

In Search of Staying Power

The challenge of sustaining high executive performance

By Tom Nash

It is one thing to reach the top in today's challenging business world – but it is another to stay there. Now, recent research points to a winning formula for sustaining high executive performance.

In 2013, *Developing Leaders* ran a feature on the work of Dr Christian Marcolli, a Swiss performance coach who had developed P⁶PROP, a new leadership performance model that was proving popular with blue chip clients.

Five years on, Marcolli and his colleagues at leadership development consultancy Marcolli Executive Excellence (MEE) have collected a wealth of data from their proprietary P⁶PROP program that casts new light on the challenge of sustaining high executive performance. Analysis of the data shows that lasting high performers are marked out by three particular characteristics:

The strength of their 'passion' – their overwhelming desire and commitment to fulfil a clear purpose

- Their hunger for constructive feedback on their performance, particularly from their immediate manager
- Their willingness and, more importantly, their ability to transform that feedback into improvement through 'deliberate actions'.

A key implication of the findings is that organizations are making a fundamental error when it comes to identifying and nurturing their top-performing executives. As Marcolli explains, "Organizations love to classify executives based almost purely on above-average or 'overperformance'. But looking at overperformance alone doesn't tell them if it can be maintained. If it's not delivered in a sustainable, healthy way, it takes its toll and can stall a career. In the worst case, overperformance can kill an individual in the long term."



Marcolli is referring to the kind of stressful, high-pressure corporate culture that relentlessly inflicts long hours, unhealthy lifestyles and strained relationships on high-flyers, and causes some of them to reach their “melting point” – the point at which they can no longer cope and they display dysfunctional behaviours that ultimately damage their performance. “Many short-term over-achievers deliver extraordinary performance at the cost of their own needs,” he says. “They put their work and career first to such an extent that it’s impossible for them to establish healthy routines and stable networks to allow them to recover, refresh their creativity and further grow their performance capabilities.”

Marcolli maintains that many organizations do not realize that their most valuable top talents are not simply those that are outperforming at present, but those that will continue to outperform for the long term, while displaying the three above-mentioned characteristics. “There needs to be much more careful differentiation between high-performing executives,” he says. “Crucially, your real business champions build in specific actions to achieve sustainability at the highest level, so they can continue to outperform.”

The message for leaders and senior managers is that they should invest time and energy in specifically supporting their best executives, rather than taking their performance for granted and spending most of their ‘people time’ with lower-performing individuals in the organization. As passion is so important for these individuals, failure to provide them with favourable conditions means that, sooner or later, they will leave and find somewhere else to express themselves fully and fulfil their potential.

According to Marcolli, sustainable high performers need an enlightened manager who is willing to support them “cognitively, emotionally and instrumentally” – investing time in them, providing them with high impact tasks, and offering them proper development

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programs, and personal coaching, mentoring and “sparring” (testing their ideas and abilities through rigorous challenge). Such steps will help retain their long-term loyalty. “These people know their value and will look for opportunities elsewhere if they don't get the feedback and support they want and need to thrive and rise higher in the organization,” he adds.

Passion for performance

Marcolli's own passion for understanding optimal performance was sparked when injury forced his early retirement from professional football in the 1990s. He studied for a PhD in Applied Psychology from the University of Zurich, completing training in Sport and Performance Psychology at the University of Ottawa. In 1997 he founded MEE to specialize in leadership development and team effectiveness. He subsequently achieved certification as a mental training consultant and went on to work with top athletes (including tennis icon Roger Federer), business leaders and leadership teams around the world, helping them achieve and maintain high performance, often in challenging conditions. By 2010, he had developed P⁶PROP.

The P⁶PROP program teaches high-flyers how to reach their peak, and sustain it, by looking after themselves holistically. The 'PROP' stands for Personal Resource Optimizing Performance, and the P⁶ refers to six P-components that Marcolli has identified as an individual's critical success factors: passion, precision, perception, peace, presence and persistence. By strengthening the six 'P's, executives can better maintain their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, and build up and protect important relationships at work and at home. In practice, this means, for example, strategically addressing issues such as exercise, diet and sleep, and managing the successful integration of their personal and professional lives.

A key part of the program is thoroughly assessing an executive's current all-round state of personal leadership. Marcolli and his team have developed a remarkably comprehensive package of diagnostic tools to do it. They include:

- The P⁶PROP Inventory – a detailed questionnaire that helps participants understand their strengths and weaknesses, and their potential to perform at their best under given circumstances. The Inventory is also completed by a more objective third party – usually the participant's manager – who knows the executive well enough to offer reliable input
- The Passion Storyboard – a personal story-telling tool to define a participant's purpose and vision, key elements for inspirational leadership
- The Life Management Survey – which aims to make a participant's top professional performance sustainable by harmonizing it with the other key aspects of their life
- The Executive Performance Melting Point Inventory – which focuses on managing a participant's coping mechanisms to increase their resilience when under pressure
- A state-of-the-art health and fitness test – a scientifically rigorous assessment that includes analysis of body composition (BMI, body fat etc), energy levels, sleep patterns and time management.

