7 traits of a high-performing employee

A high-performing employee is the type of person everyone wants on their team. Though the specifics of what make up a high-performer may vary slightly depending on your organization or field—what doesn't change is the characteristics that set a high-performing employee apart from the rest.

Most people would say that a high-performing employee is one who exceeds expectations, demonstrates exceptional skills, and makes significant contributions to their team. But when it comes to it, what *exactly* is a high-performer made of?

In this blog post, we'll explore the key traits of a high-performing employee. This will not only help you identify high-performers when making hiring decisions, but more importantly, help nurture these skills in your existing team members so *everyone* can be considered a high-performer.

What makes for a high-performing employee?

There are eight essential traits every high-performing employee possesses. We'll dig deeper into each of these

throughout this post.

Accountability

When your team members have a strong sense of purpose at work, they're more likely to take ownership of their role and responsibility to achieve success—which is the foundation for what a high-performer is made of. While this is a natural skill for some, most [workplace accountability](#) stems from leaders taking the time to develop it in their workforces.

To develop accountable employees, managers and employees must work together to establish clear lines of responsibility to ensure everyone has a strong idea of what they own. Without accountability at work, the lines between roles and responsibilities get blurred, resulting in unmet expectations and broken commitments. High-performing employees hold themselves accountable for their work, ultimately benefiting the overall team's success.

Accountable employees tend to ask leaders and peers questions like:

- How can I better support you in your work?
- What could I have done better to help you achieve your goals?
- Have I communicated clearly?
- How could I improve as a collaborator and team player?
- Have I applied feedback you've given effectively?
- How does my work impact your work?
- What do you think are my strengths and weaknesses, and how can I improve?
- What feedback do you have for me on how I can be a more effective teammate?
- Is there anything I can do to better support you and the team?

This allows them to maintain strong relationships and achieve the goals set out as part of their role.

Self-awareness

There are two key reasons why self-awareness goes hand-in-hand with high-performance. When a person is aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, it helps them define their role within a team. They're confident in their areas of expertise, but know where they'll need to seek the support of others to get the job done and fill in the gaps. (This is what they mean when they say [hire people smarter than you](#)).

Self-aware employees also have a greater understanding of their impact on others. When employees recognize how they affect their peers, they're more likely to adjust their efforts to be more helpful towards them.

Fostering self-awareness means having:

- More empathy for what might be driving the decisions and reactions of those around you
- Better business results from decisions and relationships rooted more in thoughtfulness and less in impulsiveness or selfishness
- An improved focus on everyone your decisions impact, from your bosses to your subordinates to customers and prospects
- More persistence and confidence to work through problems when they arise
- A strong example for coworkers to be self-reflective

Collaborativeness

Collaborativeness is a key trait of [high-performing employees](#), and it centers around the ability to work effectively with others towards common goals. A high-performing employee

recognizes that a collective effort of the team leads to better results than working in isolation, and welcomes new perspectives, knowing that different viewpoints lead to more innovative solutions.
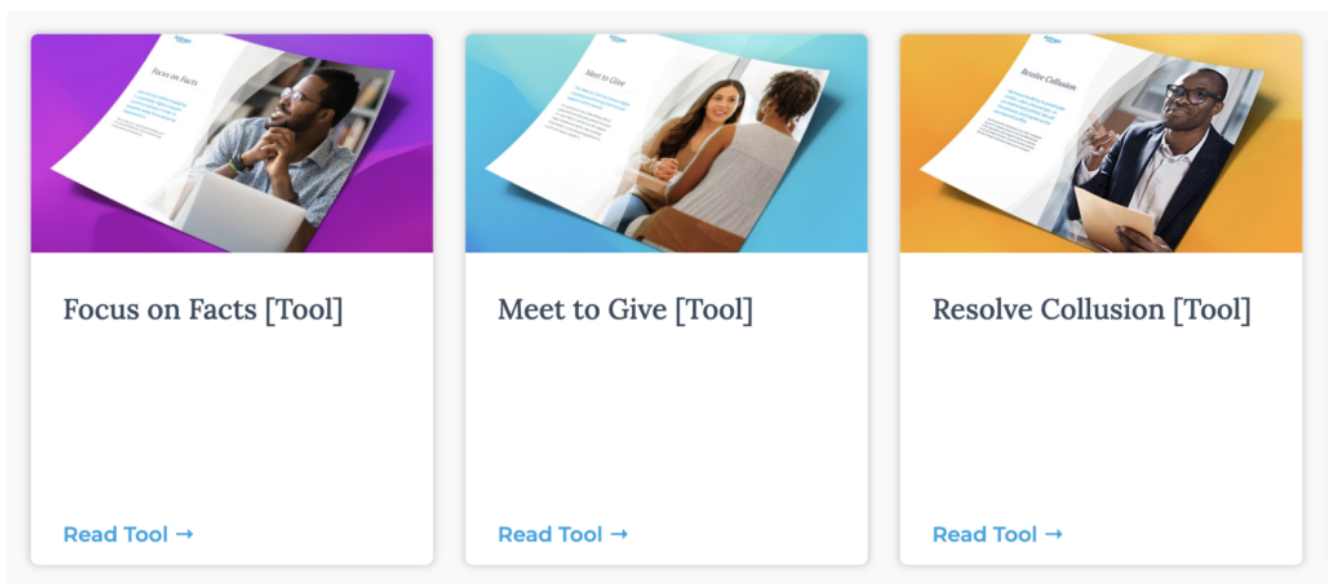
A true high-performing employee puts a premium on authenticity and interpersonal relationships, as building strong connections with others is the key to achieving goals together. After all, positive relationships made by collaborating with others can help us maximize the time we have at work to make us significantly more productive.

