

How CEOs identify top performers

Top performer: It's a term often used to describe the ideal employee, but what does it really mean? At PI, we believe top performers are people who greatly surpass their expected output directly or through others.

These are people who would be incredibly hard to replace in your organization. People who, if you were to start your own company, you'd want to come along.

Most stumble across top performers. We're sharing how to identify them pre-hire and how to recognize when they're ready to promote internally.

How to recognize top performers pre-hire

Recognizing top performers pre-hire isn't difficult. It just requires an understanding of what to look for and dedication to sticking with the process.

Trick #1: Use this resume hack.

While resumes do a poor job of predicting future success, they can be leveraged to determine whether a candidate has top-performing potential.

If a candidate is early in their career: Just because a candidate is early in their career doesn't mean they can't be a top performer. What you want to look for here is whether they took ownership of their personal and professional growth. Some examples of ownership include: working through college, starting a nonprofit, or being captain of a sports team. These are by no means exhaustive examples, but a good starting point to determine if a candidate is active or passive in their approach to personal and professional development. This is a good indicator at their chances of success in your organization.

If a candidate is further along in their career: Take a look at their career trajectory. If you're hiring for a role with little growth opportunity, experience may be the one thing you're looking for. But if you're searching for someone who's going to grow in your organization and assume more responsibilities over time, pay attention to their career path. Did they move up the ranks in their organization (e.g., marketing coordinator to marketing manager to senior marketing manager)? Or did they grow in roles laterally within the organization? If the candidate maintained the same role over time, chances are they won't be a top performer in your organization.

Trick #2: Ask this question.

In addition to reviewing their resume for work history, make sure to ask them this critical question:

Tell me about a project you worked on that didn't have great results. What would you have changed or done to make that project better?

When asking this question, you're looking for them to suggest improvements they could have executed on. The question they're really answering is: Can you find a way to solve a problem that's within your control? Avoid people who only come up with issues out of their control (i.e., "I wouldn't have taken on that project," "I would've picked a different team," or "There's nothing I could've done, because someone else was in charge of the project.")

Questions to help you identify top performers

The following are questions hiring managers can ask to determine if a candidate has next-level talent.

- **What projects didn't go well and what did you do about it?**

With this question, you are looking to see if they are able to self-reflect and take responsibility for any changes they could have made to a project's success or if they blame others for the outcome of a project.

- **For individual contributors: What skill sets are you trying to build on, and what are you doing to improve upon them?**

If the candidate is proactively seeking learning and development opportunities, you can rest assured they're always going to be getting better.

- **For managers: Describe your team and their performance levels. What did you do about that? Where are they today? (i.e., How many were promoted or terminated? How many new team members were added? Of the new additions, how many worked out?)**

These questions will give you insight into how this person manages their team, how successful those efforts have been, and their approach to leadership.

- **Who was your favorite boss? Who was your worst boss?**

What you're looking for in their response is genuineness and authenticity. Do they badmouth their former boss, or are they able to acknowledge what transpired without negativity? You'll also get insight into what they think about leadership and how evolved they are in leadership capabilities.

When to promote top performers

So you have a top performer on your hands. While the temptation may be to promote them right away, keep in mind that not every top performer will succeed as a people manager. Here are two tricks to identify who's excelling and who's ready to promote:

Trick #1: Listen for these two things.

The first few months after you make a hire, pay close attention to how they behave. There are two key things you want to be looking for:

1) Do they talk a big game, execute, or both?

Ideas are a dime a dozen in business. What really matters is the ability to execute on those ideas. If your new hire has lots of great ideas, but takes action on none, they're what we call an "idea fairy"—ultimately not top performer material. But if they're able to decide which idea to take action on, then execute, those are the individuals who will go far in your organization.

2) Do people talk about them out of context?

Of course, if people are saying less than favorable things, the person in question is probably not a top performer. But what you really want to listen for is when others mention an employee out of context (e.g., "I was talking with Bob the other day and he had a great idea for our upcoming event.") What you're looking for here is: Does this individual provide value to the organization outside of their defined role? Do they take the time to build cross-functional relationships?

Trick #2: Promote based on attitude and intellect, not experience.

First-time managers often make the mistake of promoting based on experience. What you should be promoting for is attitude and intellect. Experience is arbitrary. For some roles, more experience is necessary before climbing the ladder. Pay attention to an employee's attitude (should they be at your company) and intellect (how high up they should go) to determine promotability.