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Motivating People

How to Retain and Engage Your B Players

by Liz Kislik

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We've heard for decades that we should only hire A players, and should even try to cut non-A players from our teams. But not only do the criteria for being an A player vary significantly by company, it's unrealistic to think you can work only with A players. Further, as demonstrated by Google's Aristotle project, a study of what makes teams effective, this preference for A players ignores the deep value that the people you may think of as B players actually provide.

As I've seen in companies of all sizes and industries, stars often struggle to adapt to the culture, and may not collaborate well with colleagues. B players, on the other hand, are often less concerned about their personal trajectories, and are more likely to go above and beyond in order to support customers, colleagues, and the reputation of the business. For example, when one of my clients went through a disastrous changeover from one enterprise resource planning system to another, it was someone perceived as a B player who kept all areas of the business informed as she took personal responsibility for ensuring that every transaction and customer communication was corrected.

How can you support your B players to be their best and contribute the most possible, rather than wishing they were A players? Consider these five approaches to stop underestimating your B players and help them to reach their potential.

Get to know and appreciate them as the unique individuals they are.

This is the first step to drawing out their hidden strengths and skills. Learn about their personal concerns, preferences, and the way they see and go about their work. Be sure you're not ignoring them because they're introverts, remote workers, or don't know how to be squeaky wheels. A senior leader I worked with had such a strong preference for extroverts that she ignored or downgraded team members who were just

going about their business.

Meanwhile, the stars on her team got plenty of attention and resources, even though they often created drama and turmoil, rather than carrying their full share of responsibility for outcomes. Some of the team members she thought of as B players started turning over after long-term frustration. When the leader and some of her stars eventually left the company, some of the B's came back and were able to make significant contributions because they supported the mission and understood the work processes.

Reassess job fit. Employees rarely do their best if they're in jobs that highlight their weaknesses rather than their strengths. They may have technical experience but no interest, or they could be weak managers but strong individual contributors. One leader I know had been growing increasingly more frustrated and less effective; the pressures of satisfying the conflicting demands of different departments were too much for her. Then she took a lateral move to manage a smaller, more cohesive team focused on developing new products, and was able to focus and be inspirational again once she was freed from the pressures of managing projects in such a political environment.

Consider the possibility of bias in your assignments. Women and people of color are often overlooked for challenging or high-status assignments. They're assumed "not to be ready," or they're not considered because they don't act like commonly held but stereotyped views of "leaders." When a midlevel leader who was trying to get more exposure and advancement for one of his team members couldn't figure out what was holding her back in the eyes of the senior leader, I raised this possibility, and we strategized multiple ways that her boss could showcase the quality and impact of her work in upcoming meetings.

Intentionally support them to be their best. Some people are their own

worst critics, or have deep-seated limiting beliefs that hold them back.

When one of my clients lost a senior leader and couldn't afford to replace her at market rates, a longtime B player near the end of his career nervously filled the gap. Although he expanded his duties and kept the team going, he emphasized to both his management and himself that he wasn't really up to the job, and most of the executive team continued to treat him that way. It was not till after he had retired, and a new senior leader had to fill his shoes, that it became clear how much he had done on the organization's behalf. The executive team never came to grips with how much more he could have accomplished had they provided the relevant development, support, and appreciation all along.

Give permission to take the lead. In 30 years of practice, one of the most common reasons I've seen people hold back is if they don't believe they've been given permission to step up. (The people we think of as A's tend not to ask for or wait for permission.) Some B players aren't comfortable in the spotlight, but they thrive when they're encouraged to complete a mission or to contribute for the good of the company. A midlevel leader I coach is quiet, modest, and doesn't like to make waves. She kept waiting for her new leader to lay out a vision for the future and to provide direction about how the work should be done. I asked what she would do if she was suddenly in charge. She laid out a cogent plan, and I encouraged her to present it to the new leader and ask for permission to proceed. Now she and the senior leader are moving forward in partnership.

We can't all be A players, and it's unrealistic to think we'll only ever work with A players. But that may not be the appropriate goal. Instead, try using these strategies to help employees give their best, and you'll be ensuring that your whole team can turn in an A+ performance.



Liz Kislik helps organizations from the Fortune 500 to national nonprofits and family-run businesses solve their thorniest problems. She has taught at NYU and Hofstra University, and recently spoke at TEDxBaylorSchool. You can receive her free guide, [How to Resolve Interpersonal Conflicts in the Workplace](#), on her website.



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