

Human Resource Executives: Stars vs. Sustainers

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In Silicon Valley, almost all HR executives are performers. But some function at a much higher level than the rest, enjoy their jobs more, and earn up to four times more in salary than others. To use terms that author Adele Sheele has coined, some HR executives are "sustainers," and some are "stars."

Sustainers are people that, upon meeting them, say they worked for a company such as Fairchild 35 years ago—as if this is relevant to the current-day trends of e-commerce, e-tailing, and the extranet. Sustainers hire other sustainers.

They hate change and love control. They are losing the employment race and know it but are scared.

Stars, on the other hand, talk about what they're doing now in their careers. They hire people who will produce results, which will make them look good. Stars are winning the employment race. They are also much more attractive because of their confidence and energy.

Who is a Star?

Fortunately, being a star is a discipline that can be learned. What kind of HR executives are stars? What kind of behaviors do they exhibit? Conversely, what traits are danger signs, and how can these traits be self-monitored? Here are some of the traits of HR executives who are stars:

- They are energetic, brilliant, knowledgeable, prepared and humble about their abilities.
- They are direct with people.
- They know how a new project should work, who should be involved, and how it should be presented.
- They use technology (that is, do their own spreadsheets, programs, etc.) better than anyone and never brag about their ability to do so.
- There is something surprising and unique about their lives and families.

Most successful, HR stars routinely hire subordinates much better than themselves and milk their peers and consultants for their ideas and insights. If an idea can make them more successful, make them look good at their jobs, and help them fix a problem, they will not hesitate to use it. Senior vice presidents of HR from the valley's top networking and Internet companies are easily identified and emulated as stars. Stars are directors and vice presidents at hot software start-up companies, serving as HR business partners and HR senior managers at biotech companies, and they manage both HR and MIS at engineering companies.

To be a successful HR executive, have the fun, and make the big bucks, one must learn to think, feel, act, and react like a star.

Who is a Sustainer?

Our least successful sustainer HR clients are naysayers. Sustainers hate change and are the ones who don't believe in empowerment because they don't want to share the power. They don't

support innovative ideas or programs because these would involve risk taking. Competency and drive in subordinates scare them, so they lay off these folks. Sustainers love employee surveys because they take a long time, make them look like they're accomplishing something, and are safe. They structure the surveys to provide the results they expect and hire the largest, most expensive management consulting firms to conduct them. They feel comfortable knowing that no one ever gets in trouble for doing a survey.

Sustainers in Action: A Case Study

Recently, I had the disappointing experience of meeting with a senior vice president of HR at a Fortune 100 company and his technical operations director. The operations director was meeting with the senior vice president to outline what HR projects needed to be implemented in order to achieve the company's strategic objectives for manufacturing. One objective involved ramping up production to capture a new market segment. To do this, he needed the technical and manufacturing employees around the world to handle "make or buy" issues quickly and share team successes with counterparts worldwide so that they would not waste time reinventing. This was their only chance at succeeding.

The reaction of the HR vice president was one of a sustainer, saying that this was the business of Finance, not Manufacturing, and that Finance would not like it if Manufacturing was in its territory. His expression said it all. "How can I say no to him as quickly as possible, yet cover my tracks?" It appeared as if he was not really listening and the only "program" per se that he did refer to was an expensive survey that he hired a Big Six consulting firm to do, which, of course, gave him information he already knew.

In this case, the technical operations director was a star and decided to go ahead despite the sustainer. Within three weeks, he had set up an International Learning Organization, brought in his own experts, designed programs, and went full stream ahead, doing HR's job.

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Star Traits

A holistic model of the traits and behaviors of stars and sustainers produces some of the following characteristics:

Humility

Humility is the most attractive trait in an HR executive. Being humble allows you to keep your two-way communication channels open. You are open to feedback, change, and improvement because you don't believe you know everything already. You are humble enough to focus on constant, quantum leaps of improvement, not just taking a class. Like one former Silicon Valley CEO, you publicly state that you hire people better than you. You don't worry about them doing better than you because you take credit for good hiring. You know that having the best people working for you will make you look better.

Innovation and Risk Taking

To quote management consultant and author Eileen Shapiro, "Good gamblers know that they can pull aces from the sky...and that to play the odds successfully, they need to assess the odds astutely." HR stars love to take risks. They don't mind making the occasional mistake because they know they are being judged on results, not perfection, and the best results often come from taking risks. Taking risks excites stars. Stars will even take jobs at risky companies or take six

months off to volunteer in their kids' schools, as one of my clients did, not worrying about how it would look to others. They know they're good. A risk taker can step down as vice president with a large staff, take an interesting job as an internal HR business partner, and not worry about it looking like a demotion. Stars love new ideas, and their knee-jerk reaction to a new idea is to consider the benefits of doing it. They don't want to be like the Yale University professor who gave Fred Smith a "C" for the paper in which he proposed the idea that became the foundation of Federal Express.

Strategic Planning

A senior manager of HR who works for a small biotechnology company predicted decreased venture funding for biotech companies and an increased need for clinical trials, sales forces, and manufacturing facilities. He accurately forecast an increase in M&A activity in biotech. He was planning for the contingency of his company acquiring or being acquired, and the possible HR issues in either case. He wanted to talk about innovative practices in outplacement, change management, and career planning.

