

Prima Donnas at Work



BY GREG SCHINKEL

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Do you have some employees or co-workers who think of themselves as extra special, indispensable and untouchable? Their superior attitude often ticks off the people who work with them. Should you knock them down a peg, belittle them or feed their insatiable ego?

Employees and co-workers with superior attitudes see the world revolving around them and expect everyone else to bow down and kiss up (or kiss butt) to get something done. While saying "pretty please with sugar on top" might be nice, it really shouldn't be necessary to get the person to do their job.

A misguided view

Often the prima donna forgets that his or her job function exists to support another job function. A classic example in a manufacturing plant is that the maintenance department will act as though they are doing production a favour by fixing something that is broken down. In fact the maintenance department's customer is production. They are supposed to keep the line running and improve flow and cycle time.

Tool makers can get prima donna complex because they are called in for their expertise in solving a particular problem that others can't fix.

In the office, a prima donna might work in accounting, reception, engineering, sales, marketing or quality. The prima donna is often a good performer who has let his or her special talents inflate the ego instead of focusing on serving others.

Managers are reluctant to address this behaviour because they are lulled into a sense of complacency and fear a backlash. Plus the manager likes the work done by the person. Overall performance is usually less than it could be because the prima donna doesn't share information or expertise very well, preferring instead to use it as a competitive advantage.

Reflection Questions

Who are the prima donnas in your work group? How does this behaviour impact you as the boss or co-worker? How does the work group or organization as a whole suffer because of this need for special treatment and ego stroking?

What NOT to do

- Knock them down a peg. It really isn't helpful to criticize or point out the person's flaws or jump with glee when they make a mistake.
- Over inflate the ego. While it's positive to provide praise, avoid saying, "You're the best!", "We couldn't do it without you!", "Too bad everyone else can't be more like you!"
- Ignore them. Prima donnas, despite their bravado often act the way they do to attract attention, both good and bad. Ignoring them can cause the behaviour to get worse.

Action Items

- List the destructive consequences of having prima donnas in the workgroup.
- Recognize that low self esteem might be behind this behaviour. The person may be compensating for a feeling of inadequacy by acting superior.
- Point out the specific behaviours (in private) that you want the person to stop doing. In many cases the person is likely unaware of how they are perceived.
- Remind the individual who the customer is, their role in supporting the customer (internal or external) and that the overall success depends not on his or her individual talents but the overall capability of the group.

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