

The Guide to Balancing High Care and High Performance at Work

The tension between caring for employees yet holding them accountable to certain performance standards is one that has become increasingly taut in recent years. We face what seems like a relentless wave of external stressors — a global pandemic, political uprisings, and now the fear of a recession and subsequent job loss looming ominously on the horizon. The list goes on. It can be very difficult for employees to compartmentalize the stressors of life and their work and still have the ability to be focused and productive.

But, from the top down, organizational leaders are still under just as much, if not more, pressure to keep performance high, meet targets, and grow the business. This creates an impasse where leaders find themselves struggling to balance the need for employee care with the need for high performance. Many leaders end up falling into the trap of thinking that high levels of care simply cannot exist in a high performing organization.

Prioritizing employees' feelings and wellbeing seems like a soft, feel-good approach, but how does it impact the numbers? If employees are taking mental health days, how much productivity are we going to lose? At what point do we draw the line and say that mental health issues are not an excuse for continued low performance? These are questions many leaders may be grappling with.

There are also leaders who are deeply convinced that high levels of care are necessary and want to be able to provide that, but find it difficult to manage capacity or prioritize in a way that allows them to do so.

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“We’re experiencing extreme demands for compassion at a time when there’s no room for compromising on outcomes. As a result, many leaders have fallen into the trap of thinking in terms of a binary choice between compassion or performance. They know that both are essential but are finding it hard to drive performance in a way that also maximizes support of their employees.”

**MARK MORTENSEN AND
HEIDI K. GARDNER**
HBR

We need to build capacity for compassion in the workplace — but how?

This guide will cover structures and supports you can put in place in your organization to achieve that balance of high care and high performance and support a team of humans that don’t just survive, but thrive.



Synergistic Prioritization: A Paradigm Shift

The first step of building the capacity for compassion in an organization is understanding that everything comes down to prioritization. With a finite number of hours in the work day, there is only so much time to allot, and oftentimes, encouraging managers and employees to take time away from work tasks to make time for compassion and wellbeing seems counterproductive.

If we view a manager's workload as a wheel full of all their priorities, we imagine that increasing the priority placed on one spoke of the wheel means that all the other spokes of that wheel must shrink to accommodate that change. But this thinking creates a parasitic view of prioritization — that when one area is prioritized, it is at the expense of all other areas.

This thinking is flawed, and pitting wellbeing against performance creates a false dichotomy. Sure, there are some scenarios in which placing more focus on one area may be at the detriment of another area. But in many cases, two priorities can actually have a synergistic relationship, where improvements in one area lead to improvements in another. We'll call this synergistic prioritization.

Understanding that priorities can be synergistic creates a paradigm shift that helps us see the relationship between care and performance in a new light.

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People are coming off years of languishing and burnout, and it is unrelenting but that doesn't mean that we need to give up on accountability or care. We really can choose both.

JEFF SMITH

*VP OF PEOPLE STRATEGY
& INSIGHTS
15FIVE*

To make this synergy sustainable, however, requires structure. Let's walk through some of the structures and systems that can be used to cultivate an environment in which employee wellbeing and the success of the business can rise together.



Make Objectives Objectively Clear

Doing good work requires a careful balance of emotion and logic. Similarly, balancing high care and high performance requires the mental bandwidth needed to operate in both of these areas.

Mental bandwidth is a finite resource, so organizations need to ruthlessly prioritize, and then take away the work that doesn't matter or does not move the organization forward.

A crucial component of freeing up some of that mental bandwidth is eliminating any confusion that may exist around what the business is focused on and what the goals are. At any given time, every single member of the organization should be able to list out what their top priorities are at that moment. This, of course, starts at the top with company-wide goals and objectives, then trickles down to departments, teams, and individual employees. When this trickle down prioritization is in place, employees have a framework for evaluating the importance of any new task or request that comes their way — does this fit into my priorities or objectives?

It also greatly helps managers help their employees manage priorities. In a sense, it greases the tracks for managers to understand what tasks they, or their team members, can deprioritize in order to create more space for wellbeing.

The best way to create this structure of prioritization is to adopt a goal setting methodology that is adopted organization-wide.

At 15Five, we use the [OKR methodology](#), which stands for Objectives and Key Results.

OBJECTIVES

are what the organization or individual wants to accomplish, and are typically qualitative or subjective, ambitious, and time-bound.

KEY RESULTS

are concrete, specific, and measurable. They should describe how you will accomplish the objective and measure whether you are on track, behind, or at risk of accomplishing an objective.

Using OKRs paves the way for organizational alignment, crystal-clear focus, and super engaged teams.



