

# How to harness the talent of your maverick

Mavericks are wilfully independent people and talented visionaries. Unfortunately they do not always interact with other members of the organisation in the most effective way. By **Judith Germain**, managing director of Dynamic Transitions.



What makes a maverick? I define a maverick as being wilfully independent. Wilful independence is the trait that successful companies use to propel themselves to success. This wilfulness, however, needs to be harnessed because, left unchecked, it can bring down a company from the jaws of success. Companies need to balance the need to encourage and restrict this independence to ensure that they can be successful and their employees productive, effective and engaged. This is the essence of true talent management.

Consider the success of the following maverick leaders, Richard Branson, Ricardo Semler, Jack Welch, Bill Gates, JFK and Martin Luther King. If you agree that it was their willingness to challenge the *status quo*, to stand up for what they believe in, to inspire and motivate others and to demonstrate true leadership that made them stand out from the crowd, then the question to ask is how you can create an environment for other mavericks to express the same skill. The reason that the leaders mentioned above have been successful is because they have been able to handle their own 'maverickness'; they were unreasonable when others were being reasonable. They believed in their own vision and followed it unerringly,

especially when others thought they were crazy or doomed to failure.

Every company can grow and nurture their own maverick who has the capacity to be the company's greatest leader (even if they do not currently hold a leadership position). Unfortunately every company has the capacity to mishandle their maverick to the detriment of their company.

Pareto's Principle (the 80/20 Rule) holds true when it comes to mavericks: mavericks tend to be 20 per cent of the most talented employees, causing 80 per cent of the problems in the company. This is a huge issue for companies because if they do not harness this talent they are likely to lose productivity and increase the company's liabilities. Only a true maverick (Gerald Ratner) would have said to an audience at the Institute of Directors that some of his company's earrings were "cheaper than an M&S prawn sandwich but probably wouldn't last as long".

This was disastrous to the company, wiping an estimated £500m from the value of the company. Mavericks can be quite impulsive, not thinking through the consequences of their actions. When mavericks become more self aware, and have managed to harness their talent they can produce amazing success for themselves and their company. Semler's



Semco SA revenue has grown from US\$4m in 1982 to \$212m in 2003 under his leadership.

Consider how you, as a company, are harnessing your maverick's talent and if this talent is working for you or against you. Often mavericks are excluded from talent management programmes because of their behaviour. They are seen as too unpredictable to be promotable. This can be a costly mistake; 21st century companies tend to need maverick competencies to survive and stay ahead of the competition. When mavericks are constantly passed over for promotion and not recognised for their ability and expertise, they can work hard to bring the company down around them.

### **Bored with talent management?**

The war for talent is a rallying cry that is heard often and with such clarity that it has become the Holy Grail for HR professionals and companies wanting to outdo the competition, and bring out the best of their employees. It has also become a clichéd subject, guaranteed to bore managers and ensure that their attention will drift elsewhere. The phrase 'talent management' is fast becoming the panacea for all employee issues. Managers' eyes glaze over when they hear the term, making it difficult for innovative solutions to be found and implemented.

Ineffective talent is a growing problem with graduates joining organisations lacking the ability to interact with peers and customers professionally, or with good business English. Companies are merging, downsizing and de-skilling with increasing speed, requiring employees to be more flexible and more able to work with autonomy. Customers are becoming more demanding and harder to please. Great innovative companies are fast becoming a thing of the past. The old ways of managing no longer work.

Doing the same as everyone else will not make your company great, neither will continuing to cut costs to make your company 'lean'. Eventually customer service and satisfaction will begin to suffer.

For a company to succeed it needs to be agile, with a clear understanding on how it can truly harness the competencies of its top performers. Poor performing companies tend to be stuck in 20th century management thinking, insisting on command and control techniques and strict conformity from its employees. With a misinterpretation of European law there is an insistence on a one-size-fits-all approach to management which can lack the flair and flexibility necessary to harness the most talented in the organisation.

### **Is your company playing safe?**

Highly skilled and talented employees are at a premium and becoming increasingly harder to work with. These employees know they are in a seller's market and are not prepared to work in the same way as other employees.

They want to command high salaries and maximum flexibility, with the least amount of effort expended by them. They want to define the manner and the hours they want to work.

These talented employees want recognition for their expertise and respect for their talents from their peers and the people that manage them. When they are not challenged and stretched appropriately their boredom tends to find a destructive outlet for their talents.

What do you do if these talented employees have a different mindset or personality to the rest of the workforce, can you manage them in the same way? If they are acting as young Richard Bransons or Ricardo Semlers, how do you get the same results?

