



Guide: How to be a high- performance employee

About this guide

Work has changed from the industrial era and as an employee it's no longer about waiting to be told what to do.

In this era of knowledge and service based work, successful employees are taking responsibility of their own performance and growth.

They're identifying where and how they can make the biggest impact and bring the most value to their teams. They communicate their proposed goals, seek feedback and share regular updates as they execute.

In this guide you'll learn the key practices used by high performing employees to create a more fulfilling work day for themselves, and where managers extend more trust, more autonomy and more growth opportunities.

The new way is not about going off on your own tangent, in fact it's more team based and collaborative than ever before.

The truth is, it is a big shift from the old way of waiting on your manager to give you your next task, but with this methodical approach you can learn the simple practices that will help see you successful.



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View your manager as a coach

A large part of the way we interact with our manager is based on the lens we see them through. High performing employees will see their manager as a coach, someone that's on their team, they can lean into for help, share ideas with and seek feedback from.

If you're doing knowledge or service based work, try to avoid viewing your manager as a person with answers to all your problems. Make it a part of your growth journey to research, learn and overcome the daily challenges in your domain.

If you have an outlook that your manager will have all the answers, it's placing big expectations on the relationship. We're no longer in the industrial era, where work was repetitive and managers were the experts in the minutia of every job. In a knowledge and service world we're making decisions on new problems every day.

TIP

Today's managers add value by supporting their team, clearing the obstacles and freeing them to do their best work.

As an employee, communicate to your manager when you're struggling and what support you need.



Being aware of assumptions



As a team member it can be easy to make assumptions about the role of your manager.

Personally, I've made many incorrect assumptions which have caused me a lot of angst. My top 5 biggest mistakes were thinking:

1. My manager would have the time to tell me what to do.
2. That it would be inappropriate for me to make suggestions to my manager.
3. That my manager should know more about my job than me.
4. That I'd be recognized if I just put my head down and got on with the job.
5. Sticking rigidly to my job description would have me considered as a high performer.



I can now recognize that these were my **assumptions**. At the time though, they were my **expectations** and I got frustrated when these expectations weren't met.

Communicate 'how' you work best

Discuss a modus operandi for working with your manager. It's valuable for your manager to understand how you like to work (and for you to understand how they like to work), but sometimes this can be hard to articulate.



If you do struggle, try spending 30 min on 'A user manual for me'. - [this article has an awesome downloadable template](#) from [Cassie Robinson](#) (excerpt shown below).

User Manual for Cassie Robinson

Conditions I like to work in

I like a quiet working environment. I find it hard to do work that requires my concentration if there is a lot of noise and distractions

I like having my own desk space

I find it hard to work in heated rooms, and love fresh air (windows open etc)

The times/hours I like to work

I am trying to start my work day at 10am so that I can have 2 hrs from 8-10am in the mornings to do things like exercise and meditation etc.

I work best in the evenings

I don't mind being contacted at any time but I will likely only respond during week daytimes and evenings

My diary is open and accessible so everyone can see my availability. I don't mind people booking things in my diary if I am free

The best ways to communicate with me

Slack is the quickest way to get a response from me

I will never answer my phone, but I look at text messages

I keep on top of my emails each week and usually respond within a few days at the latest.

The ways I like to receive feedback

I'd rather have difficult conversations than things be unspoken or inauthentic, so just be straight with me

I like receiving feedback face-to-face

I see all feedback as a learning opportunity so I like any feedback to include examples and also suggestions on how I / it could be better/different

Things I need

I love ideas sessions with people, where we can freely think about what is possible without the if's and but's

I need time to reflect

Authenticity - I find it really hard to be around bullshit, inconsistency or incongruence

Things I struggle with

I'm an introvert so working "in the open" is something I have to work hard at

Too much critiquing and logical reasoning drains my energy

If I don't understand the wider purpose behind why we are doing something, I find it hard to engage with

Unnecessary process - I love agile and design-lead process however, it's not always necessary. I like minimum-viable-process - what is enough?