A good goal setting framework will:

- Clarify company and individual objectives with ease
- Allow for goal progress to be tracked in real time
- Help teams and individuals stay on target
- Create space for collaborative goals that engage teams
- Help uncover challenges so they can be quickly addressed
- Motivate everyone to make progress

Having objectives that are objectively clear creates a lot more brain space for employees, managers, and leaders alike to engage with and support the emotional wellbeing of themselves and others.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT 15FIVE'S TOOLS FOR OKRS AND GOAL SETTING.](#)

Operationalize Feedback Touchpoints

Another critical ingredient to finding the balance of high care and high performance is **feedback** — especially feedback between a manager and their direct reports. It is crucial to provide opportunities for managers and employees to regularly touch base, so there are organic opportunities for feedback to occur.

First, how can managers support their employees when they don't know what their employees are struggling with? Acting on assumptions of what employees need is not only ineffective, but can actually be harmful. The best way to find out what someone needs is to ask them.

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Your ability to build trusting, human connections with the people who report directly to you will determine the quality of everything that follows.

KIM MALONE SCOTT,

*RADICAL CANDOR: BE A
KICK-ASS BOSS WITHOUT
LOSING YOUR HUMANITY*



But how often do managers take the time to truly check in with their employees on a personal level, and then adapt their approach to managing and caring for that employee based on their unique needs?

If the answer is “not enough”, don’t jump to blame the managers for this discrepancy. The real problem is likely not that managers simply do not care, but that they do not know how to organically and authentically encourage employees to voice their concerns and what they are struggling with.

A good way to counteract this is to operationalize feedback, perhaps by using a tool like a weekly check-in. This check-in can include questions about progress the employee has made on their priorities, but also include more personal/wellness focused questions such as “Is there anything you are worried about, or anything I can help you with?”

The screenshot displays the 'My Check-ins' interface. At the top, it says 'My Check-ins' and shows the user's name 'Marilyn' with a profile picture, a notification bell, and a settings gear. Below this, there's a section for 'Marilyn Stewart', Sales Director, with a 'Due in 5 days' status. The main part of the interface asks 'How did you feel at work this week?' with a scale from 1 (Awful) to 5 (Amazing!). The number 4 is selected, and a feedback message says 'Smooth and steady! Anything to add?'. Below this is a 'Priorities' section with a list of tasks: 'Set up 10 calls with 10 VPs' (unchecked) and 'Engage with 100 people on LinkedIn' (checked). On the right side, there's a section for 'Sharon Metcalf', Reviewer, with a 'Print' button. At the bottom right, there's a list of 'Marilyn's recent Check-ins' with dates and submission status: 'Sep 15 – Sep 21' (Current), 'Sep 8 – Sep 14' (Submitted on Sep 14), 'Sep 1 – Sep 7' (Submitted on Sep 7), 'Aug 25 – Aug 31' (Not submitted), and 'Aug 18 – Aug 21' (Not submitted).

[Learn more about our check-ins tool](#) that empowers employees to share how they’re really doing with managers — in just 15 minutes.



That being said, it is important that managers do not rely too heavily on one method of feedback. Different data collection methods will yield different types of information, so having multiple touchpoints for getting the pulse of employee sentiment and struggle is ideal. Asynchronous check-ins can be very helpful, but they may not capture the full picture. Having face-to-face conversations creates more opportunity for connection and vulnerability when giving and receiving feedback. On the flip side, only having face to face conversations can be detrimental, as some employees may have higher levels of discomfort with raising certain topics, and may feel safer broaching it first in writing, where the concern or feedback can

be processed privately and thought through before a response is required.

At 15Five, we have a tool for check-ins and a tool for 1-on-1s, because we believe that those two touch points serve different purposes. Nonetheless, having tools for both touchpoints provides support and frameworks for managers to use so that all employees, regardless of manager, can receive the same level of support and care.

[Learn more about 15Five's 1-on-1 tool.](#)

Less Surprises = More (Psychological) Safety

A key portion of this operationalized feedback loop discussed above is ensuring that employees **always** have transparency into how they are performing. An employee's performance level should not be some secretive information that is gathered in private and revealed to them during performance reviews — Surprise! You're significantly underperforming and we're letting you go!

No, employees should always be able to get a sense of how well they are performing. With a universal goal setting methodology and a consistent feedback loop in place, employees are able to know at any

point if they're hitting or missing the mark on what is expected of them, and managers and employees have many opportunities to discuss what is happening if performance appears to be slipping.

This continuous transparency creates a high degree of psychological safety, as employees don't have to live with the constant low-level fear that they're not doing a good job and are at risk of getting fired. Instead, they are equipped with the agency to know exactly what doing a good job looks like at any given



point in time, and they are given the space they need to raise concerns and problem solve with a manager whenever they are falling behind.

