

Why you should encourage the high-performing weirdos in your workplace

Interview by Frank Sennett

Many managers spend too much time cracking down on the harmless oddball behavior of their most creative workers when they should be celebrating these individualistic innovators instead. Or so argues performance improvement consultant John Putzier in *Weirdos in the Workplace* (Financial Times/Prentice Hall). We found his ideas strangely appealing—and likely useful for any organizations wishing to cultivate more high-performing employees and a culture of innovation. Find out more about Putzier's management methods at www.firststepinc.com.

ERR: You say it's critical for managers to go through something called the STAR progression when dealing with productive oddballs. What exactly is that?

John Putzier: The STAR progression starts off with *Stifling*. In the '50s, we stifled diversity. Diversity wasn't even a concept in the organization. And then with the introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we tolerated it. So that's the letter T, *Tolerance*. Eventually, we started to accept diversity because it wasn't going to go away. In the '80s, we hit the A, which is *Acceptance*. But we never really did *Rejoice* in that diversity, which is the R in STAR. To rejoice means to recognize and tap the value of individuality. Diversity is still a legal issue, but when organizations look at diversity as individuality, they move past the forced aspect of it and embrace the fact that differences are a good thing if they are productive, innovative, creative, etc. That's the underlying thesis of the book: Let's try to get individuals and organizations to take responsibility for tapping what I call the "natural weirdness" of individuality. The word "weird" is not used here pejoratively. It's actually a good thing in many cases. That's the point for managers: to recognize which weirdness is valuable, and which is just a distraction from organizational effectiveness.

In managing weirdos for maximum productivity, you note that these folks often don't want to be on a traditional team and shouldn't have to be on one.

Productive weirdos are people who are very good at something—I like to use the analogy of an Einstein or an Edison. I guarantee you they wouldn't want to sit in a "quality circle." But what high-tech company wouldn't want to hire an Einstein or Edison today? They would be difficult to manage, but they would be worth their weight in gold. That's the extreme example, but we've also got good, solid performers who may also not really do well in team settings. And we need to recognize that our society actually celebrates the individual—probably to a

fault today. High performers will work with the team if it helps them succeed. That may sound selfish, but that's just the reality. High performers often turn their noses down at others who are not. It may not be blatant, but subconsciously they're thinking, "I'm carrying these people" or "They're holding me back." They will jump onto a team if there's a crisis, but that's about the only time you'll see a team of dynamic high performers where they're not asking, "What's in it for me?"

One message is to find ways for these folks to go their own way within the system. But you also note that high-performing weirdos often like to circulate among themselves. So you say get them on a team occasionally, but don't call it a team.

Call it a brainstorming session, call it a taskforce, call it a SWAT team. Make it look really important. Weirdos like to hang with weirdos. I saw this a lot in high-tech, particularly in the '90s. The wonks get together at lunchtime. Their conversation sometimes is almost like going to a Trekkie conference. It may not be for everybody, but they really feed off each other. If you can set up an environment in which your top performers can informally feed on each other's energy, the results can be unbelievable. And if everybody is on an equal footing and they think it's important, they'll actually be proud to be on a team for once. But that's an exception to the rule.

You stress the importance of not sweating the small stuff when managing productive weirdos. Not all odd behaviors require intervention. In every case, managers have to rigorously ask, "Would it be better just to live and let live?"

It's just smart as a manager to devote your energy and your resources to the true problems. I give an example of a guy we call Blue Suit Bob, who wore the same outfit to work every day. It turned out he had six of the same suits. It would be an issue if it was a hygiene problem, but Bob wasn't dirty. He worked in a cubicle, he wasn't in sales—his behavior was costing the organization nothing. He looked perfectly acceptable, and if his coworkers didn't like it, too bad. Why waste organizational resources trying to "fix" something that doesn't cost anything? A lot of weak managers like to waste their time "fixing" non-problems. After all, there's nothing to lose; these are easy "problems," and they divert energy from truly destructive behaviors the managers don't want to confront.

Effective managers know when to intervene and when not to. I've got something I call the "weird worth ratio." The premise is, the more you're worth, the more you can be weird. It may

not sound right to some people, but it's a commonsense thing. I'm more willing to accommodate a guy who delivers patents from ideas he comes up with at 3 a.m. in bed. He doesn't want to come to the office at 8 a.m. on those days and be worthless. I would accommodate that guy, because he's bringing in great value to the organization. That's an example of accommodating weirdness when it has value.

Google has harnessed weirdo power to the max. Engineers are allowed to sign on to any project posted on an internal database, and they only have to e-mail management a weekly progress update.

And in their interview and selection process, they're looking for people who have kind of off-the-wall personal lives. They've got everything from ex-Navy SEAL types to snake charmers to puzzle champions—people who enjoy the challenge of getting out of the box and trying something new. But you can't accomplish what Google has done unless you are a high-trust organization. That's the only way you can be comfortable having your people just jump on to projects and trust they're working on something useful. When telecommuting was introduced, most corporations could not conceive of trusting that people would get their jobs done. "How do I know he's not watching *Oprah* in his jammies?" Well, did you ever consider looking at results?

The more results-based an organization is, the better able it will be to accommodate productive weirdos and profit from them.

Absolutely.

In addition to not sweating the small stuff in the workplace, you caution against cracking down on weird off-duty behavior. If a productive weirdo's oddball behavior after hours doesn't have a significant negative impact on their job, the ability of others to perform, or the effectiveness of the organization, leave it alone.

