
SCOT CHISHOLM

A FOUNDER GUIDE

Why Top Performers Leave

7 reasons you're losing your top performers.
The real, often hidden red flags.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- 7 warning signs that push A-players out
- The fix for each one
- A retention review you can run this week

Great leaders are made, not born.

A-players don't just "quit."

As a founder in the trenches for 20+ years, I've seen my fair share of A-players come and go. Most assume that star employees leave because of compensation or career advancement reasons. For some, yes, but for the majority, the answer is no.

In this post, I'm going to share 7 reasons you're losing your top performers. These are the real, often hidden red flags...

01 FOR FOUNDERS

Spot the leadership habits that quietly push your stars out the door.

02 FOR MANAGERS

Turn each warning sign into a concrete coaching conversation.

A-players are the lifeblood of your organization.

They set the standard for performance and inspire others to up their game.

Bad managers

Nothing sends an A-player running for the hills faster than a micromanager. Top performers thrive on autonomy and trust. They wither under constant scrutiny and second-guessing.

But it's not just micromanagement. A-players also need training to sharpen their skills, clear direction on goals and expectations, and regular coaching to reach their full potential.

If their manager doesn't meet this need, don't be surprised when your star starts looking for greener pastures. A-players are driven by growth and continuous improvement. They want to work for leaders who are invested in their development, not just their output.

THE FIX

- Ensure every manager is equipped to be an A-player coach, not just a taskmaster.
- Provide management training, set clear expectations, and deal swiftly with bad apples.
- Regularly assess your management team — are they providing the guidance, resources, and feedback their teams need to excel?

Very often, people leave managers, not companies. Invest in your leaders, and you'll keep your stars.

Lack of purpose

Top performers aren't motivated solely by a paycheck. They need to understand and believe in the company's deeper "why."

If you haven't painted a vivid picture of your purpose, don't be shocked when A-players start to feel like just another cog in a soulless, money-driven machine. Inspiration turns to apathy, and soon they're updating their resume.

The antidote is to frequently reinforce your mission and help each team member connect it to their own sense of purpose. A-players will run through walls when they're chasing meaning, not just dollars.

But it's not enough to just state your mission once and expect it to stick. You must weave it into the fabric of your company. Talk about it in all-hands meetings. Celebrate customer wins and projects that embody it. Constantly connect the dots between daily work and the bigger picture.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- When A-players feel a deep sense of purpose, they'll pour their heart and soul into their work.
- They'll go above and beyond because they're emotionally invested in the outcome.
- Strip away that meaning, and you'll strip away their motivation along with it.

A-players will run through walls when they're chasing meaning, not just dollars.

Pointless work

Star players need to see a clear distinction between their daily tasks and overall impact. They thrive on meaty challenges that move the company forward. They long for the strategic context that helps them connect their day-to-day to the bigger picture.

If an A-player's workload starts to fill up with meaningless minutiae, don't be surprised if they start picking up that recruiter phone call. They'll begin to wonder if their talents could be put to better use elsewhere.

To keep them engaged, ensure every project has a 'why' attached to it. Treat them like the CEO of their domain and empower them to prioritize high-impact work. That's how you reignite the spark you saw when you hired them.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- A-players aren't just doers; they're problem solvers.
- They want a challenge, not just a bunch of boxes to check.

Treat them like the CEO of their domain and empower them to prioritize high-impact work.

Career stagnation

High-performers are always focused on what's next. They have a long-term vision for their career trajectory. If they can't see a path to get there at your company, they'll look for it elsewhere.

The first step is simply asking. Regularly discuss their career goals and map out ways to achieve them.

But career growth isn't just about moving up the ladder. It's also about expanding their scope of influence and impact. Look for opportunities for them to lead cross-functional projects, take on stretch assignments, or mentor junior team members.

CREATE GROWTH THROUGH

- Training and workshops to expand their skill set.
- Mentorship programs to connect them with internal leaders.
- Transparent promotion pathways to keep them progressing.

A-players are lifelong learners. If they feel like they're stagnating, they'll seek stimulation elsewhere.

Low compensation (for too long)

A-players are often willing to sacrifice hefty salaries in the short term for outsized rewards later. But their patience isn't infinite. Eventually, they expect their pay to match their output.

But "fair" compensation isn't enough to retain a true star. To keep them from entertaining offers, you need to know their true market worth, pay at or above market value, and consider unique incentives like bonuses or equity.

The equity piece is especially powerful because it ties your A-players into the company's upside. It treats them as a true partner in the business — one that has some risk up front but also one who will be rewarded greatly when the company succeeds.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- If you want to keep top-tier talent, be prepared to shell out top-tier comp.
- They know what they're worth and won't settle for less (indefinitely).

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Poor work-life balance

Burnout is the silent assassin of top talent. A-players are often their own worst enemies, pouring themselves into their work at an unsustainable pace.

As a leader, you must protect your people from themselves. Require employees to take their vacation time. Offer flexible working arrangements. Model work-life balance yourself. Provide self-care resources and support.

This is also about recognizing that your A-players have lives outside of work that need attention, too. Encourage them to pursue their hobbies, spend time with family, and recharge their batteries.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- When you create a culture that values the whole person, not just the employee, you'll foster a deeper sense of loyalty.
- A-players will stick around when they feel like they can bring their whole selves to work and still have gas left in the tank for their personal lives.

Burnout is the silent assassin of top talent.

Lack of feedback & recognition

A-players are always hungry to be the best version of themselves. Since they are constantly learning and pushing themselves, they require feedback on a regular basis.

But it's not the hollow cheerleader stuff; what they really want is specific and actionable feedback to help them improve and hit their goals.

Make feedback a regular part of your one-on-one conversations. Focus not only on what they're doing well but also on where they can improve. Be specific, timely, and actionable. And don't forget to follow up on their progress.

And while they may not admit it, they also appreciate heartfelt recognition for a job well done. They don't seek recognition ALL the time, but a lack of recognition entirely will turn them off for sure.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- When A-players feel seen, heard, and appreciated, they'll double down on their efforts.
- They'll go the extra mile because they know their work isn't going unnoticed.

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Don't wait to do damage control

A-players are the lifeblood of your organization. They set the standard for performance and inspire others to up their game. Losing even one can have a ripple effect across the entire team.

If you spot these warning signs, don't wait to do damage control. Have an honest conversation with your star about what's missing and co-create a plan to fix it.

Be as proactive as you possibly can. This is an area where some healthy paranoia is actually a good thing. It'll be well worth the effort.

YOUR RETENTION REVIEW

01 Who are the A-players you can't afford to lose?

02 Which of the 7 warning signs apply to them right now?

03 What's the one conversation you need to have this week?

Healthy paranoia is actually a good thing.

It'll be well worth the effort.

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