

How to Lead Leaders

By: Saj-nicole Joni

If you're lucky, you'll get the chance to lead a leader. You know the type. They're the ones who reliably surprise you. They're the superstars in your organization whose results consistently surpass not only their cohorts, but also your more senior and experienced players.

Consider Alex Kinnier, whose stunning and unconventional results in his first years at Proctor & Gamble (nyse: PG - news - people) on Febreze made him the fastest-promoted product development manager in his class. Today, he is Google's (nasdaq: GOOG - news - people) product marketing manager.

Then there's Paige Arnof-Fenn, who exceeded expectations in a series of positions at P&G, Coca-Cola (nyse: KO - news - people), the U.S. Treasury Department, and Inc.com. Today she is CEO of Mavens & Moguls, a global marketing strategy firm.

Karyn Polak, deputy general counsel of global wealth management and general counsel of the Citigroup Private Bank, accelerated fast upon joining Citigroup (nyse: C - news - people): two promotions in just over a year. And Tommy Johnson of AFLAC (NYSE: AFL - news - people) and Justin Bennett of Guardian Life made the top-agents list in their first years, surpassing hundreds with more experience and seniority.

Not everyone enjoys or knows how to manage rising superstars. How do you nurture women and men with smarts, huge ambition and tendencies toward irreverence? This month I went to the source to learn how rising superstars view their careers, ambitions and colleagues. Their answers might surprise you.

Rising superstars are hungry and have big appetites. While they might not admit this in polite company, many superstars are not content to rise through your ranks, even on the fast track. They view most people above them as having grown complacent or as no longer being hungry enough. Superstars have a hunger in their core to do, create and get extraordinary results--fast. They dream big.

As Johnson told me, "If you don't have dreams so big that you want them with your whole being, dreams so big that nothing will stand in your way, then as a leader, you are dead."

They are voracious learners. As a kid, Bennett found more than his game on the basketball court. Everyone said he'd never make the team; too short, not fast enough. What they didn't see was the way he could train and learn.

"Not only did I have the discipline to train longer and harder--I knew I'd have to train smarter, innovate to be better, and cultivate the inner mindset of success. I surrounded myself with people better than me, and I absorbed everything like a tremendous sponge. You have to be a great listener and use every scrap, big and small, to drive forward and stand out from the pack. Listening is active and strategic, there's nothing passive about it."

After college, Justin transferred all this to business, bringing the same discipline, hunger and mindset that fed his youthful basketball days, with extraordinary results.

They don't see things the way you do, and they connect the dots differently. "My first instinct is to not just do what I'm told. I do what I think is right for the business," says Kinnier. "I get better results by not putting anything above my own judgment. Unfortunately, I think most people are averse to digging deep and thinking hard [about] what is needed to crack a problem. They just do what's asked of them. Although I often don't do what's expected, I'm not a rogue player. It's my job to educate upward, so that my bosses know what I'm doing and why. It's also my job to get them to educate me so that they'll give me the broadest view and context in which I am accountable for my decisions and results."

Johnson puts it this way: "Too many senior people today are stuck in the past--in a comfortable illusion of a universe which doesn't really exist. People at the top risk getting detached from the everyday challenges of the people they are leading. I get a very different level of results because I capitalize on nontraditional innovation that reflects the new realities of how business relationships work. But most people just follow the well-worn templates without even realizing they assume a world long past."

They love high-capacity people with spark and loathe plodders. Polak's trajectory took a huge burst with the growth of the business at Citi, where the top is focused on being the market leader and rewards those who get it done.

"Don't put me around people who just ask, 'Why?' Give me colleagues and bosses who just as often ask 'Why not?' This unleashes my capacity to go for extraordinary outcomes in an environment that is constantly changing, and therefore constantly challenging."

They are not defined by their job titles. Many rising superstars "get their break when someone at the top sees their spark and invites them in," says Arnof-Fenn. "There were several times in my career when my boss' boss asked me to elaborate on a comment or explain the look I gave at a meeting. Sharing my perspective directly with very senior people in an unvarnished capacity always played to my strengths and allowed them to see why I was so passionate about a particular idea or decision. Having the biggest thinkers in the room, regardless of title, is critical, or you invite the likelihood that the essence of big ideas will get lost in the shuffle. Rising superstars and the best top leaders know and act on this."

Don't be surprised: Stars rarely stay put. Don't think you've failed if you're unable to hold on to your best and brightest. You haven't failed as a boss or wasted your time. Realize that you have your superstars only for a short time, and you're free to make the most of them while they're around. Give them hard and challenging assignments. Let them shine, break the rules and create disruptive and profitable breakthroughs. Help their peers and managers get over feeling threatened.

Their greatest value lies outside the box. From the beginning, groom your rising superstars to be great partners. Develop their knowledge and networks throughout your

organization. Create the context and culture where they will want to bring back a cycle of abundance from the outside--through joint ventures, deals and innovation you could never create on the inside.

Your rising superstars know that in a global world of possibility, business is not a zero-sum game. Treat them like you know it too.

####

About the Author: Dr. Saj-nicole Joni is chief executive of Cambridge International Group and an internationally known "third-opinion" adviser to senior executives and high-potential leaders. She is the author of *The Third Opinion: How Successful Leaders Use Outside Insight to Create Superior Results*.

Join Dr. Saj-nicole Joni at *The Women in Leadership Summit* in Boston on November 13-15, 2006 where she will present on *The Third Opinion: Building and Sustaining High Powered Leadership* and on *Truth, Trust, and Authentic Leadership*.