Strategically addressing issues such as exercise, diet and sleep, and managing the successful integration of their personal and professional lives

The information gleaned from these techniques forms the basis for an executive development program to provide long-term personal direction, with ongoing monitoring of progress.

Robust research

MEE's research base consists of clean data from 539 middle and high-ranking executives, representing the majority of participants who have been through the P⁶PROP program over the past eight years. "This is rich data because we run small, in-depth programs," says Marcolli. "We know these individuals personally, we know a lot about them, and we've tracked them over a long period of time."

The data shows that 9% of the executives exhibit all three critical characteristics – strong passion and purpose, desire for feedback on their performance, and the implementation of positive actions as a result. The participants' managers more or less corroborate this figure – identifying 10% of participants as possessing these traits. Marcolli expands: "There are recent management and business books that claim as few as 2% of an organization's managers and leaders make a real difference. That's a tiny number and it seems to lack empirical validation. The figure of 9-10% based on our research is more plausible."

It is also more optimistic. "Companies clearly have something to work with," he says. "But first they need to change their herd instinct and look beyond the classical tool of year-end appraisals as their sole guide to future success or potential to take on a more challenging role."

He adds, "Some organizations try to take an enlightened approach to talent management. Some have embraced the concept of agility, and started to use this to score executives – but often they do it intuitively, they do it badly, and they don't do it enough."

In contrast, P⁶PROP aims to offer them a comprehensive development structure to improve performance levels sustainably, complete with measures of an executive's passion and purpose, desire for feedback, and willingness and ability to make improvements.

Beneficial outcomes

MEE has run dozens of programs over the past eight years, generally consisting of 8-12 senior decision-makers or 'high potentials' from one company. The small size of the groups is important, allowing participants to be monitored individually and offered personalized coaching. Numerous executives testify that the program works (see boxes), while MEE's analysis of past participants shows that they have significantly more energy, are much more engaged outside work, and know better what routines allow them to completely recover in stressful periods. The majority of executives initiate at least one 'good habit' following the program – such as getting the correct, individually calibrated amount of sleep, doing state-of-the-art cardio-aerobic training, or taking deliberate actions to manage relationships better at work and at home.



MEE's evidence supports the view that P⁶PROP is not a short-term fix. Its positive outcomes are maintained regardless of how much time has elapsed since participation in the program, showing its lasting benefits. Over 80% of executives consider the program to have made "a significant contribution to their ability to sustain high performance". A similar proportion says it has made "a significant contribution to their personal health, fitness and wellbeing", and that it has helped them to "harmonize their professional life with their private life". Many participants have won promotion in the wake of the program, and invariably they credit their ability to sustain high performance to it.

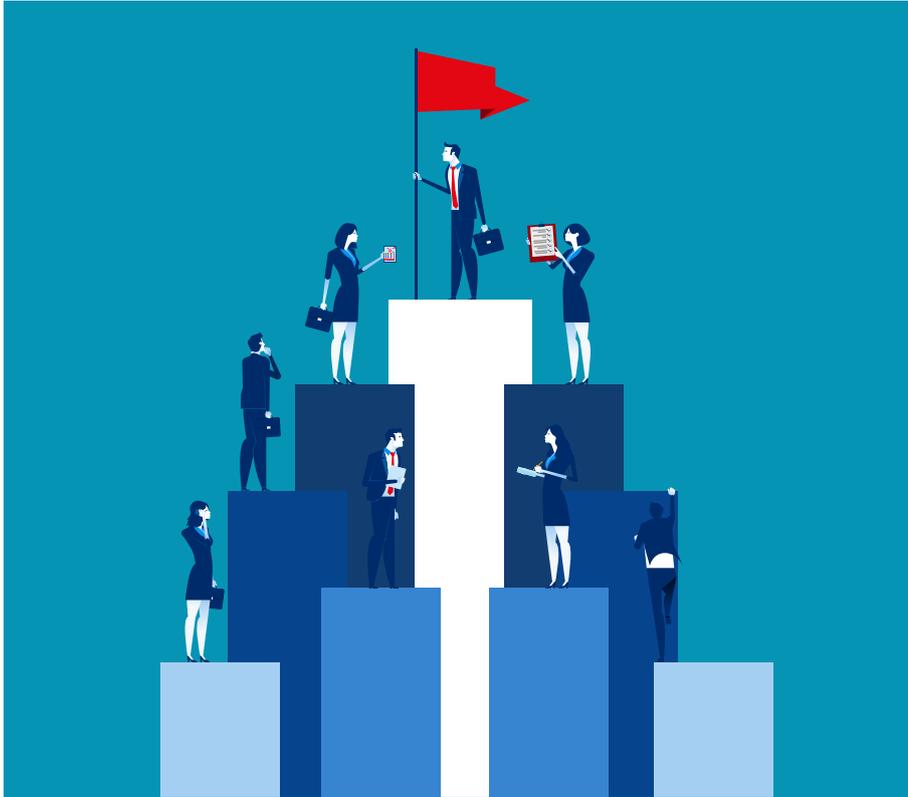
Marcolli sums up: "It's all about being able to identify your true top performers – the 9% with 'champion potential' – and keep them fit and firing, avoiding things like disengagement, chronic frustration or even breakdown. It's about keeping them in the organization and making sure they can deliver long term."

