



Work Performance And The Perils Of Comparison

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Let me take you back in time. You're in 8th grade. You've signed up for your first guitar lesson and the teacher plays Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." She offers it up as an example of a great song that you can learn to play. You're motivated to learn, right? Wrong! She no sooner finishes her sentence about "you can learn how to play," when you hear Jimmy Page rip into his classic solo and you decide then and there that it's time to take up sports – "because there ain't no way you're going to be able to do what Jimmy's doing in that song!" You leave the lesson discouraged.



I share this because there is new evidence uncovered by researchers Avi Feller and Todd Rogers that suggests "that exposure to exemplary peer performances can undermine motivation and success by causing people to perceive that they cannot attain their peers' high levels of performance." This finding has some huge implications for businesses – especially as it pertains to individual and team performance in the workplace.

But, managers, don't despair! You and your team are not doomed to a work life of less than stellar achievement. There are some things that you can do to avoid falling into this trap. Here are 5 suggestions:

1. **Show that you're into it!** Passion and enthusiasm are contagious. If you demonstrate that you're into the work at hand, your team can't help but follow.
2. **Set goals that can be attained.** Don't set the Led Zeppelin as the goal. Rather, choose goals that can be achieved. The team will hang in there and work to get better, if they can gain a sense of accomplishment as they work.
3. **Stop comparing your team to others.** As the research suggests, there are other ways to motivate. Challenge the team to work towards improving their performance every day, every week and every month – Jimmy Page wasn't born a virtuoso. He grew his talent over time through practice and dedication.
4. **Provide air cover.** If you have someone else to answer to, as most managers do, you may not be able to control how you and your team are measured from above. So, it's essential that you have your team's back as they progress. By providing some air cover you'll give your team the chance to mature and evolve into meeting and exceeding all expectations.
5. **Make it about the journey and not about the destination.** It's OK to have some fun at work. Make performance achievement about the "this is how we get better" and, not about the consequences of not meeting goals.

To close, comparison can be a perilous path to take when working to motivate. Like the guitar teacher, you can intimidate those that you're trying to inspire. Instead of falling into the comparison trap, try some of these tips and you just might lead your team to outstanding performance.

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