These employees can be as much as one-fifth of the talent pool. Not only do they believe that the rules do not



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apply to them, they often cause a myriad of problems for the company. Criticised for their arrogance, their rudeness, their influence (which can be destructive at times) they usually take a defensive stance or an entrenched position. This can lead to high employee turnover, increased claims of bullying and depressed team cohesion and performance.

The 21st century solution is to recognise that a culture of command and control does not work effectively anymore. By treating employees with an individualistic approach, the manager needs to consider not only how a team is motivated and influenced but the needs of each individual team member. This can mean that the manager with a maverick on his team will need to treat him quite differently from everyone else. There must be a balance between treating him in a way that is tailored for him, yet consistent with how other employees are managed.

### Steps to help harness maverick talent

Almost all employees hate to be micro-managed, however mavericks are far more sensitive to being managed than most employees. This means they will challenge even the most simple of tasks if they feel they are being managed rather than led, and they will not accept instructions that the rest of the workforce find acceptable. They enjoy autonomy and the need to be in control of their own destiny. They value their independence and it is something that they will fight hard to maintain even if that leaves them at a disadvantage in the long term.

This can cause difficulty because their desire to be treated differently conflicts with most management styles that insist on treating all employees in the same way.

The only way to satisfy their need for autonomy and the company's need for consistency is to employ a leadership style that is flexible enough

to guide the maverick towards the desired outcome while allowing them to have a degree of autonomy that both parties can accept and value. This can be more difficult than it first seems as a vast majority of mavericks are unaware of the effects they have on others. Their preference for bluntness and the delivery of unadulterated truth can be an uncomfortable experience for those on the receiving end. Often the temptation is to revert to managing them closely to bring them back into line. Resist this – sound leadership techniques will bring them back into line.

Mavericks have high self-esteem and confidence, which is why they prefer autonomy rather than strict rules. They are certain when they begin a task that they will complete it successfully. Mavericks do not want to fail, unless they have calculated the likelihood of failure, and find it acceptable.

This paradox means that for a task to be completed successfully the maverick needs to be certain that they will succeed before they begin. That search for certainty can manifest itself in many ways. One of the most common ways is the maverick's insistence that they have access to you (their manager) whenever they need to check their understanding of an issue. This is their way of discovering what the success parameters are. Mavericks will not admit that they are worried about succeeding, as they do not want to lose face. It is important you give them the amount of time they need to ensure they completely understand the task ahead and are certain the task is within their abilities. But do not provide them with tasks that are not challenging – mavericks want to be stretched.

This can be a difficult balance to maintain and, in the early stages, mavericks can take up a lot of your time if you do not lead them properly.

The most important thing to a maverick is recognition. This is why the above point is particularly pertinent.



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Ignoring them is guaranteed to ensure that they will participate in more and more activities that will force you to notice them and recognise them. This is truly a situation where if you do not recognise them for their expertise, you will recognise them for their capability to cause trouble.

Mavericks are wilfully independent and will fight for that independence at any given moment. This is why conventional management techniques, such as 'command and control' or 'carrot and stick' do not work.

They prefer to work in an environment that supports 'structure without structure'. It is important that there is structure but it should not be constraining. One of the advantages about mavericks is that they are able to quickly see the holes in an argument or processes that do not work properly. This is one of the key reasons why mavericks tend not to follow rules – they simply do not believe that they are helping the company achieve its stated goals. This is why it is important that managers check the reasoning as to why a maverick has stopped following a particular rule. It is important to ensure there is a culture that supports openness and transparency. This enables the manager and the maverick to have a discussion on why the rules were being broken by the maverick.

Mavericks tend to work to their own timetable, preferring to create at times that suits them. To achieve the best productivity out of them, you

should try to find ways to accommodate, even if that means they do this at odd times during the day. Often, companies are nervous about allowing employees to work at times when the manager is not there – believing that the employee will not be productive unless they are supervised. If the maverick respects and believes in you, they will work tirelessly to ensure that your vision is implemented and is successful. They will do this in a way that can be unexpected at times.

Mavericks need to feel trusted to be able to reach peak performance. If a maverick senses that you don't trust them, they are likely to turn their talents elsewhere and become quite destructive. Successful managers of mavericks are those that have taught the maverick how to gain your trust.

Mavericks tend to work well with those they respect and find credible. It is these people that are more likely to enable the maverick to moderate their behaviour when it is required. You should elicit their help if you believe that they may have more sway over the maverick than you do.

Mavericks need boundaries and they respect those that enforce them in the right way. If you find yourself managing a maverick that is disengaged from the company or project in hand, give them a compelling reason to change. This will enable you to harness their creativity and insight for the benefit of the company. ■

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