Things I love

I like hearing what others are working on and connecting up the dots of what we are doing

I love organising team things - birthday gifts, evenings out etc.

A generative, risk-taking culture that has a flag in the ground about what it stands for

Quarterly team away days

Other things to know about me

I use my intuition a lot to make decisions

My favourite saying is "the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts."

I am an INFP / INFJ cusp

I don't like or drink tea

I bring my whole self to work (we should chat about what this means to me)

Agree a cadence for meeting 1-on-1



Speak with your manager and agree a cadence for meeting 1-on-1 (tip: at least once a month, ideally fortnightly or weekly). When working out your cadence, think about the relationship you have with your manager.

Have you only recently started working together and you're still getting in sync with expectations - meet frequently; Or have you worked with each other for years and you're very much on the same page - then less frequent is okay.

TIP

Remember, you usually only have one manager, but your manager will likely have many reports.

Try to take responsibility for organizing the 1-on-1 meetings and share talking points in advance of each 1-on-1.

By removing the admin from your manager, you're maximizing their time for helping you and making it easier for them to deliver value...

As a manager I can't convey enough how much I appreciate this.



The format should be flexible

It's up to you to set the agenda for what will help you progress most. The conversation needs to be future-focused and an opportunity to communicate upcoming work, seek guidance on blockers, discuss team dynamics, learning goals you've identified, etc.

[Read our blog on 1-on-1 meetings here.](#)

Identify & share your top 3 goals

Knowing what you know about your role, identify the top 3 goals you could achieve in the quarter that would have the biggest impact on what your team is trying to achieve.



If you don't know what the bigger picture looks like, ask your manager to describe the overarching direction of the company and the role your team plays in that.

Finalising your goals



Once you've got the first version of your goals, discuss with your manager (in a 1-on-1) & ask:

- ☐ If the goals are well aligned with the team and company direction.
- ☐ Are they a good stretch for a quarterly cycle? Too much, too little?
- ☐ Any suggestions who might be good people to collaborate with to speed up learning or progress?
- ☐ Anyone else you should keep informed of your milestones that will impact their work or decisions?
- ☐ Confirm you would like to discuss your goals (progress and challenges) in your 1-on-1s . Aim for multiple times throughout the cycle and not just an end of quarter review.

[Read our blog on getting started with quarterly goals here.](#)

Share status updates

Agree to communicate a status update each week. It should only take 10 minutes to convey:

- 3 to 5 achievements you've made in the current week
- 3 to 5 things you will aim to achieve next week; and
- any challenges you're currently facing that you might like some help with.

This might sound like a bit of a chore because it's stuff you're already across. But as a manager, receiving such proactive, frequent and succinct communication is both useful, and confidence inspiring in your abilities.

Why?

It keeps your manager from worrying that you've gone off working on a tangent.

It means your manager won't have to ask what you're doing, which helps them to be an empowering leader.

It allows your manager to focus where they can bring most value - helping you to clear your blockers

This simple process of writing down our achievements is a like an act of journaling that nurtures a sense of progress.

It allows our brains to acknowledge the amount of things we achieve. Without this reflection and in the busyness of each week, it can be so easy to downplay or underestimate our progress.



Being open to feedback

Make it easy for people to give you feedback. Just because a person is a manager, it doesn't mean they are automatically comfortable with sharing feedback. In fact, most people are deeply uncomfortable with the process which can literally trigger fight or flight reactions, closing down the very parts of the brain most needed for a productive conversation.

There's an easy answer, be the initiator and request feedback but don't mention the 'I' word, eg. "I've worked on the first version of the slide deck and would love to know if you see any areas it could be improved?"

Not a weakness

Actively seeking feedback is not a sign of weakness, in fact it sends a much more powerful message than you might think. It communicates that you are open to learning, you are prepared to be vulnerable, and that you are conscientious, humble and attentive when it comes to your work ethic.



