

**WE SHOULD ALL BE
SERIAL ACHIEVERS**

**(AND THAT DEFINITELY INCLUDES
YOUR EMPLOYEES)**

Jeff Haden

The keynote speaker spent a couple of minutes talking about importance of a relentless drive for perfection.

Then he briefly discussed the need for accountability. Then he spent the next forty minutes talking about the power of focus: Laser-like, Steve Jobs-like focus.

It was hard to disagree. Focus is important.

Still, I realized I would retain very little of what the speaker said. Platitudes are hard to remember. They're even harder to put into practice.

Especially when Venus Williams destroys them.

Even if you aren't a sports fan, you know of Venus Williams. She has been ranked the world's number one tennis player on three separate occasions. She's won seven Grand Slam singles titles. She's won 14 Grand Slam doubles championships. She's a four-time Olympic gold medalist. She's one of the all-time tennis greats.

Clearly her laser-like, Jobs-like focus is the key to her success.



Or not. In fact, she's what I call an "and." She's a serial achiever. While many people assume the path to success lies in focusing on just one thing, Venus has never felt she should focus only on tennis. She can be—and is—a tennis player and an entrepreneur and a designer and a student. She runs two design companies. She designs active-wear and commercial interiors. She's currently working on a Master's in interior architecture.

"To me, that's normal," she told me. "From an early age, I had to figure out how to be amazing at what I did and do well in school at the same time.

"In my home, we weren't allowed just to be athletes. We had to be students. And our dad taught us to be entrepreneurs. We would drive to a tennis tournament somewhere, and he would put in a cassette about buying foreclosure properties. We were 8 and 9 years old and we had to listen to how to make money on foreclosures.

"Obviously, we didn't understand much of it. That didn't really matter, because our dad was trying to establish that mindset of multitasking, of being an entrepreneur, of charting your own path... so for me, trying to excel at multiple things is normal.

"I also realized early on that even the longest athletic careers are actually really short. When you're an athlete, you're 'done' early in life, so I decided to see that not as a limitation but an opportunity. So, I've always been focused on having goals beyond tennis."

Platitudes are hard to remember.
They're even harder to put into practice.

Venus is not alone in embracing multiple goals. Nearly every successful person I interviewed for my book, *The Motivation Myth: How High Achievers Really Set Themselves Up to Win*, sees themselves as an “and”—as a serial achiever. Metallica guitarist Kirk Hammett also produces horror film fan festivals and runs a guitar pedal company. Arnold Schwarzenegger was one of the greatest bodybuilders of all time, then the highest-paid movie star for years, then the governor of California. (How’s that for an unlikely career path?) Dany Garcia, Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson’s partner in 7 Bucks Productions, is a top agent, manager, producer, and bodybuilder.

To most people, “specialization” indicates accomplishment and success, when in fact the opposite is true. You, me, all of us... we’re too good to specialize.

And so are your employees.

In fact, the pursuit of perfection is the enemy, especially on a professional level. The current professional landscape actually values generalists over specialists. Change occurs quickly. Skills that are valued today are obsolete tomorrow.

Managers can’t just be good at managing a certain function; they need to be good leaders. Employees can’t just be good at performing a certain function; they need to embrace an entrepreneurial mind-set and constantly reinvent themselves.

When specific knowledge is more and more a commodity—and it is, because information is more widely available than ever—the people who can synthesize and blend and apply a broad base of skills to a variety of functions and problems are the people who are most valued. That’s why none of your employees should be just one “thing.” Each possesses a variety of skills. And they can all possess a number of new skills—if you help them develop those skills.

No matter how successful they are in one pursuit, your employees have other skills they would enjoy developing and using. Regardless of how fulfilling a current business job may be, they all have other things they would enjoy doing too—especially if they got paid to do them. For your employees, that's a genuine win-win.

And it is for you as well, because your business is changing. Aside from how your industry and market is evolving, as your company grows, your employees will need new skills, new perspectives, new attitudes... and you'll definitely need new leaders.

In short, you'll need people who are serial achievers: Capable of doing this well today, then that well next year, then that well in five years...

While you should absolutely maintain a clear focus on your company's one or two most important goals, where your employees are concerned, stop trying to create an environment of laser-like, Jobs-like focus. That may be sufficient for today; it won't work next year. Take the steps that allow your employees to describe themselves as an "and," either now or in the near future.

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How?

Start giving them:

Greater freedom. Best practices can create excellence, but every task doesn't deserve a best practice or a micro-managed approach. (Yes, even you, fast food industry.)

