

The Care and Feeding (and Firing?) of a Prima Donna

By Danny Cox

Prima donnas come in all shapes and sizes. They can be managers, sales persons, secretaries, assembly line workers, or anything in between. No matter who they are, they present a challenge. More than anything else, prima donnas like to complain about other people's work or personal habits. If anyone tries to coach them about their own shortcomings, the result is intense resistance. They don't want to hear about any problems they might have. Most of all, they never consider the possibility that they are a problem.

Here's the five-step prima donna process:

Step One. The most effective way to manage a prima donna is to engage him or her in a discussion about his or her strengths. They love to talk about how good they are. As they give you a glorious account of how they will increase sales, production, or whatever, take notes. Ask him or her to commit to a date when these great wonders will be accomplished. Have the goals and the dates for accomplishment written up for the person and pledge your support to his or her progress. Promise to check in along the way to make sure that deadlines are being met, especially the deadline for completion. In a way you are using the individual's own arrogance to ensure that s/he performs instead of merely talking.

Step Two. If the prima donna is part of a project team, the negative influence is multiplied. It becomes important to make sure that the prima donna commits to deadlines and productivity benchmarks. This way managing the prima donna can actually help the rest of the team to plan and accomplish their tasks in the appointed amount of time. You can also prevent some major dissent and disruption that the prima donna could create.

Step Three. Pick your battles. If something is not very important, don't go to the mat for it. A prima donna can make almost anything a battle if you allow it. Sometimes discretion is the better part of valor. You need to have enough self-confidence to let the prima donna think s/he has won a victory or two along the way. As a leader, you need to concern yourself with winning the war more than getting entangled in minor skirmishes. Remember, though, minor skirmishes can lead to major battles if you don't keep your finger on the pulse of a situation.

Step Four. Know your facts. Prima donnas are usually very well informed. If you get into a dispute with a prima donna, s/he will jump all over any misinformation you might have and make you eat your words. As Kenny Rogers sang, "You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em." You don't need to inflate an already over-inflated ego by letting him or her stomp you flat in an argument where s/he has better facts. Setting up a prima donna to win an argument with the boss doesn't do much for pumping up your image in the eyes of other team members. The team members know when the prima donna has won, even if you try to pull rank and declare yourself the winner.

Step Five. Fire the prima donna. There comes a time when a leader has to make a judgment. If the prima donna is truly not manageable, despite your best efforts, and is a detriment to organizational productivity and success, you need to protect the hard-working, dedicated people in the company. Sometimes the best way to do that is through termination. As we said back in the Ozark hill country where I grew up, "You can't teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and irritates the pig."

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