Case study 1] Lucia's story

I was only 28 when I was promoted to head a department in a new country. I didn't have a lot of leadership experience and suddenly I had a group of 120 people in a very different culture from what I'd been used to. I was in a very stressful situation.

I had quite a challenging background. My family had moved to a different country every few years, so I had had difficulties building up lasting relationships. And my father pushed me very hard to do well at school. On the positive side, it made me very independent. But the dangerous thing was that I was incredibly tough, even brutal, on myself.

I would transmit these expectations onto my team and my organization – good was never good enough. Through the program I learned to understand my background and what might be driving my behaviour. I was able to reflect and see things I didn't see before. This really helped me get to know myself better and build my self-confidence.



Although I was very adaptable and independent, I was a little disconnected externally – perhaps rather lonely. I became aware I was lacking deep connections and learned to be more relaxed with other people – going for lunch, building a rapport – a combination of small things.

We also did a lot of work around how I could lead my own family – how much energy did I have left for those people who are on my side and deserve something back? When I was going home, instead of remaining completely in my work mode, I adopted efficient rituals on how to transition, to consciously think, “I’m no longer at work now, I’m at home and I’m switching off”.

I’m not going to change my character – I’m a high-energy person, I tend to push myself. But I know when I’m in my ‘red zone’, if I can put it like that. Sometimes I still land in the red zone but I don’t crash. I say to myself, “Now I have to do something – how am I eating, how am I exercising, and how much time am I taking just time for me?” I start my routines again and I get my balance back.

A key element in this personal transformation has been the support of my manager. He not only prompted me to do the program, but keeps on checking in with me to see how far I am applying the behaviours to continuously be at my best. It is crucial to me to know that he is committed to me performing well in a sustainable, healthy way.

The program truly changed me. I’m a better leader because I’m happier in myself and this is transmitted to the people I work with. Now, I’m not just obsessed by my level of performance, but love what I’m doing. I’m proud of what I’ve achieved and I have confidence that I can bring a lot of value if I’m happy. I have a clear idea of where I want to be – and this clarity is incredibly helpful.

Case study 2] Carl’s story

There was a particular phase in my career where I felt I was trapped in a hamster wheel because of high intensity at work and the demands of being a single parent. I was managing to perform well at work and my children were doing well, but I couldn’t go on like that, feeling continuously exhausted, physically and mentally.

Through the program I learned to understand my background and what might be driving my behaviour

First, the program helped me understand my value to my organization. I saw that I was too much of a 'pleaser'. I had a boss who was driving me hard. I got on well with him and he was motivating me, but he was the kind of boss who would not stop asking for as much as possible from me. I was not able to say, "Up to here OK, but no further." I learned that pushback, communicated in a clear and constructive way, was possible and accepted. I became more self-assured, able to demonstrate my value and experience, and able to draw lines without getting a negative reaction.

Second, I learned the importance of good habits. I didn't know how to get out of that hamster wheel, while still keeping my performance at a certain level and being able to really fulfil my expectations and those of my people. I learned routines to enhance both my private and my professional life – such as how to be with my friends and family in an energized way. I was afraid my performance would suffer if, for example, I regularly went jogging for an hour. But it was the other way around – my performance was actually better.

The third issue was how to handle my family affairs. I discovered how I could include the kids more in my thinking and become a better leader of the family. We had some serious talks to clarify our roles and expectations, which I hadn't consciously done before. We enhanced family life by introducing some new routines – so we always had Sunday night 'family meetings' to talk about what they wanted to do in the upcoming week, how I could help, and what my wishes and concerns were.

The fourth issue was helping me build the effectiveness of my team, getting people working together with common values and goals. That ultimately led to the fifth issue, which was securing the senior executive job I have today. I clarified my profile, so I showed my strengths and ensured I got the networking right – explaining my credentials without overselling myself.

Now, I also have a manager who makes all the difference. I would call him 'enlightened'. He is hungry for success, but generous with the feedback I need to achieve new goals. His willingness to support me is the foundation for my further transformation and development as a leader.

I couldn't have carried on the way I was before. Now, in times of stress, I know what my 'derailers' are and I know how to deal with them. For example, one of my huge derailers was to micro-manage. Obviously, with 600 people reporting to you, this is a clear path to failure. But I have learned how stress factors can feed my tendency to micromanage, and I understand that, while I will always have this tendency, I know how to handle it now.

Today, I'm happy with the way my professional and private life is going. I am a more effective leader, successful in my role, and more content and fulfilled overall.

(Names have been changed)