

December 6, 2009

Make a maverick your wingman; Talented employees can be hard to control, so give them freedom and let them shine, writes Frank Dillon

By Frank Dillon

THEY can be impulsive, difficult to control and are often insensitive to others. Highly talented but maverick employees pose huge problems for managers, but harnessing their talent and creativity is often vital to the success of an organisation.

Where would [Ryanair](#) be without Ireland's greatest loose-cannon executive, Michael O'Leary? Brian Mclvor, a management consultant, might not have O'Leary's profile, but he is a self-confessed maverick. In a former role as a staff development officer for Irish Life, he produced offbeat training videos for the organisation that often raised eyebrows.

"I was always given my head to do things differently, which was great," he said. "My boss would say, 'that is either the worst or best idea I've ever heard', but, ultimately, he would trust me. Mavericks need to be given responsibility. Give them the resources and tell them not to let you down."

It can be an isolated existence, however. Colleagues may sneer at them. "I used to be called Steven Spielberg and be asked what movie I was directing next," said Mclvor.

Mavericks are often talented with high self-confidence, and this can seem like arrogance to others with a more conformist approach, says Judith Germain, of Dynamic Transitions, a UK-based leadership training company that specialises in harnessing the power of free spirits. The Pareto principle (or the 80/20 rule) holds true for mavericks, she said — mavericks represent a small minority of employees, but cause most of the problems in a company.

"They tend to be impulsive, not thinking through the consequences of their actions," said Germain. "When mavericks become more self-aware and harness their talent, they can produce amazing success for themselves and their company."

Mavericks believe in brutal honesty and have a need for the truth to come out, she says. This can seem like they have a very rigid approach to ensuring that their view is heard and their ideas are implemented.

Germain said: "The key difference between the maverick and a conformist is that mavericks will risk their jobs if they believe that what they are doing is the right thing. A conformist will not." Mavericks tend to be the top performers in any organisation. Strong lateral thinkers, they will work tirelessly to ensure the organisation's objectives are met, she added. The fundamental issue with mavericks is not one of competence, but one of direction, says Joe Ungemah, of the talent assessment firm SHL, who adds managers should resist the temptation to sideline mavericks into non-customer-facing roles. "Don't keep them locked away because they are different. Keep your mavericks close to the market as this enables them to see possibilities for innovation that might not be obvious to others," he said.

"Without mavericks, organisations risk stagnation through an inability to adapt," he added. "Innovators must feel that they are being taken seriously."

Performance management of mavericks is particularly difficult, however, as they often experience a run of failures before discovering a truly great idea, he observes.

"Colleagues may resent that the failures of mavericks appear to go unpunished, not realising that failure is a natural consequence of innovation. To create a fair appraisal process where innovation is required, metrics based on behavioural competencies — how the individual goes about the job — should be considered alongside tangible business results," he advised. Dealing with the resentment of colleagues is a big issue, agrees Germain, who says managers must discern if there is a valid reason for the resentment, or if it is pure envy. "Because mavericks blaze so brightly, others can feel inadequate beside them. This should be assessed and dealt with appropriately" he said.

Managers should also determine whether the nonconformists have too much freedom and need to be reined in, or whether company rules need to be altered, warns Germain.

Keeping a check on maverick behaviour is tricky, but it can be managed, says Dean **Roger Martin** of the **Rotman** School of Management in Toronto. He advises managers not to be too picky.

"Talent typically comes with attitude," he said. "Few star salespeople ever hand in expense reports on the prescribed schedule — and it is partially because they are out selling more and partially because they want you to know they are too busy for your 'bureaucracy'. If a firm hand is utilised for every indiscretion, the talent will walk. If confrontations are saved for truly critical issues, the talent will understand that it needs a supportive context and can't have everything its own way."

It's preferable, if possible, to find a middle ground with mavericks, he adds. "Remember that you have to replace the talent if you sack it. That doesn't mean you shouldn't sack misbehaving talent.

"Sometimes it is very liberating and motivating for the organisation. But if you sack in a frenzy of moral outrage and only thereafter think about the task of talent replacement, you have done your organisation no favours."

To motivate mavericks, you should give them as much autonomy as possible. "The best way to manage a maverick is to provide guidelines rather than rigid rules," said Germain. "This will often mean they will be working differently to others and will provide unexpected lateral solutions." She added: "True socialised mavericks will astound you with their ability to achieve."

HANDLE WITH CARE

- Keep rules to a minimum, but let staff know they are responsible for their actions
- Provide them with the resources to experiment and allow for failure
- Coax them to understand and work with the politics of the organisation
- Value their honesty and openness about the organisation
- Find roles where their creativity can shine through