Take a look at this short video to see how high-performing employees at Outfit7 accelerated collaboration:

Communication

Communication is arguably one of the most important workplace skills—and it's certainly one that all high-performers excel at. Clear communication aids in everything from setting expectations, working through challenges, managing resources, building trust, and so much more.

While some people are naturally effective communicators, it's a skill that's important to continuously evolve. A high-performer is able to recognize that they're never "done" developing a skill, and may encounter situations that challenge their ability to communicate effectively. For leaders looking to nurture this skill in their employees, we'd suggest enabling them with [tools and frameworks](#) to help operationalize communication. Below are some examples of tools that can help in an employee's day-to-day communications. Click through to download them for yourself.

Focus on Facts [Tool]

Read Tool →

Meet to Give [Tool]

Read Tool →

Resolve Collusion [Tool]

Read Tool →

Adaptability

Take a minute to think of the top performers you've worked with in your career. How did they respond to change?

Another commonality all high-performing employees share is the ability to adapt and effectively pivot. Adaptability is a

skill that can be learned, and it starts with getting curious. Rather than immediately resisting or challenging something new, high-performing employees take the time to ask questions and evaluate different perspectives. They understand that in the working world, change is a constant, and fighting against it is unproductive for everyone involved.

Nurturing adaptability in employees starts with a shift in mindset. Challenge employees to stop and ask themselves, "How would I approach this challenge with an open mind? How would I act differently? What questions would I ask? What would I do?" While it can be tempting for even the highest performing employees to react from a place of frustration or disregard, this exercise pushes employees to think differently.

This video about the team at Citrix is a great example of adaptability at work:

Reliability

Being reliable is directly related to trust and dependability—which are both critical to being a high-performer. If team members know they can rely on someone, they're more likely to assign them projects, ask them for help, and trust their feedback. And those are the types of people we want on our teams.

One way to foster reliability is to operationalize check-ins between peers. Having regular check in time with one another not only helps us understand our impact, but also helps us identify where we can do better.

Encourage your team members to check in with their peers and ask these questions:

- What are your biggest challenges right now?
- How have I made your job harder?
- What can I do differently to make your job easier?
- How often should we meet to ensure we're both on track?

Staying on top of the meetings and actioning on any feedback is a great way for employees to showcase their reliability and in turn become high-performers.

Proactivity

Sometimes we work with people who feel like they're so ahead of the curve, it's like they're predicting problems before they happen. Being proactive at work is so closely tied to high-performance because it demonstrates initiative, foresight, and a commitment to driving positive outcomes for the larger team. Proactive employees don't wait for instructions; instead, they anticipate needs, identify opportunities, and take the lead in solving problems.

Proactive employees make for a more efficient and innovative

workplace, as they actively look for ways to improve processes and suggest solutions. But in order to develop this skill in your employees, you need to ensure that you've created a [psychologically safe environment](#) where people feel empowered to ask questions, challenge ways of thinking, and present alternative solutions.

How does mindset impact employee performance?

There is one common characteristic across top performers at work: an [outward mindset](#).

We found that the eight traits of a top performer outlined above consistently correlate to working with an outward mindset. When employees have an outward mindset—seeing others as valuable contributors with their own goals and challenges—it results in a more positive and effective work environment for everyone.

For example, an employee with an outward mindset will likely actively seek ways to support and assist colleagues—recognizing that the collective success of the team is essential. There are plenty of ways to do this, like voluntarily taking on additional tasks to lighten a teammate's workload, or offering support when a colleague is facing something difficult at home. By adjusting their efforts to make the work of others easier, this way of working contributes to a more collaborative atmosphere that enhances not just individual performance, but overall [team performance](#).

This mindset, of course, is [most effective when modeled by leadership](#). Like all of the traits mentioned in this blog post, this mindset is something that can be actively nurtured and developed within every individual, organization-wide. Here's a look at how it starts:

Developing high-performing employees

While some employees are natural top performers, there are also a number of external factors at play that can influence employee behaviors at work—many of which, you as a leader can influence. Take a look at your team and see where you can help nurture employees, and just watch how their performance changes.

For more on how leaders can drive change at their organizations, download a copy of [The Leadership Gold Standard: A Blueprint to Culture Transformation from the Top Down](#).