

Managing the Prima Donna

How the best managers handle their gifted -- yet difficult -- superstars

by Benson Smith and Tony Rutigliano

Excerpted from [*Discover Your Sales Strengths*](#) (Warner Books, 2003)

After interviewing thousands of sales managers, we found that the biggest difference between the “great” and the “not-so-great” is the ability to manage stars. By “manage,” we mean how they recruit, retain, and keep their stars producing at top levels.

We have attended countless sales award dinners. One of the most coveted awards is usually sales manager of the year, and in almost every case, that award was won because of the contribution of a star salesperson. Often, the star sold six to eight or even 10 times as much as the average performers at the company.

The reason stars perform so much better than their colleagues is their incredible talent. Generally, they have striving and impacting strengths that are off the charts. Such extraordinary talents often don't make for well-roundedness, but rather for idiosyncrasies. As a rule, these unique individuals present more than their fair shares of management challenges.

We were at the annual sales banquet for a software company at which, as tradition had it, the company's top brass was honoring the year's best performers. Toward the end of the evening, they introduced David as the sales representative of the year. His results were extraordinary. He had single-handedly sold more than some entire districts. The audience greeted him with a thunderous ovation as his results were recited.

Then David took the microphone and spoke. He thanked the founder of the company for the great products he had developed. He thanked the internal people for all their support. He thanked the sales manager who had hired him and taught him the ropes. He thanked his coworkers for their efforts. Each statement was greeted with an ovation. Finally, he looked out over the audience and asked each sales rep to work even harder the next year. It seemed the perfect ending to a perfect evening. Then he did the unthinkable.

Instead of sitting down and basking in his glory, he looked over the hushed audience and told them he had heard that two of the company's best products were being removed from the commission plan the following year. “I just want you to know,” he said, “that if that happens, I'm leaving the company!” The audience was stunned into silence as he left the podium. The happy smiles on the executives' faces had quickly turned sour. Even though everyone agreed that he was entitled to his viewpoint, everyone also thought he had picked the worst possible time to express it.

What would you do if you were the manager? How would you handle this “star”? Is David worth keeping, or should the company get rid of him?

This particular company has a great track record of retaining star salespeople. They understand that the very best can sometimes be a bit unorthodox. The company chose to evaluate David's situation according to four criteria.

For them, performance is the first criterion. Many people can be hard to manage, but only a few can deliver the numbers year in and year out. In this company, if you want to be different, you had better be really, really good. One manager told us, “There is a fine line between a prima donna and an unemployed flake . . . and that line is productivity.”

The second criterion by which the company evaluated David’s action was ethics. No amount of productivity can make up for ethical lapses. Honesty and integrity are at the core of this company’s value structure. They clearly understand that ethical standards must be maintained by all employees -- no exceptions.

The third criterion is mission. “Mission” defines how a company wants to conduct business and the kind of reputation it wants to have. Some exclusive department stores, for example, have a certain way they want their salespeople to treat customers. So do many companies. These are not ethical standards, but they can be just as sacred to a company.

The final criterion has to do with community. How does the salesperson treat others? Some stars can be quite demanding on internal support personnel, but in this company they are not allowed to become abusive. Everyone in an organization deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Sometimes tempers can flare and a few tense moments can erupt, but systematic “torture” of support staff is not allowed.

David’s manager got together with his own boss the next morning to discuss how they should handle the situation. David was a top producer, and he had breached no ethical standards. Although his remarks had been made at a very bad time, they were actually made with a good intent and did not violate the company’s standards regarding mission or community.

So they met with David and told him they had not yet made up their minds about the commission program. It was an important issue to the company because profits for certain older products were declining, and the company needed to focus its attention on newer offerings. They asked him to represent the sales force on the committee that would review this issue.

The manager never said anything about David’s remarks. He realized he didn’t need to. All of David’s friends in the company gave him enough grief. Instead, the manager looked beyond his lapse in judgment and tried to address David’s concerns and give him a way out. In this way, David could stay with the company without losing face, even if the company removed the products from the commission structure, which, incidentally, is what ultimately happened, and David eventually came to support this decision.

Handling prima donnas can be incredibly daunting. Yet your success as a manager will depend on how many of these “opportunities to manage” you can attract and retain. Everyone is different. There is no cookbook that will work for everyone.

Benson Smith is a consultant, speaker, and author for The Gallup Organization and an expert in the area of sales force effectiveness. He is co-author of [*Discover Your Sales Strengths*](#) (Warner Books, February 2003).

Tony Rutigliano is a Senior Managing Consultant, speaker, and author for The Gallup Organization and an expert in sales force effectiveness, organizational effectiveness, and talent assessment. He is co-author of [*Discover Your Sales Strengths*](#) (Warner Books, February 2003).