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Grooming the high performer

Dear Jill,

I am managing a person who is a top performer but feels like he is not getting the proper guidance to advance in the company. I want to encourage him because he is smart and technically proficient. However, his people skills could be better. He does a great job but isn't well liked by his peers due to his aggressiveness. Are there other things I could do beyond sending him to training?

— F

ASK JILL



JILL MCGILLEN

Dear F,

In a study conducted by Personnel Decisions International, 27 percent of those identified by bosses as high potentials were also identified as having a high risk of career derailments. This means that one out of four high potentials may not reach his or her potential. Why? It seems to be related to respecting and gaining commitment from others. High performers are sometimes seen as arrogant or righteous about their means of getting things done.

You can help your high performer by not simply rewarding him for his successes but by also examining the way in which he reached his goals. In work, the end does not justify the means if others get trampled in the process. Consensus and team building are valuable at all levels but particularly at higher levels where being politically savvy in an organization is essential. Try these new approaches to groom your high performer:

1. Provide clear expectations about not just the task or project but also the behaviors that should accompany reaching the goal.
2. Give frequent feedback, pointing out and reinforcing the type of behavior that shows he is improving his "people-skills" and those that need to be changed.
3. Consider using executive coaching vs. training. Coaching will teach skills over a long period vs. a half-day or one-day training event where those skills may not be practiced.
4. Walk the talk. Modeling the behavior that you want him to have is a powerful way to send the message.

If you invest the time to help this high performer,

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At Work With: Vern Hance, Engineer

VERN HANCE has used his engineering skills in a variety of ways over his career spanning nearly 50 years.



PHOTO BY KEN PERKINS/STAFF

By Linnea Smith Jessup

ENGINEERS' careers can lead to a variety of fields and interests, using strong skills in math but also requiring attention to detail, a curious mind and an ability to communicate well. Vern Hance has worked in many fields of engineering and still enjoys finding new ways to use his knowledge and experience. The semi-retired engineer reflects on the myriad of opportunities and challenges that have filled his career and how lifelong education and experience have kept him busy and connected to various facets of engineering.

What was your path to working in engineering?

Actually, my first degree was in Business Administration, from Pacific Lutheran University. After three years in the Navy, I decided to return to college — this time the University of Washington — and I chose to major in mechanical engineering.

During college I worked for Boeing as a junior engineer, doing some drafting and other duties. After graduation I joined the California Research Corporation, Chevron's research lab in Richmond. We worked

on automobile engine testing of additives in lubricating oil. Later I joined Mack Trucks in Maryland as a test engineer, this time testing the design and durability of engines. I also became a member of the Society of Automotive Engineers.

Where did you spend the bulk of your career?

I returned to California after three years and joined Chevron Chemical, focusing on lubricating oil testing. I used my basic mechanical engineering skills and honed my analytical

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Vern Hance

Job title: Engineer

Current place of employment:
Peter R. Thom & Associates

Years on the job: 48

If you would like to appear in "At Work," contact us at AtWork@angnewspapers.com.

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abilities to turn data into something meaningful [that could be applied to new products and equipment].

I got involved in all aspects of testing, using locomotives, taxis, test cars, even a diesel motorship. We even did some radioactive analysis. I spent nearly 20 years at this job.

How have you stayed involved in engineering even in retirement?

At the time of my retirement I was involved in a kit car club — I built my own kit car in 1979 — and I quickly became involved as a consultant to others who were seeking to certify their own kit cars. I signed up for a high school ROP (occupational training) program in auto shop and received my smog technician's license as well as a smog inspector's license.

Through that instructor, I learned about the company where I have now been an associate for 20 years. [Peter R. Thom & Associates is a forensic automotive consulting and engineering firm providing accident reconstruction, product liability and expert witness services.]

What do you do as an associate and what skills did you bring to the company?

I use my knowledge of basic physics — moving objects and how they collide, for example — and also use my interest in and knowledge of photography to help me document information from vehicle accidents. I study the accident site, the vehicles involved in the incident and other evidence. My engineering skills help me determine and document the information I gain in such a way as to clearly show what happened in the incident, which can be helpful to judges, juries and others seeking to understand what went wrong and caused an accident or other vehicular incident.

So you use engineering skills as well as research skills on these assignments?

Yes, and I use my ability to communicate clearly. I am able to write a story [about a complex series of events] in a way that can be easily understood.

A typical assignment might be evaluating a SUV [sports utility vehicle] case. I use my experience and knowledge to figure out... was it a tire failure, another vehicle swerving, or other causes. We attempt to verify a claim by showing what went wrong. I keep an open mind as I work to figure out what happened. It may not verify the driver's claim, in some cases. One of my biggest challenges is to get enough information to make an indisputable conclusion. I need to be able to back up my conclusion with evidence.

How do you make the evaluations?

The techniques include reviewing police reports, studying photographs from insurance companies or law enforcement officers and I also research specific vehicles' characteristics including what elements or features it has that could have impacted the event. I view the vehicle and visit the accident scene. I often

video the route a vehicle was taking, driving my car while the video [mounted on the car] is running. I can get a good sense of what the driver was seeing at the time of the accident.

So it's like an automotive CSI [crime scene investigation] I review?

