPs are, by definition, your best employees. They thrive in a favorable work environment and are very sensitive to the deterioration of that environment. What you may be seeing when problems appear is the MVP's early display of a growing problem. They are like the canary in the mine shaft that reacts to a gas leak before the miners do. The MVPs we interviewed identified four problems that could sour them on a good business:

1. They are in the wrong job. One MVP reported how she had been a great salesperson and had been asked to take over the sales manager job. Everyone thought she was doing her usual terrific job, except for her. She

maintained high standards for herself and felt she wasn't meeting her standards. She was new to feeling like a failure and didn't like it one bit. She spoke up, and her manager listened to her. She was successfully moved to manage account executives and took over sales training.

2. They get no respect. Something changes, and MVPs no longer feel they are important to the business. They are no longer asked for their ideas; they don't feel they're a part of the decision making process in their area of expertise. Don't confuse the MVP's need to be involved with a belief of entitlement that implies a cemented position of awe and deference. It is simply a feeling that their current contributions are no longer valued.

The No. 1 reason MVPs leave a company or fail is a boss who has poor management skills and who

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does not value the MVP.

3. They do not agree with the company's vision. A change in strategy or direction is made that sidelines the MVP's goals, and no one has taken the time to talk with the MVP about new opportunities.

4. The MVP has changed, and the business has not. Development plans may have been sidelined or abandoned. MVPs desire challenge.

In summary, MVPs are off-the-balance-sheet assets who, each morning, choose to come to work and contribute to the success of the organization.

DIAGNOSING THE FALLING MVP

You may have seen old silent movies depicting a team of

firemen maneuvering a big circle of canvas under a burning building, trying to catch a tenant jumping to escape the flames. The firemen scoot from side to side to determine the best spot to make the catch. If it was a Keystone Kops comedy, they usually missed.

Catching a falling MVP is like the firemen's scoot—it takes a team and some consideration of the individual's particular landing spot.

Here are some issues to consider when diagnosing the cause of the problem:

1. MVPs, by nature, question the status quo. They are constantly looking for ways to improve product, process and people. Is the current disruption due to colleagues who feel threatened by the MVP's questions, or is the MVP behaving in a way that

engenders problems?

If the MVP is facing resistance in the face of improvement, you will want to tell the MVP of the problems being created and work with the MVP to overcome this resistance.

If the MVP's behaviors are disruptive and give rise to problems while linking to thoughtful improvement, you will want to let the MVP know as soon as possible. Then work with the MVP to take responsibility for the problems and find a way to resolve any open issues.

2. Is there a prior history to the problems and how were they resolved? If there was a prior history, you will be able to talk with the MVP about the linkage and discuss what was learned previously that could be of use now.

If you are a relatively new manager of this MVP, seek out institutional memory. Check with HR to learn what they know and recommend; talk with the previous manager; check with your boss if he or she was in place before you.

3. Has something dramatic changed for the MVP at work or outside of work? To successfully manage an MVP over time, a manager knows what an MVP does to succeed and also knows who the MVP is as a person. MVPs value personal connections with their cohorts, and these connections can be the foundation of a thoughtful MVP “catch.”

MAKING THE CATCH

To catch an MVP, you must reach out. Initially managers become aware that something is

wrong by seeing slight differences in behavior, hearing general concerns from co-workers or customers, or noticing a drop in quality. Once your thinking has grown from awareness to concern, you should act. You can choose to act directly or to seek guidance from your boss and from human resources. Either way you should talk with the MVP early and often. Let them know of your concerns. Share with them the specific problems that their behavior can cause. Ask them to work with you to find a solution.

It is important to talk about observed behaviors and not about opinions. An example of an opinion is “You are pretty angry at Paul.” The MVP can respond by saying, “No I’m not. I am happy with Paul.” Opinions can lead to arguments that eventually lead nowhere good.

You can talk about a behavior by saying, “In our morning meeting, you told Paul that he was undermining your authority with your people and he had better stop it. I don’t know if you saw this, but Paul and his direct report looked surprised and confused by this. Later, I took Paul aside and he told me that he had been responding to questions from your people.” It is difficult to argue with this recitation of an observed behavior. At this point the manager could remind the MVP that meetings are not the place to air a grievance, ask why the MVP’s people are going to others for answers and talk with the MVP regarding his or her job well-being.

During this time the manager can assess what’s going on with the MVP. Has business alignment changed to self-interest? Has opportunity morphed into entitlement? Has developing

others solidified into exaggerated self-importance? In other words, has the person lost the MVP’s characteristics? If so, he needs to know that what once made him indispensable has slipped away and that you, the manager, want to work with him to regain that effective edge.

THE MVP AS AN EXAMPLE

In research on corporate MVPs, we found that senior executives and HR professionals valued their MVPs as examples of what is best about their business. They could point to the MVP and say to other employees, and to themselves, “We have a great community of people here, and our MVPs embody our values.” This is not a surprise.

When we began to ask questions about fallen MVPs, we received a consistent response that did

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surprise us. In summary, we were told that if an MVP's performance falls, it is best to fix it quickly or, if it can't be fixed, come down hard on the MVP. If you have presented an MVP as a positive example, then you must demonstrate that management will manage negative examples.

One company president went so far as to say that he comes down harder on his best people because he and the other employees look to the MVP for leadership. "Being an MVP means accepting responsibility for your actions—good or bad," he says. "It does not entitle the person to a free pass to an immune position. MVPs need to be held to a higher standard than their colleagues."

The message here is simple: Don't avoid the problem altogether. Assume that MVPs are less than 5 percent of your employees. This small group is

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composed of your most valuable people. Not only do they perform at the highest levels, they improve your entire business.

Do all you can to help a falling MVP or to bring back a fallen MVP. These employees have proven their value and their commitment to the business; they have earned the opportunity to improve. It may cost you, as the manager, and the company time and money -- but you will recover one of your most valuable assets.

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