That can be painful for managers who have strong social, religious, or political beliefs, but it is not your business. We shouldn't be regulating personal behavior unless it is illegal, has a negative impact on the organization, or the person brings it to work. We look at the case of a receptionist who moonlights as a stripper. You don't have to agree with it or like it. But unless it results in her coming in late or trying to "sell things" in the organization, it's none of your business.

The other person in that case study was the CEO, who was putting bills in the stripper's garter not even knowing she

was an employee. So if you've got someone in a position of high visibility in the organization and they're engaging in weird behaviors . . .

. . . Then it is work-related. You're dealing with questions of organizational image, judgment, and leadership. Remember, all weirdos are not created equally. The receptionist isn't a high-visibility representative of the organization, but the CEO is. And her judgment doesn't have nearly the impact on the organization that his does.

You study a guy you call System Tester Sam. He refuses to submit redundant status reports and even turns in one filled with gibberish to prove no one reads them. The lesson is, when you're infuriated with one of these weirdos ask, Is this person actually a white knight with obnoxious delivery?

System Tester Sam is always jabbing at policies and procedures. Most times, someone like that wants to make positive changes, but they come across in a negative way because they don't know any other way to make their points. And they often get even more abrasive when their points are proved correct.

The Weird Worth Ratio

The more you're worth,
the weirder you can be.

They do a little touchdown dance.

Exactly. The point here is to consider something called "creative dissatisfaction." Nobody wants to see productive change more than Sam. So why not tap that motivation and energy? When I help organizations form cross-functional teams, I always want the most ticked-off, maverick malcontents. It does work. One of two things happens: Either Sam's going to come up with a bunch of really good ideas, or we're going to come to the realization he's full of hot air. Either way, we win. Say, "Here's why the policy exists. But if that explanation doesn't satisfy you, Sam, how would you do it?" He's going to have to pony up or shut up.

Earlier, you briefly touched on a guy known as Circadian Charlie. He comes up with brilliant ideas at 3 a.m., and then doesn't want to come in early the next day. You offer a couple of ways to approach that request.

The short answer is, you honor his request. You have something to gain from it, he has proven results, and he's not abusing the situation. But the issue is his coworkers. A weak manager would say, "If I let you come in late, I have to let everybody come in late." No, you don't. You educate coworkers about the reasons why Circadian Charlie needs this schedule and how he has earned the trust. Say, "If you want to work at 3 a.m. and show me the results, we'll talk about creating a similar schedule for you." Some jobs can't be done at 3 a.m., but creative thinking

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can be. You've got to be firm with your people in saying, "We're flexible when it's productive and justified."

There are other approaches you can take with Circadian Charlie that will help maintain group morale. You can make him an independent contractor, for instance.

Yes. If his schedule was really becoming an insurmountable challenge to the organization, you might put him on as a contract employee. That way, he doesn't have the same work rules as full-time employees do. Charlie may like that better anyway.

Discuss the five-step progression you outline for cultivating high-performing weirdos: Individualism, Independence, Information, Incentives, and Innovation.

First, to capitalize on individualism, you have to embrace it. The independence follows from that—these high-performing weirdos just want to get their assignments and be left alone. It means giving people enough trust so they can be truly independent within an organization. It's a free-agent mindset. And if we have high trust, we also want greater sharing of information. Instead of a "need-to-know" culture, you want a "want-to-know" culture where people can attend meetings outside their department, etc. The way to make all this happen is through incentives. I don't just mean compensation, but perks, privileges, prerogatives, recognition, and rewards. With the right incentives, information, and independence, these individuals will be very innovative.

In terms of incentives, you contend weirdos are highly likely to be motivated by nonmonetary rewards such as trophies and public recognition. They crave that validation of their genius, so play to their vanity.

No question about it. And those things don't cost a lot of money. So many weak managers think the only thing they've got to work with when it comes to motivating people is the salary budget. But that's the least motivating thing, if you think


about it. On a day-to-day basis, it's the recognition that gets you charged up.

To get your weirdos on board with a project, you recommend allowing them to see for themselves the reasons why you're asking them to do certain things. It's not bad to say, "Joe, here's what I want you to do, and here's why I want you to do it." But it's better to lay out the issue until Joe exclaims, "Here's why we need to do this!"

Lead them to the water. Most managers don't do that because they think it takes too long. But it doesn't take any longer to do it over than to get people on board and doing it right the first time. If it's my idea, you don't have to sell it to me. I'll be motivated to do it. But if I'm just told to do something and it's your idea, I'll find every reason to blockade it, even though it may be the right plan. That's particularly true with high-performing weirdos, who always think they know better than you do.

The rank-and-file often resent those high performers. But conversely, the weirdos also resent low performers. You say organizations should take a clue from that.

You're trying to create a culture of high performance. You're still going to have some good, solid performers who may not be the Einsteins and the Edisons. But you need to recognize that your Einsteins and Edisons are going to be a little arrogant. Don't stifle that, or you'll also stifle the value in those people.

When you do start creating a culture of Einsteins and Edisons, those frictions start taking care of themselves. If you bring a dolt into a room full of geniuses, the dolt is not going to last long. Our goal is to find the right place in the organization for everybody, and that so-called dolt is likely just in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong skills. The goal is for as many people as possible to tap their natural weirdness by figuring out what they really do well, what they really love to do, and what they can get paid to do. Find a job where those three things intersect, and everybody wins. 

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