Until the previous year, this man had always been in recruiting. This was his first generalist position and his most senior management position so far. His knowledge, foresight, and dedication are excellent, and his quiet confidence and strategic nature are impressive. He is not arrogant and knows when to ask for recommendations and support from outside the company. He knows that he doesn't know everything and therefore that he must work harder and plan more. He also belongs to a special group for biotech company HR executives who get together and swap ideas and discuss trends. He is smart enough to see the extreme value in this. Other HR executives don't seem to plan at all. They seem surprised, even shocked by what happens at their own companies. This puts them in a weak, reactive mode, like someone who waits for their clunker to finally die and then doesn't have the luxury of time when negotiating for a new car. To quote the German author Konrad Heiden, "Unused power slips imperceptibly into the hands of another." It is very difficult to see the shocked expression of a client blindsided by an HR issue such as the departure of a key executive or a harassment suit. The good executives see it coming and plan for it. They walk the halls, listen to their people, and like one star in the Valley, attend engineering meetings so that they know how their managers are doing.

Focused on Results, Not Process

Sustainer clients love to show me their online performance appraisal systems. These HR executives spend amazing amounts of time arranging training sessions on the systems and making sure that everyone is complying with them. While they are busy doing this, the companies are sustaining. These executives are busy reading hundreds of e-mails a day and answering their own phones because they are too busy to delegate.

Stars have performance appraisal systems, too, but don't talk about them. Instead, they talk about what is important: the real issues, and what they can do to change them and get the results their companies need. They are confident that they can get the results they want because they have built a track record of successes.

To focus on results and not the process, stars trust their people and business partners. Some sustainers get caught up in a skills bias as part of their need to hyper control. They believe they should intervene and are likely to assume that they have the skills to intervene effectively.

Unfortunately, they often lack the operating knowledge, personal relationships, or facilitative skills required to achieve the desired results, and become obsessed with micromanaging the process.

Focused on Individuals, Individual Needs, and Individual Issues

The most successful stars in the Valley talk about the individuals in their companies and their issues: why a certain manager is ruining morale in his group; why the business development manager will not become the COO; how the out-of-state group needs career development; the single employees who are lonely and want to work out at a gym where they can meet others and date; the married couples who want to work out at gyms where parking is plentiful and child care

is good; or the funny thing an engineer said to them. These stars see their companies as composed of individuals with individual needs and problems. Even policy or institutional problems are viewed from the point of view of employees and what solutions might better meet their needs. Conversely, sustainers see their companies in terms of subsidiaries, departments, and political turfs. Problem resolution involves the most politically expedient solution.

Flexible

Good HR people have the confidence to be flexible, and this allows them to improve, innovate, not get in the way, and let evolution happen. As Les Kaye in *Zen At Work* said, "Difficulties in our lives can be opportunities. They give us a chance to see how our minds emphasize desires and personal concerns. Before we have this awareness of our delusions, we remain entangled by old beliefs and habits. This is why we

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emphasize the awareness and acceptance of any difficulties that arise." Sustainers are inflexible. It doesn't matter what will solve the problem, produce better results, make people happier, or increase productivity. Sustaining the status quo is the most important. Be Zen-like, be a good sport, be confident, and be flexible.

Listens, Accepts Feedback, and Doesn't Need To Be Right

Sometimes I hear up-and-coming HR professionals complain that their bosses are so busy managing up top that they don't have time to listen to their people in the trenches and don't have time to develop them. I am saddened to hear that there are HR vice presidents in Silicon Valley who do not even have regular meetings with their staff. Not listening to your generalists is like living in Louisiana and not listening to the storm reports. Good HR executives not only listen to their people, but also give them broad-reaching authority to do what they see fit in order to serve their internal customers.

Externally Focused

Successful HR executives often tell me what other companies are doing, what the *Harvard Business Review* reported, and what new programs exist. While stars actively seek alternatives and best practices from other companies, sustainers are insulated from the world outside their company and rarely seek solutions beyond their office doors. As part of your external focus, practice self-conscious cooperation. According to author Terry Mollner, in the relationship mode of behavior, we self-consciously make every decision and choice in line with what is simultaneously good for us, good for the organization, and good for the social and physical environment. To do this, you must set aside your personal panic, self-protecting reactions, and think of your actions separate from yourself. I can see that in the stars, who literally use 360-degree vision to make every decision.

Becoming a Star

Peter Drucker writes about entrepreneurial management and says that it is a discipline that can be learned. The same can be said about star management. To achieve this, you must require of yourself the following personal policies and personal practices:

Be receptive to innovation and willing to perceive change as an opportunity. You must be ready to do the hard work of a star. Your actions must be entrepreneurial.

Set up personal measures to judge how entrepreneurial you are. How many times did you say no to new ideas this week? Did you encourage and empower ideas contrary to your own? You must design opportunities for you to practice new behaviors. Judge your internal reactions.

Restructure your department practices to give the business partners, generalists, and recruiters increased power and then hold them accountable for the results. Set up systems to reward their “uppity” behavior. Change your department around to take orders from and to serve your internal clients.

Rerum novarum cupidus means to become greedy for new things. Crave new ideas and change like you crave chocolate.

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