Autonomy and latitude breed engagement and satisfaction. Latitude also breeds innovation. Even manufacturing and heavily process-oriented positions have room for different approaches.

Whenever possible, give your employees the freedom to work the way they work best. That will not only make them more productive today, it will allow them to develop skills they can put to use tomorrow.

Better targets. Goals are fun. We are all—yes, even you—at least a little competitive, if only with ourselves. Targets create a sense of purpose and add a little meaning to even the most repetitive tasks.

Without a goal to shoot for, work is just work. And work is boring.

A real mission. We all like to feel a part of something bigger. Striving to be worthy of words like “best” or “largest” or “fastest” or “highest quality” provides a sense of purpose.

Let employees know what you want to achieve, for your business, for customers, and even your community. And if you can, let them create a few missions of their own.

Caring starts with knowing what to care about—and why.

Clearer expectations. While every job should include some degree of latitude, every job needs basic expectations regarding the way specific situations should be handled. Criticize an employee for expediting shipping today, even though last week that was the standard procedure if on-time delivery was in jeopardy, and you lose that employee.

Few things are more stressful than not knowing what your boss expects from one minute to the next.

When standards change, make sure you communicate those changes first. When you can't, explain why this particular situation is different, and why you made the decision you made.

More opportunities to provide input. Everyone wants to offer suggestions and ideas. Deny employees the opportunity to make suggestions, or shoot their ideas down without consideration, and you create robots.

Robots don't care.

Give your employees the freedom to work the way they work best. That will not only make them more productive today, it will allow them to develop skills they can put to use tomorrow.

Make it easy for employees to offer suggestions. When an idea isn't a good fit, take the time to explain why. You can't implement every idea, but you can always make employees feel valued for their ideas.

A real sense of connection. Employees don't want to work for a paycheck; they want to work with and for people.

A kind word, a short discussion about family, a brief check-in to see if they need anything... those individual moments are much more important than meetings or formal evaluations.

Greater consistency. Most people can deal with a boss who is demanding and quick to criticize, as long as he or she treats every employee fairly. (Think of it as the Tom Coughlin effect.)

While you should treat each employee differently, you must treat each employee fairly. (There's a big difference.)

The key to maintaining consistency is to communicate. The more employees understand why a decision was made the less likely they are to assume favoritism or unfair treatment.

A real future. Every job should have the potential to lead to something more, either within or outside your company.

For example, I worked at a manufacturing plant while I was in college. I had no real future with the company. Everyone understood I would only be there until I graduated.

One day my boss said, "Let me show you how we set up our production board."

I raised an eyebrow. Why show me? He said, “Even though it won’t be here, some day, somewhere, you’ll be in charge of production. You might as well start learning now.”

Take the time to develop employees for jobs they someday hope to fill—even if those positions are outside your company. (How will you know what they hope to do? Try asking.) Employees will care about your business when you care about them first – and showing that you care about their futures is a great place to start.

Add all that up, and what does it say about your real job?

If you want to be a great leader, your job is to make every person around you better. Your job is to make every person around you a serial achiever.

No one does anything worthwhile alone, especially great leaders. Leaders are only great when they build great teams—which means making every person on those teams better.

For some employees, that means a little more training. For others, it means more encouragement. For others, it means holding them to higher standards. For others, it means providing opportunities to gain skills and experience.

If you want to be a great leader, your job is to make every person around you better.



Every person is different. That means every person's needs are different.

It's your job to figure out what those needs are, and then deliver.

Take a close look at the people around you. Are they more skilled than when they joined your company or team? More proactive? Better communicators? Better team players? Better leaders? Better performers?

And just as importantly, are they on a path to have better—and more—skills next year? In five years?

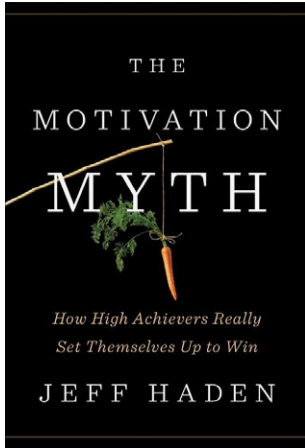
If the answer is no, you aren't doing your job. Great leaders develop every employee. Great leaders make every person around them better.

Great leaders help their employees become serial achievers.

Because when they do... everything else follows. 📌



Info



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Jeff Haden is Inc.com's most popular columnist and one of LinkedIn's most widely-followed Influencers. His work has also appeared on *Time*, *The Huffington Post*, *Fast Company*, *Business Insider*, *Entrepreneur*, Yahoo! Small Business, MSNBC, and CNBC.

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