While check-ins and 1-on-1s are both great formats to surface questions and concerns about work priorities and performance, we also firmly believe in the power of a more in-depth biannual performance review

cycle. Creating space for a holistic view of an employee's performance is a great way to paint the full picture of how an employee is doing — and showcase all that they have achieved!

[Learn more about 15Five's performance management tools.](#)

Make Transparency the Norm

Speaking of psychological safety, it is a two way street. In order to strike a balance of high care and high performance, two things need to happen. First, as we've discussed, employees must feel comfortable and supported in expressing their concerns and speaking openly about mental health/energy/capacity struggles.

Second, leaders must feel comfortable being honest about the performance demands the organization is facing, and where gaps or threats exist. Adopting a universal goal setting methodology, like the OKR methodology, for example, makes it a lot easier to speak transparently in a language that all team members can understand ("We only accomplished 60% of this OKR").

Leaders can model vulnerability by making it the standard to consistently report on where the company stands performance wise — and not only that, but express emotions about it. If a CEO is feeling energized and optimistic, for example, after a really successful quarter, they should express that. If, on the other hand, the market has been volatile and the performance expectations for the quarter were not met, the CEO should be able to express disappointment or anxiety. Ultimately, leaders should remain positive and constructive, always angling towards solutions rather than simply complaining. But we're all human, and we should be allowed to showcase our humanity regardless of what seniority level we sit at.



Leaders should also create space for employees to react and ask questions in the wake of transparent communication around performance — especially when organizational goals are not being met, or when the leadership is recommending a shift in

priorities. This could mean baking in time for questions after big announcements in all-hands meetings, or encouraging managers to hold team debrief meetings after difficult company announcements or situations.

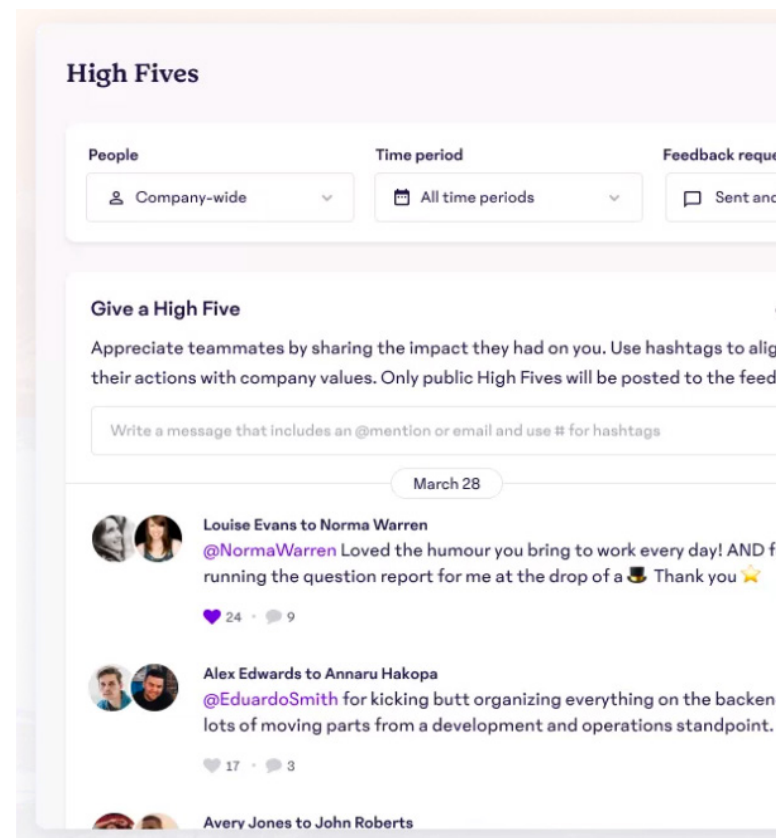
Reinforce Positive Behavior and Celebrate Wins — Big and Small

During times when it feels like there is so much negativity and precarity swirling around, it is important to celebrate every win, no matter how small. Celebrating wins gives employees confirmation that their work is valued and that they have an impact. It also reinforces positive behavior.

Some benefits of gratitude in the workplace include:

- **Increased engagement:** Organizations that recognize their people inspire real connection.
- **Higher productivity:** When employees feel celebrated and valued, they're more excited to work.
- **Better retention:** A positive recognition strategy boosts morale and breeds loyalty.
- **Greater motivation:** Regular appreciation gives people fresh purpose and momentum.
- **More satisfied customers:** Employees who are openly praised earn higher loyalty and satisfaction scores.
- **Stronger connections:** Remote teams feel more connected when positive feedback rolls in.

There's a reason why [High Fives](#) — which allows employees to appreciate other employees and share the impact they've had — is one of 15Five's most popular features. They help promote a culture of gratitude and recognition that can be felt by in-office and remote employees alike.



