



Invest in Your Best

By Patrick Sweeney
President, Caliper

Now that you've gotten through the worst of the worst, are you ready for what's next?

The last year is one that none of us will ever forget. We all had to shrink to squeeze through the eye of the storm. And we had to learn how to compete in a completely new game. Our competitors, we found, are no longer in our neighborhoods or on the other side of town. They are on the other side of the world. And they are awake as we try to sleep.

Meanwhile, many of the partners we counted on, our banks and our suppliers, are no longer around.

The sand has shifted beneath our feet. But we are still standing – which has been a test of our leadership – our competitiveness, our self-discipline, our optimism, and our resilience.

We've made it through.

Still all of us have changed. Most of us are a smaller. We've become substantially faster. And, hopefully, a little smarter.

But we haven't had much time to assess what we've been through. How our world has been turned upside down. How we've recovered. How we will be different this year. And that is a concern.

We all know that the best leaders, historically, have been able to balance two factors – being able to reflect on all the forces we're facing, then acting faster than our competitors.

And that time between reflecting and acting has almost disappeared completely. Many leaders I've spoken with say they cherish their time on planes because they can be alone with a pad and pen and their own thoughts.

And what are they thinking about? We know from a survey we just conducted that leaders are concerned about how to maintain momentum; how to prioritize now that their companies are half their former size; and how to develop and retain their top talent.

Now is the time to make sure
we are connecting in very real
ways with our top performers.

As leaders, one of our most important challenges this year is to make sure that our top performers – and those who have the potential to be top performers – know how extremely important they are to us. We need to recognize them, and keep them engaged, motivated, and enthused about their future with us.

Nothing is more important now than making sure that we keep our top talent. Because, at the end of the day, our top talent is ultimately what distinguishes us. Everything else can be copied by any of our competitors – at lightning speed.

To make sure that we don't lose any of our top performers, we have to make sure they understand, in no uncertain terms, that we are intent on re-creating a collaborative, innovative top-performing organization – and that they are a vital part of our vision for the company's future.

We need to engage and inspire our top-performers. However that starts by clearing up a misconception that we have found to be held by many leaders. They mistakenly believe that top performers will inspire and raise the level of performance of everyone else around them. But we have found, in fact, that the exact opposite is what top performers are looking for.

One thing we've learned, for certain, about top performers is that they want to be connected with other top performers.

They do not want to be working side-by-side with average performers, let alone with someone who will slack off and not complete his or her part of an important project on time.

As a result, we are currently helping companies around the world to create situations in which their elite performers push one another to levels they would never reach if they were working with less-accomplished colleagues.

As a world-class leader, we strongly recommend that one of your primary goals this year is to bring together your company's stars to work side-by-side on a major initiative. That's what engages top performers. They want to be part of a winning team. And they want to make a real difference.

Engage your top performers

Brandon Raasch, Director of Human Resources at West Marine Products, said, "The economy really tasked our people to become more motivated and more efficient." However, at the same time, he had to focus on helping his top performers to develop new talents, so they could be the kind of leaders West Marine Products needed to move into the future.

What has he been focused on most?

Raasch has worked with them individually and in teams to improve efficiency, communication, and performance, while reducing conflict. By focusing on his top performers, Raasch has shown them that they are truly valued and important to the organization's success.

Developing the potential of your top performers is very strategic and very personal. It begins with noticing that somebody has potential, then coaching and grooming that person in an individual way.





We have been helping one multi-national firm to review their talent and develop a formal succession planning process. This provides top performers with the recognition they deserve, while securing the company's future.

They have developed a 70-20-10 Development Plan – with the premise that 10 percent of a hi-potential employee's learning should be done in a classroom, 20 percent with individual coaching and 70 percent should be accomplished through experiences. They review the next steps in the jobs of a top performer, then identify the new skills that need to be acquired, then build a developmental plan around those gaps. The idea is that most of the gaps will be filled with experiences. So special projects, new assignments and moving the individual around to different functions helps to open new doors, while coaching and classes to acquire new skills round out the learning process.

Development programs

Bob O'Leary, Executive Vice President of Philadelphia Insurance Companies, feels that implementing development programs not only helps the company as a whole, but also motivates

employees to stand behind their leaders. "The respect that leaders generate is almost self-fulfilling. By approaching business in a totally different manner than before, leaders generate respect from their people. So it becomes almost contagious."

Now, with people being asked to do more and more with fewer resources, development programs are essential to the future of your organization. Development programs are entirely customizable based on the needs of the organization. Below are some examples of what some programs might look like. Your company may use a combination of the ideas below or might seek out an approach entirely specialized to suit your company's goals:

Coaching: customized, in-depth coaching process and developmental plan from an objective, third-party coach that helps pinpoint abilities, motivations, and growth opportunities.

Action Learning: employee development program where organizations solve critical and complex organizational problems in real time, while simultaneously building strong leaders. This form of "learning by doing" helps leadership teams become more willing to learn from one another, more flexible and better able to shoulder difficult tasks.

Three Sixty Feedback: process that sheds light on areas where employees can improve, especially related to how co-workers feel about their performance. Three Sixties also provide guidance for tapping into strengths and taking the steps necessary to make real change.

Management System: program that helps tie performance to overall strategy. A performance management system not only enables the company to measure and monitor performance, but it also helps integrate an understanding of individual motivations with clear expectations and open lines of communication.

Top Talent Retention: program where a consultant works one-on-one with top performers to help them assess their talents, identify hidden potential and clarify their goals, while linking their abilities and interests with the needs of the organization. Increasing top employees' feelings of value increases loyalty and tenure.

Validation Study: process that helps a company get a clear sense of their top performers and their strengths, what distinguishes them, and how to both hire people similar to your existing top talent and develop those who are currently on board who have high potential.

The right emphasis

As we recover from these difficult times, realizing that our organizations will be different for many years to come, nothing is more important than developing our top talent.

And you have to recognize that your top talent, and those who have the potential to be your next top performers, are all looking to you much more closely and intently than ever before.

You may have myriad reasons to spend budgeted dollars elsewhere. But we would argue that nothing is more important than developing top performers' potential.

Your company's future depends, first and foremost, upon having a clear understanding of the talent you want to develop.

What are the competencies you need to be known for? Innovation? Collaboration? Resilience? Optimism?

You need to be very clear about what your company will be known for.

Then determine who in your company possesses those competencies.

That's where you want to focus.

As markets collapse and jobs disappear, your top performers are looking to you, as a leader, for two things: They want to know the truth about what is going on, while, at the same time, they are looking to have their concerns replaced with confidence. To have confidence, they need to know that your company has a plan – a plan to head straight into challenges and prevail.

And your top performers are who will get you there. But they need to know that they are fundamental to your plan.

Invest in them, build upon their strengths, surround yourself with them, and celebrate them.

They are your company's future. If you don't recognize them, your competitors will. ■

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506 Carnegie Center, Princeton, NJ 08540
609.524.1400 ◆ calipercorp.com

Patrick Sweeney is the President of Caliper, an international management consulting firm, based in Princeton, which, for nearly a half-century, has helped over 25,000 companies around the world to hire and develop top performers.

About Caliper

Our solutions help develop your organization by aligning the talent and potential of your employees with the needs of your business. For a half century our expertise and accuracy, combined with the depth of our personalized approach, has enabled our consultants to provide the objective insights needed to help more than 25,000 companies succeed.