

Give Your Top Talent the Axe

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There's an old saw about two people chopping wood. One person remains steadfast on task; the other seems to disappear and takes frequent breaks. After a few hours, the individual who never stopped chopping has a pile only half the size of the other. How can this be? When asked how his pile came to be twice as high with so many breaks from work, the expert chopper replied, "Those were not breaks, I was sharpening my axe." When the best of the best in your organization have an axe to grind, opportunities for growth may be close at hand.

Some of the most celebrated executives err on the side of keeping key employees on task. Astute leaders, however, must be vigilant about talent and need to recognize when, how and why high performers sharpen their axes. Sometimes, talent takes very public and purposeful breaks. Companies eager to grow their talent bench must make adequate preparations to accommodate an empty seat every now and then.

In July of 2007, Barbara Frittoli opted out of performing her role as Tatyana in the Chicago Lyric Opera's production of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. She felt unready to deliver a peak performance. Two months later, Ms. Frittoli received a standing ovation for her debut at the opening concert of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In 2005, Dave Chappelle walked away from a reported mega-million deal with Comedy Central and elected to spend time traveling the world. He stated that he had never fully mourned the death of his father years earlier. By 2007, Mr. Chappelle performed at The Laugh Factory and established a comedy set record with over six hours of continuous joke telling. By many accounts, it was a phenomenal set. In 1967, after refusing on religious and moral grounds to step forward to officially report for induction into the military, the stellar boxing career of Mohammed Ali was idled and he was stripped of his championship title. Mr. Ali spent the next three-and-a-half years lecturing on the Vietnam War and his convictions. After a favorable Supreme Court ruling, he returned to the ring to defeat George Foreman and regain the title in the "Rumble in the Jungle."

Top talent takes reasoned breaks: when not on the stage, in the ring or at the office, high performers can be found practicing, pondering and even preaching. Sure, we all benefit when high performers go chopping. But, there is promise when our talented players exit to grind away, only to return with a much sharper game.

Leaves of absence (LOA), sabbaticals, and vacations are conventional and useful human resource tools for those in need of freshening up. However, these institutionalized absences are often policy-driven and organizationally timed. In contrast, Frittoli, Chappelle and Ali honed their respective axes in a season of their own choosing, and in a manner most personally suited their talents and needs. Top talent is self-sharpening – often away from both woodpile and workplace. For certain high performers who opt to "go missing," an LOA is the opportunity to express the sentiment: Love Our Axes. Our recommendation is to give them the axe and embrace their absence as time well worth the (often mutual) rewards.

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