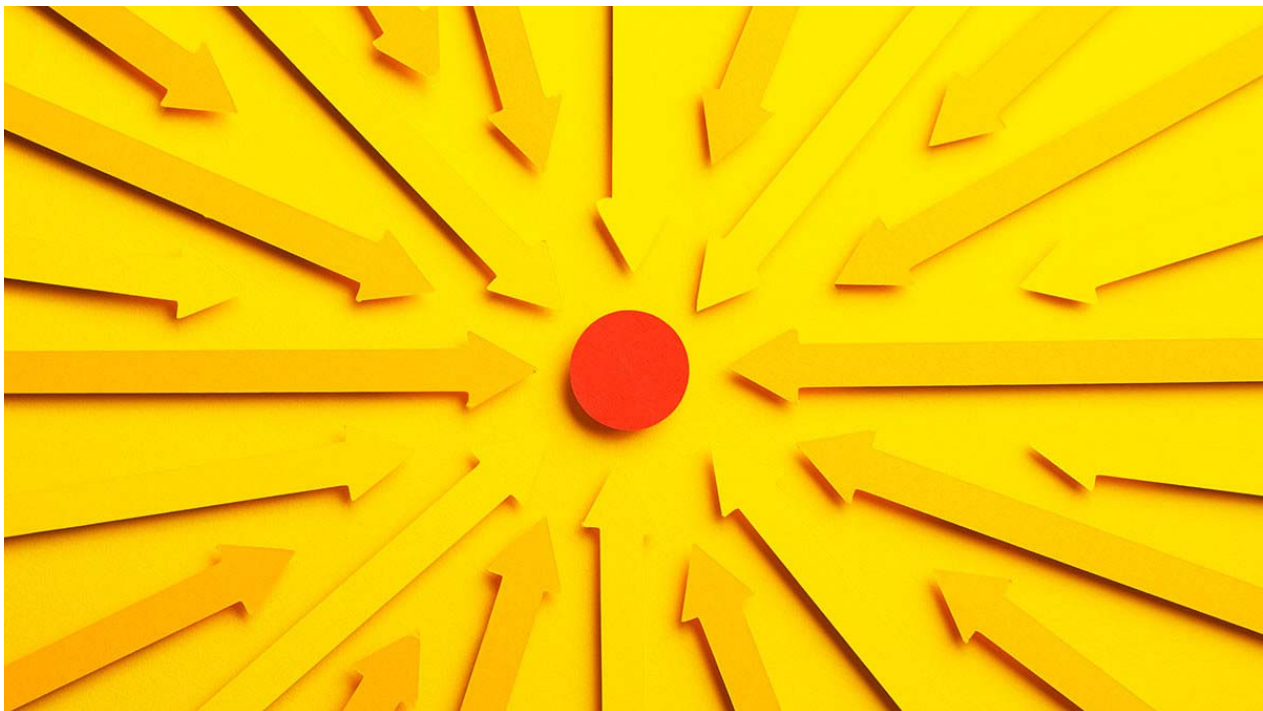


## COLLABORATION

# When One Person's High Performance Creates Resentment in Your Team

by Hui Liao, Elizabeth Campbell, Aichia Chuang, Jing Zhou, and Yuntao Dong

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Organizations face a dilemma in their hunt for talent. They pursue the proverbial “best and brightest” who can outsell, outthink, and outproduce their peers. So they spend sizable resources to attract and retain high performers who stand out. But often these organizations also want teams that function in solidarity. So they place their prized recruits in collaborative groups and tell them to fit in.

Many managers miss or underestimate the potential harm to high performers from their teams. Often with good intentions, managers set up high performers as targets for sabotage, aggression, and exclusion. As the Japanese proverb warns: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

Some high performers exit their organizations to escape such negative social consequences. Those who stay often flounder without peer support. Research estimates over 30% of high performers feel a lack of engagement at work, and 25% expect to work elsewhere within a year.

With the rise in collaborative models of work, the problem gets worse. Our research, forthcoming in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, suggests that an emphasis on teamwork in the modern workplace has amplified the risks for high performers. That's partly because high performance is relative and based on social comparison. In communities with frequent interaction, opportunities for such comparison increase.

