

Developing Employees

How to Help Someone Discover Work That Excites Them

by Amy Jen Su

September 13, 2017



Summary. Passion plays an important role in the potential and high performance of others. Research points to a strong correlation between believing in the mission, enjoying the job, and performing at a high level. So, how does a leader develop others toward their passions?... [more](#)

Much has been written on a leader's role in motivating, engaging, and bringing out the best in others. Yet research suggests there is still much more that could be done. Frequently cited is the 2014 Deloitte study that found that “up to 87% of America's workforce is not able to contribute to their full potential because they don't have passion for their work.” This passion gap is important because “passionate workers are committed to continually achieving higher levels of performance.” Robert Kaplan, author of *What You're Really Meant to Do*, states that “numerous studies of highly effective people point to a strong correlation between believing in the mission, enjoying the job, and performing at a high level.” If passion plays an important role in the potential and high performance of others, how does a leader develop others toward their passions?

Adopt a servant leader's mindset. In the face of heavy workloads, it's easy to have every interaction with your direct reports turn into a rushed conversation focused on getting stuff done or fixing problems. Developing others toward their passions requires a mindset shift. While many authors have written about the concept of servant leadership, one of the best definitions still comes from Robert Greenleaf, who originally coined the phrase in an essay published back in 1970. In it, Greenleaf writes, “The servant-leader is servant first...it begins with that natural feeling that one wants to serve. The best test, which is difficult to administer, is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

Help to unlock and discover people's passions. You can help to explore what drives passion on the job for your employees by giving them a chance to pause and reflect. Choose natural points in the workflow to ask questions such as:

- **In advance of new experiences:** What are you excited about for this upcoming project or initiative? What are ways you hope to develop, learn, or grow with this experience?
- **After key milestones:** What's something you felt great about or were especially proud of on that team or project? What was especially rewarding, meaningful, or inspiring coming out of that project, initiative, or event?
- **At annual performance reviews:** What did you most enjoy working on this past year and why? What are the types of things you'd like to get more experience in next year?
- **In career development conversations:** What is your career aspiration over the next three to five years? How do you see this role helping you get there? What inspires you now?

Prioritize work at the intersection of passion and contribution. With greater information in hand, you can help to better identify that sweet spot where your employee's passion and contribution to your team or organization overlap. In January 2017 I wrote an HBR article about prioritizing those activities where passion and contribution intersect. While the article focused on how to prioritize your own work, you can apply the same framework to helping your direct reports prioritize theirs. This ensures that passion is included in the equation.

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES

**Making Work More
Meaningful**

Be careful of assuming that throwing more opportunities or stretch assignments at your employee is the key to unlocking passion. At some point, this can lead to what Michael E. Kibler



To Find Meaning in Your Work, Change How You Think About It

by John Coleman

5 Questions to Help Your Employees Find Their Inner Purpose

by Kristi Hedges

You Don't Find Your Purpose — You Build It

by John Coleman

calls a “brownout” — a term used to describe part of the life cycle of a star. As Kibler says, these people “seem to be performing fine: putting in massive hours in meetings and calls across time zones, grinding out work while leading or contributing to global teams, and saying all the right things in meetings. However, these executives are often operating in a silent state of continual overwhelm, and the predictable consequence is disengagement.”

Know when it's time to help someone move on. Practically, you aren't always going to have work or opportunities that hit the “passion contribution” zone for your employees. The key is to recognize when a role has run its course. Don't become the boss who keeps others “in a box” or gets locked into a view of someone from the past. Not allowing a protégé to move on or spread their wings can create a passion drain.

One of the things that most struck me in Sydney Finkelstein's 2016 HBR article “Secrets of the Superbosses,” which was based on his review of thousands of articles and books as well as more than 200 interviews, was how superbosses “accept churn.” They recognize that “smart, creative, flexible people tend to have fast-paced careers. Even after someone moves out of their organization, superbosses continue to offer advice, personal introductions, and membership into their networks.”

Helping others to develop toward their passions can be a rewarding part of being a leader. By adopting a servant leader's mindset, helping others to explore, prioritizing for passion contribution, and supporting others' careers beyond their current role, you will not have only increased engagement but also be more likely to build long-lasting relationships.

AS

Amy Jen Su is a co-founder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a premier executive coaching and leadership development firm. For the past two decades, she has coached CEOs, executives, and rising stars in organizations. She is the author of the HBR Press book *The Leader You Want to Be: Five Essential Principles for Bringing Out Your Best Self—Every Day*, and co-author of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence* with Muriel Maignan Wilkins.