Navigating Tough People Decisions with Grace

During difficult times, like an economic downturn, there is always the possibility that the company will need to downsize. While you may do everything in your power to avoid this fate, sometimes the organization reaches a point where cuts need to be made.

If this scenario comes to fruition, ensure that any action taken is done with empathy and care for the individuals impacted — and that includes more than just the individuals being let go. Layoffs impact every single member of the organization in some way.

Some best practices for navigating difficult people decisions with grace:

- Make sure a leader communicates with the employees that are being let go face-to-face, in a 1-on-1 meeting. Nobody that has contributed

so much of their time to an organization should be told they're being let go via email.

- Offer severance to give employees a landing pad and support while they search for a new job.
- Leverage your network as a leader and connect laid-off employees to other employers who are hiring.
- Provide support to remaining staff. Remember that as a leader, you have known about the lay-offs and have had more time to process it. Don't minimize the impact that it can have on remaining employees, both emotionally and from a workload perspective.



Know What to Outsource

At the end of the day, no employer or leader can offer complete support to their employees. While providing a high level of care and compassion to employees is ideal and should be the norm, it is important to acknowledge that there is only so much you can do.

A good part of offering high care is knowing the constraints of the level of support you can provide. Get clear about the structures, systems, and supports you can put in place, and those which you cannot. For those supports that you cannot provide, do what you can to provide external resources, or at least point employees in the right direction.

Managers, for example, should not be playing the role of a therapist. But companies can expand their employee benefits to include access to mental health supports like teletherapy. And, if a benefit like this is in place, it should be well communicated, and managers should be equipped to educate their direct reports on the existence of such benefits and how they can take advantage of them.

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We want 15Five to be a healing organization. It starts with healing our own selves and the relationships we have with others. We started offering unlimited therapy with Better Help for all employees and a dependent. We are also providing access to Headspace, Wellness Coach, and online fitness subscriptions.

JENNIE YANG,
VP, PEOPLE AND CULTURE
15FIVE



Focus on Managers

There is one thread running through all of these ingredients to a culture that balances high care and high performance that cannot be understated — managers. Managers serve as a key link between executive leaders and individual contributors, and they have the power to make a massive difference (for better or worse) in employee experience **and** performance.

The truth? Many managers need support. With all this potential for influence comes a lot of pressure. Many managers right now may feel the added pressure to be both managers **and** caretakers, and they may have no idea how to navigate that. They may feel uncomfortable talking about sensitive topics, or be reluctant to try to connect and understand employees' struggles for fear of being too personal or coming across as intrusive.

We talk a lot about managerial skills in the business world, but perhaps one consideration we fail to give attention to is the idea that what makes a good manager great is precisely the ability to find that balance between high care and high performance, and to support and empower their employees in a way that maximizes both.

And although it may seem like a “soft” skill, or a nebulous quality that is hard to pin down let alone teach, managers can be coached to embody and elicit this balance. Investing in manager coaching is an investment that ultimately can support the wellbeing of your entire workforce and the bottom line.

Learn about [15Five Transform](#), a blended learning solution designed to help managers think and act like leaders.



Help People Who Help People

As an HR leader, you may be thinking: But what about me?

We see you, HR leaders, and we know that the past few years have been immensely challenging for you. While you are being tasked with supporting and enabling the wellbeing of all employees, while also having to answer to the C Suite and navigate difficult people decisions, it can be easy to forget to take care of yourself. Or perhaps you simply don't have time.

That's why we created a guide that covers steps HR leaders can take to engage in self care in the workplace, so they can avoid burnout and feel better at work while continuing to drive impact.

Download [The Guide to Self Care for Strategic HR Leaders](#).

Balance High Care and High Performance With 15Five

Want to learn more about how 15Five can help your organizations find and maintain that balance of high care and high performance?

To keep the pulse on strategic HR topics, [check out the 15Five blog](#) — and scroll down to subscribe to our newsletter!

Schedule a Demo

Try 15Five Free



About 15Five

15Five is the holistic performance management company. 15Five equips HR teams with a complete, single-platform solution to improve manager effectiveness, drive high performance and engagement, and increase retention. By combining easy-to-use software with coaching, manager training, and a thriving professional community, 15Five's approach provides HR leaders with everything they need to achieve their strategic people objectives. 15Five offers a full suite of products including 360 performance reviews, in-depth engagement surveys, robust goal & OKR tracking, and weekly manager-employee feedback tools like 1-on-1s and pulse ratings. Together, all of these enable HR leaders to continuously measure engagement and performance within the flow of work and then empower their managers to drive change from the bottom up. HR leaders at over 3,400 companies, including Credit Karma, Spotify and Pendo rely on 15Five's software and services to make their talent a growth driver. For more information, visit www.15five.com.

