

Don't Starve Your Racehorses

By Bette Price, CMC

Imagine the owner of a horse ranch who purchases only the finest thoroughbreds in an effort to maximize his chances of developing a stable of high performance winners. Then, imagine the same owner deciding not to feed those thoroughbreds regularly with quality food, limit the exercise time of these fine horses, and deliberately confine them to small, isolated quarters. What kind of impact do you think this would have on the well-bred thoroughbreds achieving their greatest potential?

As ridiculous as this scenario seems, this is exactly what happens in business. A company hires well-educated, bright, talented individuals, only to starve them of further development, exposing them to stretch assignments, and robbing their potential by working them rigorously on limited assignments for narrowly focused results.

True leaders don't let this happen. They consider their thoroughbreds an investment and work to expand their potential. Here are six significant ways to develop the performance of your best talent:

- ✍ **Feed them well.** High achievers never stop learning and they learn in various ways. Off-the-shelf training programs rarely work best for the best. Instead, customized training that meets the respective needs of these thoroughbreds pays the biggest dividends. Coaching is critical—sometimes coming from inside the organization, sometimes better from an outsider. By understanding each talent's developmental needs, their greatest talents can be strengthened and their blind spots minimized. True leaders know that investing great amounts of time on trying to shore up weaknesses merely frustrates the racehorse and diminishes their strengths. Instead, they focus on teaming aspects whereby all bases get covered by the best of the best.
- ✍ **Feed them special food.** Smart managers understand that everyone is not created equal. Some people deserve more special treatment than others—they've earned it. That's why more and more leaders are implementing pay for performance programs that allow fair and equitable pay for those who maximize performance rather than demoralize achievers by paying them the same scale that sluggards tag along on.
- ✍ **Exercise them.** Real growth only happens when stretching occurs. Great leaders know that only by giving their top performers challenges that allow them to test new waters, will they experience the opportunity to stretch and grow. Never let your best people get too settled in their comfort zone. They'll either disappoint you by settling for less or leaving because they're bored.
- ✍ **Expand, don't confine.** Leaders who have the ability to create an environment of trust will provide open forums in which top performers will be able to openly and honestly discuss their challenges, concerns, even failures, seeking wisdom from others and ways to expand their personal thinking. In an arena of trust, everyone grows.
- ✍ **Show Them.** One of a leader's greatest responsibilities is to model the performance behaviors you expect from your best. Coach them—collectively and respectfully.

Demonstrate consistency by ensuring that you do what you say and walk your talk. Demonstrate daily that you are committed to personally do what you ask of them.

~~✍~~ **Create Show Times.** Everyone likes recognition. Give them their time in the winners ring. Rewards don't have to always be major and they don't always have to be about money. When true leaders take time to really know their people, they make sure that recognitions and rewards are fitting for each and every one of them. Sometimes, it's as simple as a handwritten note. And, by the way—if you've got people on your team who are not the thoroughbreds you believed them to be, and you can honestly say you have given them all the care and feeding possible—Pasture them. This alone sends a strong, clear message to your true performers that you value them and the commitments they've made to continue to grow and will not discourage them by supporting those who have demonstrated that they are unwilling to do the same.

As we all know, even the finest of thoroughbreds don't win every race, yet they stay in the race with dignity, commitment, and pride. With quality feeding and nurturing of your fine thoroughbreds, they too will perform with consistency, quality, and pride.

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