De-stress your relationship

By making it easy for managers to give you feedback, you're literally de-stressing the relationship. Because if you are doing something that's not aligned with your manager's expectations and they happen to be uncomfortable giving feedback (like most people), the problem would most likely simmer and become a much bigger issue.



[Read our blog for 3 simple steps to get going with feedback](#)

With the practices so far, we have setup a rock-solid framework of communication between you and your manager, covering quarterly goals, fortnightly 1-on-1 meetings, weekly status updates and in-the-moment feedback. These communication cycles will build a relationship of trust, confidence and clarity between you and your manager.

Don't be a box ticker

So far, we've covered the key practices for being an individual high performer. But it's quite possible to tick all the boxes for the stuff written into our job descriptions and still not be considered a high performer when compared to others.

In fact, most employers consider the job description stuff to be a minimum standard, not a 'high bar' to be striving for.



Inside Tip

I've been in the management meetings when employee performance is being discussed and sure, the data from the evaluation process is considered, but there is a whole extra layer of conversation that doesn't feature in the forms.

It's about attitude, contributions made beyond the job description and how you amplify the effectiveness of others in your team.



What attitude will you bring?

Think about the type of work ethic you want to be known for.

For example, being the type of person to proactively identify and make a suggestion for your next activity (rather than waiting for your manager to come up with a task) is an incredibly valuable team member.

And you get to help shape your role into what you enjoy and what you're great at!

Be a team player

A [study by Google](#) which looked at performance across different teams found what really mattered was less about who is on the team, and more about how the team worked together. It didn't matter if the team was filled with grade A players!

A further [study by EY](#) found that 90% of work problems being solved are so complex they can only be solved by teams.



So if you really want to make an impact, we need to look at how we work with other people, and our impact beyond our immediate role. The words 'being able to work in a team' just roll off the tongue, and I've previously made the mistake of thinking that it simply means: *"I will be doing some work that forms part of a bigger project."*

Well I was wrong, working on a team is much more than just doing your own bit. It's about being a good human, helping others to be successful, making their lives easier & contributing outside of your designated role, sometimes at the expense of our own comfort or workload.

Examples

- ☐ Be a positive influence, the person who recognizes when colleagues have made an effort or lived the company values. Call it out and celebrate the success of others.
- ☐ Be curious about the challenges of others and explore solutions with them.
- ☐ Empty the dishwasher, pick up trash, help put the decorations up, organize a team lunch, pick up the coffees, say happy birthday, ask how the weekend was.
- ☐ Have empathy for teammates, build their confidence & encourage their contribution
- ☐ Actively contribute outside of your position description. Take the time to learn about other areas of the business and how your work fits in.
- ☐ Concentrate on making your team as successful as it can be... and have fun along the way!

Whilst some of these examples may seem small, trivial or insignificant, it's not always the act of doing it that's important, **it's the underlying message that says loud and clear you care deeply about the well being of your team.** And that you're willing to contribute to the success of the team above your own advancement.

Conclusion

What we've described here can feel overwhelming in terms of implementing into your work routines. But here's the thing, just implementing one routine will make a tangible improvement. In fact, we would recommend mastering one at a time.

For example, it's no good having 1-on-1 meetings where you only talk about the past, this will feel like a chore with no value, then you'll likely stop doing them and think it was a waste of time.

It's a journey




I'm still on my learning journey too. To begin with, I found the process clunky and awkward in many ways, but with practice I've got better at the way I share feedback, set my goals and keep the conversations future focused. But I still have plenty of work to do before hitting the level I'd like to be at.

Be open that it's new...



If you are just starting out I'd recommend sharing with your manager that you are trying something new and acknowledge it might be a bit awkward to begin with.

Again, it's not so much the words that are important here, but the emotional maturity you're displaying by addressing your vulnerability head on.



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working through your
organization.
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