We draw our insights from a field study of 414 stylists at 120 Taiwanese salons, followed by an experiment involving 284 business students in the United States. The salons offered a context that reflects many characteristics of workgroups: a socially dynamic, open environment where stylists worked both individually and interdependently. Rewards were also determined based on both individual contribution and collective success. To cross-validate findings from the field study, we then chose a complementary approach: a controlled experiment among MBAs where we could randomly assign conditions (i.e., more cooperative or a more competitive group norms) and manipulate the individual performance feedback after tasks. Our evidence from both the field study and the experiment points to a clear social downside of high achievement, as peers were more likely to belittle, insult, and damage the reputation of high performers. In addition, we found that the social penalty increases in more collaborative workgroups.

One obvious trigger for the undermining behavior is envy. People led by their emotions often smile at the misfortune of others. But our study suggests that something even more sinister may be at play: peers may lash out against high performers as a strategic, calculated act.

High performers often receive first choice of scarce resources such as high-profile work assignments and preferred customer accounts, which can spark threat perceptions among peers. High performers may also shatter performance standards, create more work, and raise expectations for the group. Nobody likes “rate busters” on unionized factory floors, for example, or “troublemakers” who expose incompetence and ignorance.

This tension is heightened in collaborative communities, where peers may see themselves as acting selflessly on behalf of the team when they knock down high performing outliers who threaten solidarity.

But that's just half the story revealed in our research findings. Self-interest also simultaneously pulls peers in the opposite direction: toward supporting the high performers in their midst. Regardless of envy and potential threats, high performers create perks for their teams like greater access to resources and greater leader satisfaction with the group.

High performers may also earn rewards on behalf of others, like when honor roll students do the bulk of the work on group projects at school or when all-star athletes carry their teams to victory. Benchwarmers don't complain when championship rings get passed around.

The benefits point to an important paradox in our findings. The same high achievers targeted for sabotage simultaneously earn higher levels of support. Love and hate coexist, largely because peers view high performers as both threatening and beneficial to their careers.

Such contradictions take a toll. Research suggests that experiencing both friendly and hostile responses from the same source can be disorienting and more harmful to one's work and health than hostility alone. This is because the inconsistent messages increase interpersonal uncertainty as well as cognitive and emotional burdens.

Managers who want to both maintain high returns and hang on to their high performers should anticipate that high performers will draw fire, clarify that undermining high performance will not be tolerated, and be prepared to lend high performers emotional support.

Beyond that, our research suggests two broad categories of intervention based on the understanding that peers' treatment of high performers follows rational assessments of threats and benefits.

First, managers can address peer concerns that high performers threaten their welfare and resources. One approach might be to create a more balanced performance review system that values team members' contributions beyond task accomplishment – the dimension that most favors high performers.

Organizational citizenship behaviors like helping others, making constructive suggestions, and being a good sport also matter in business, helping to lubricate the social machine of the organization. High performers sometimes forget these dimensions, focusing on tasks and ignoring people.

Second, and more importantly, managers can cultivate the understanding that everyone wins with high performers on the team, despite the reality that equal allocation of resources within a group is not always feasible or fair. To balance the inevitable peer perception of threat, managers can emphasize the upside.

For example, high performers bring expertise, experiences and connections that often translate into better team reputation, goal accomplishment and overall performance – all of which benefit everyone on the team. Managers can further facilitate the transfer of benefits by setting up star performers as mentors, allowing peers to learn and improve.

Along similar lines, managers can help high performers help themselves by coaching them to demonstrate prosocial values and behaviors. When high performers have others' best interests at heart, they become less likely to hoard credit and dismiss team contributions, thus reducing their chances of being perceived as a threat to the team.

Managers should pay particular attention to these issues in workplace cultures that emphasize harmony and cooperation. The key is helping the team recognize that the benefits may outweigh the threats when they collaborate with high performers.

Hot shots who can deliver results are valuable, hard to retain, and costly to replace. So managers of high performers should stay vigilant, watch for signs of isolation and disengagement, and intervene early to cultivate and protect their investment. Along with the Japanese proverb, they should heed the wisdom of a similar saying: "Tall trees catch much wind."

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Hui Liao is the Smith Dean's Professor in Leadership and Management at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business

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Elizabeth Campbell is an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management

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Aichia Chuang is a distinguished professor at the National Taiwan University's College of Management

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Jing Zhou is the Houston Endowment Professor at the Rice University's Jones Graduate School of Business

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Yuntao Dong is an assistant professor of management in the School of Business at the University of Connecticut.

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
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**BOON HEON TAN** 20 minutes ago

These findings resonate with me as a practitioner. it's definitely a challenge for organizations like mine which is committed to becoming more collaborative and driven by consensus decision-making and elimination of hierarchy. Looking forward to reading the article!

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