



# Motivating High Performers

## Are Managers up to it?

**Case study**

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This case was written by Dr Taran Patel, Groupe ESC Rennes. It is intended to be used as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from generalised experience.

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## MOTIVATING HIGH PERFORMERS: ARE MANAGERS UP TO IT?

As Anne-Marie Dubois walked from the car parking to her office at the Baytown Pharmaceuticals Limited, she heaved a sigh. This was going to be yet another stressful day at work. Lately, nothing had been the way it should have been. On the personal front, she was going through a very painful period. Having gone through a painful divorce, she was trying her best not to let her personal life influence her output at work. Nonetheless, the work environment was not what it should have been either. It was only the beginning of the new year and yet, she felt fatigued already. The fact of the matter was that the fatigue she was experiencing was the residue of the previous year. Just around the end of the previous year, she had had a major row with one of her supervisors at work.

Anne-Marie's job profile at Baytown Pharmaceutical Limited had two major elements to it: training the sales representatives regarding specific pharmaceutical products and active research in the product category of her specialization. Being a medium-scale young company<sup>1</sup> gave Baytown Pharmaceutical certain advantages as well as drawbacks. The reason why Anne-Marie found this a stimulating place was because of the relative freedom it provided its employees. Being different from the typical multinational pharmaceutical company in which she had worked before she moved to Baytown, this came as a welcome change. The way she saw it, she did not miss the long time taken to reach a decision, the pressure to perform, the hierarchical line of promotions, which characterized her previous employer. Baytown Pharmaceuticals Ltd. not only provided the right encouragement for initiative and drive, but being a medium-scale company also allowed for certain flexibility, that most large companies could not hope to sustain. Anne-Marie had always felt accepted and at-ease in this environment. She had often been encouraged to take initiative and had always felt that she was an integral part of this company. That is why, till recently, she had loved her job and although people often suggested that she could move to better and more acclaimed companies, she had always resisted moving. She felt that at Baytown, she had always received a fair share of rewards: both tangible and non-tangible. She had received public acclaim on different occasions and had flourished professionally during her past three years in this company.

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<sup>1</sup> Baytown Pharmaceuticals is a fairly young company. It was created in the early 90s and currently has about 25 different products in different pharmaceutical categories.

However, lately, things had changed. The last one and a half years had seen major upheavals in the company. One of her well-experienced work colleagues, James Dayton had taken over as the head of the R&D<sup>2</sup> department. Training experts, including Anne-Marie now reported to the Vice-President (Production), Sarah Thorpe as well as the Head of Research and Development, James Dayton because of the way in which the jobs had been redesigned. Like Anne-Marie, Thorpe and Dayton were both foreign nationals living in the USA for the past several years. At a personal level, she had always felt at ease with both Thorpe and Dayton. However, the end of last year brought an end to this glorious period for Anne-Marie.

In a way, this was quite a shock to her because during the last year she had outshone most of her colleagues in terms of her output. She received a lot of appreciation from her colleagues as well as the top management of the company when she succeeded in solving a major problem related to a specific formula for a new product that the company was keen to develop. She had been asked to represent the company at a major international conference on innovations in the pharmaceutical sector. Although these achievements were publicly recognized and her contribution to the company was highlighted in many meetings, she sensed a change in Dayton's attitude towards her after this. Initially she dismissed these changing vibes as a figment of her own imagination. However, when, the next application she made to Dayton for an extension of the research funds allocated to her team was rejected, she was forced to reflect upon the relationship between herself and Dayton. Such a refusal not only de-motivated her, but also contributed to stalling the development of the new product itself, a product that the company was keen to launch as soon as possible. She also discovered through her discussions with other colleagues that she was being consciously kept out of important decisions that influenced her project. Furthermore, it seemed to Anne-Marie that Dayton was inconsistent in the claims that he made. For example, he now refused to let her recruit an executive assistant, although he had informally approved of the decision earlier on. When she asked Dayton the reason behind the refusal to her request for an extension of the research funds and to the recruitment of an assistant, the only response she was given was that her product line *'no longer fitted with the strategic interest of the organization'*. This was indeed a shock to Anne-Marie because this was not what was being said in open-forum meetings. Every personnel meeting that she attended stressed more and more on the importance of this new product for the company. She suspected that there was more to this

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<sup>2</sup> R&D : Research and Development

than met the eye. However, even before she had had time to resolve this internal dilemma, she was confronted with another one!

It was decided not long ago that outstanding research output at Baytown Pharmaceutical Ltd. would be rewarded by giving the relevant research team a bonus. Although the amount in itself was not much, it served, at least for people like Anne-Marie as a sign of being acknowledged by the top management. It was a bit like being highlighted in a high school magazine for one's outstanding performance in the local spelling bee competition or like the informal drinks party arranged to celebrate a colleague's recent achievement! Although this bonus system was new and meant to motivate employees to work harder, Anne-Marie felt more de-motivated than motivated by this system! She was someone who had always been passionate about her work. She had been known to work till the wee hours of the night in her laboratory, where the only company she had was the coffee machine at the end of the corridor. During all her years of involvement with research, she had never felt the need for external sources of motivation and inspiration.