Yes, visual factors are very important, along with the evidence to be found on the vehicles. I have also used videos provided by helicopters filming the accident scene from overhead, showing skid marks and other evidence. I've only testified eight times [at trials] but have evaluated hundreds of cases which probably promoted resolution through evidence and cut down on court cases and expensive settlements.

Would you recommend this line of work to others?

If you have an interest in mechanics, it's an excellent area to work in. It's really an underpopulated field. In this kind of job, you can feel, see and touch things that are created by your work. I solve mysteries, aid in equitable settlements and get great job satisfaction.

It sounds like engineering is a very diverse field, with lots of opportunities.

Engineering is very broad — there are civil, mechanical, electrical and even computer engineering specialties, with more specialties every day and possible movement within several areas of engineering. And you will continually be studying and researching.

Engineering requires skill in mathematics. My interest in numbers — and my accounting background — have helped me a lot. In engineering, curiosity is a big factor — you need to study a situation to see how to solve the puzzle.

Engineering is challenging. For instance, in our automotive testing, it was sometimes difficult to get the same results in multiple tests of various additives and oils. It can sometimes be frustrating.

There are many engineering societies [that promote education and other causes]. For instance, the Society of Automotive Engineers (now SAE International) has set many design standards that are recognized in many industries.

Can you name some colleges and universities you believe have good engineering programs?

UC Berkeley is a prime engineering school, so are UC Davis, Stanford and the University of Washington. There's a tendency to go beyond a bachelor's degree in engineering; there's pressure to go for advanced degrees including a Ph.D. In technology the only constant is change. Engineering opportunities around the world, and electronic interfacing with mechanical devices, mean there are many more inventions [on the horizon].

To learn more about Peter R. Thom & Associates, visit www.prtassoc.com. To learn about SAE International, visit www.sae.org.

ASK JILL

— *Continued from page 1*

you are not only helping him but also helping the organization develop leaders for the future.

Dear Jill,

My co-worker tells us something will be done by a certain date and it does not get done. How can we respectfully hold her accountable without backlash?

— T

Dear T,

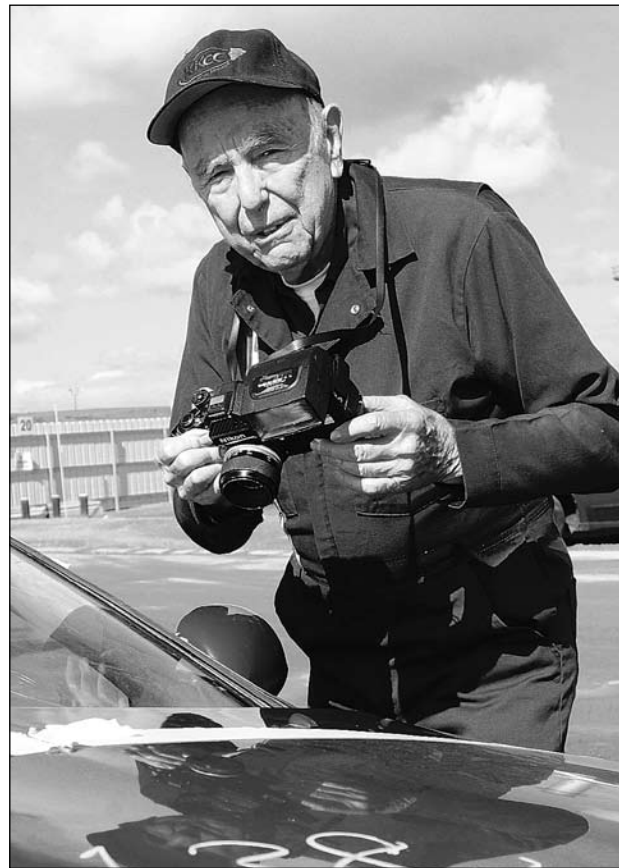
Why isn't your co-worker following through on her commitments? Below are three possible reasons, with steps to cure each one. Which one fits your co-worker?

- 1) She is too busy: When she makes a commitment, say, "I know you have a lot going on; what could I do so that you are able to follow up?" And then do that.
- 2) She is absent-minded: Say, "I am happy to send you an e-mail reminder about this as the date gets closer. I really want this to happen, and it is my interest to do whatever I can to help you remember."
- 3) She promises things she cannot deliver due to her position or authority: Ask, "How will this happen? Will it be difficult to deliver? I do not want you to think you need to try to get things for me/us that are not possible. Is there someone else that it would be better to speak with about this need?"

There are probably some things that she is delivering. Make sure to strongly reinforce this behavior. "I really appreciate that you followed up on this! I want to make your job easier and I really appreciate what you do. In the future please let me know how I can facilitate your ability to fulfill other requests... I am happy to do that."

In general, people are more likely to repeat behavior that is being positively rewarded.

Jill McGillen is president of NEXT TURN Consulting. Send questions to askjill@nextturnconsulting.com. For additional work advice go to www.nextturnconsulting.com.



PHOTOS BY KEN PERKINS/STAFF

ENGINEERING skills include data collection and analysis, communicating results and observations, according to Hance. He has a keen eye and a strong curiosity and is very detail-oriented.