However, when she entered her office and switched on her computer last week, she was surprised to receive in her e-mail box, an account statement of the bonus she was to receive this year for her exceptional research output. On one hand this was good news, because it meant additional income for what she enjoyed doing anyways. On the other hand, the figure quoted was way short of her expectations. Her research output had been 'evaluated' like that of her colleagues in terms of '*production*'. Besides, it seemed to Anne-Marie that the evaluation system had certain ambiguities. In her opinion, often, decisions made in this department were ad-hoc due to lack of clear policies. Every time she has attempted to raise this issue with the management, she was informed that Baytown Pharmaceuticals was a small and upcoming company and policies would evolve as the company consolidated its position in the market.

In attempt to resolve some of these issues, last Tuesday, armed with her work contract and some documents supporting her project, she sought to see Sarah Thorpe. Sarah was a well-balanced person with a lot of integrity and experience in the pharmaceutical field. In the past two years Anne-Marie had learnt to appreciate and respect Sarah for her patience and her ability to look at every issue from several different perspectives. When Anne-Marie related

her problem to Sarah, the latter accepted that she had a point in the arguments she was making. However, she reckoned that her direct interference in the matter with Dayton might not be the best approach. While Dayton was a colleague, explained Thorpe, he had a certain amount of autonomy in his department. Although in an organization that had clear job descriptions and specifications this seemed to be a fair comment, Anne-Marie could not help thinking if there was more to this than Sarah was willing to admit. Sarah and Dayton did have a good working relationship. Anyway, as she had always perceived Sarah as a fair and open person, she decided that it couldn't hurt to give her the benefit of doubt.

Her next step was to seek an appointment with Dayton. When she approached Dayton, she was met with a cool exterior, which made Anne-Marie feel that she was not particularly welcome. It took only a couple of minutes for Anne-Marie to realize that she was up against a situation, which was far more complex than she had anticipated. It became clear to her that the reason why her requests for research funds and an assistant were being rejected was that she was not playing the 'puppet' for Dayton anymore. In the past two years, since Dayton had assumed the current post, he had always highlighted the accomplishments of Anne-Marie as those of the R&D department. This reflected positively not only on Anne-Marie, but also on the R&D department. However, something had changed recently! As Anne-Marie reflected on her relationship with Dayton, one incident in particular came to her mind. Towards the end of last year she had received an e-mail from Dayton asking her to represent the company in a meeting of local pharmaceutical companies. Since it was nearly the end of the year and she had already exceeded her target manifold, and since she was in the middle of her divorce proceedings, she decided to refuse this demand. This was an action that took special effort on her part because she had never been the kind of person who found it easy to refuse a request from authority. This incident was brought up during her meeting with Dayton. In his attempt to defend his refusal of her research funds, he accused her of not being a cooperative subordinate. The way Anne-Marie saw it she was being punished by Dayton for not being his 'puppet' that one time when she refused to make the presentation at the conference of local pharmaceutical companies, although she had by far exceeded her professional targets. He further accused her for raising too many questions about the policies of the R&D department. Although it was true that Anne-Marie found it difficult to tolerate ambiguities in policies, especially in her department, she had always seen her feedback and comments as contributing to the development or creation of more conducive work environment for the research

community at Baytown Pharmaceuticals. That her questioning or feedback could be seen as 'creating waves' was news to her. Dayton also expressed his displeasure at the fact that she had brought up the matter with Sarah Thorpe. This took Anne-Marie by surprise, because she had not given a second thought to her discussion with Thorpe. She now realized that Dayton saw this as her attempt to undermine his authority, especially since he had been in the new position only for the last one and a half year. Thorpe was indeed higher up the hierarchical chain than Dayton. It was true that Anne-Marie had not hesitated even a fraction of a second in approaching Thorpe; firstly, because she thought she was a fair person and would give her the appropriate advice and secondly, because she believed in open communication and did not understand, why, if she were displeased about her working conditions, could she not talk to people outside the department about it! She had always respected Dayton for his keen intellect and had never thought that raising questions about the department's policies would be negatively perceived. The more she tried to resolve past issues with Dayton during that meeting, the worse it was turning out to be! In short, Anne-Marie had left Dayton's office fuming with anger and with a feeling that she had opened a can of worms!

As she stepped out of the elevator on the second floor of Baytown Pharmaceuticals, she wondered what the new year had in store for her. Was there a solution to her dilemma? Whom should she seek advice from? Once again, she heaved a sigh as she inserted her key into her office door and got herself prepared for yet another gruelling day at work.