

Transcription - Managing Highflyers 2026

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie and this is InsideExec. I was doing some research this morning for a guest that we're going to have on in a couple of weeks time and it put me in mind of a podcast that we did 10 years ago, interestingly enough, that was about managing a team of high flyers. Now this guest is going to talk to us about meltdown at high levels in organizations and I wondered, in thinking about that, what we need to think about these days in terms of leadership of teams, particularly if you've got a group of high flyers. I think that for some of you, you have more of this now than you did perhaps 10 years ago.

If we look at what has changed in that 10 year period of time, so in 2016, we talked about graduate optimism being very high and the example we used was that photocopying was considered to be mundane work and they didn't want to do mundane work. Career lines were relatively linear and authority structures were very much clearer than they are these days. And of course, office culture in terms of being at work, was physical and centralised.

These days as we know, hybrid and remote work is normal. What we're looking at now is that AI has absorbed many of what were considered in those days mundane tasks and that the high flyers are expected and they do expect rapid impact and visible growth. Their career paths are portfolio based, so it's not so much about where you have worked, it's what you have worked on that is more important. Visibility often happens online, not in the office. And psychological safety and well-being are non-negotiable with these people. They know that they have to have well-being at work. Loyalty is conditional to an organisation, not assumed. The tension is no longer just, I didn't go to university to do photocopying all day, it's about if AI can do this, why am I doing it? Is this task building my future market value? Why should I stay if I can build a brand elsewhere, my brand, my personal brand, elsewhere?

There are, of course, some things that haven't changed such as individual responsibility, whole-of-job ownership, mentoring through example, transparency in expectations, innovation around inefficient processes and recognition and credit. All of these things are timeless. What's changed is how we apply those to our new make-up of teams that we have in 2026.

So if we look at who we might have in the team at this point in time, that today what we would call high-flyers might be highly educated, digitally fluent, AI enabled, ambitious and brand conscious, less tolerant of inefficiency. They are expecting autonomy and they're motivated by meaning and by growth. They don't necessarily resist what they consider boring work out of ego alone. They resist it because they've been trained to optimise. They're aware of opportunity costs. They believe speed equals competitiveness and that's probably a big issue that we need to address. They've grown up in an automation first world. So even in that 10 years that's a very different generation that we're dealing with.

What we looked at initially in 2016 was that we encourage people, these new high-flyers that they should be doing the full job and being accountable and that we were going to lead by example in doing those same things. We will do all of the tasks that were required whether we considered them not the best use of our time or not. We were accountable for what we were doing and the people that were accountable to us. We led by example.

So if we upgrade that version to these days, what we need to do first of all is ask a question, should this task exist? If AI can draft a document, summarise a meeting, collate research, prepare slides, do all those sorts of things for us, then our managerial question goes from who is doing this to why are we doing this manually.

In 2016 we made a point, probably Fulyana that made it, about being the innovator in an organisation, being the change agent, to think about how things could be done better, not necessarily whether they need to be done manually or not. Now we have AI in the picture, AI is the enabler for us in that instance. What we need to do is to turn what would be considered mundane work into strategic exposure. Instead of saying that everyone rotates through the boring bits and we have to do everything that is part of the job that makes up the job, what we need to be thinking about is saying to our high flyer, saying to our team, this task connects you to stakeholders, to the system, to risk analysis, to quality control. Because high flyers will tolerate routine when they can see that there is strategic visibility for them, it's skill compounding, it's systems understanding and it's a reputation building. What we as leaders need to do is explain the leverage, not just the job that we expect them to do, or the task we expect them to do. We need to be replacing task ownership with outcome ownership.

So in 2016 we talked about doing all of the aspects of a job. These days we need to talk about owning the outcome end to end, including automation or AI or processes if that's what is part of it. And so what that means in terms of these people is that they can delegate to AI, they can build a better workflow, they can reduce processing time. All of those things need to be rewarded. What we are seeing in organization these days is that high flyers don't want to avoid work, they want to eliminate low value work. And that's probably not a great deal different from what it was in 2016, but it's not laziness, it's optimization thinking. And we have to change our thinking to match that.

In 2016 we were the mentors, introducing them to reality, often it was the first time that they had worked in a team or in an organization where they were considered the experts or the high flyers. These days as a leader and as the team manager you are the systems architect and talent amplifier. Now you have to design meaningful work, create visibility opportunities, connect effort to career capital, model ethical AI usage, coach emotional maturity, prevent entitlement without killing ambition. I think that that last one is probably the one that we struggle with. And that is one that is not new.

I think that high flyers came to us, certainly in my experience, they came to us, they believed they were entitled to a certain salary, a certain level of respect in an organization because they were highly educated, because they came out of a project that made them a high flyer, because we had chosen them to work with the organization. Preventing entitlement without killing ambition, I think is a key to our role in developing work that is interesting and still meets all of the targets and goals and criteria that we need to meet in terms of an organization.

We do have a new risk these days with our high flyers and that's what we have learnt to call hyper acceleration burnout. What we are seeing now is that today's high flyers say yes to everything, they want rapid progression, they compare themselves globally and they track their performance metrics constantly. So our responsibility as leaders is to help them pace their career, teach them strategic patience, encourages the depth of a constant approach and

show that mastery includes repetition.

In 2016 I used an example about a florist who had started out and the first job that she had was cleaning the fridges each night with bleach and a toothbrush and that still holds true today in that there are jobs that we don't see the immediate benefit of but we do learn something from them and it builds a base, a backdrop for our understanding of the rest of what it gets done in a day. The discipline of detail builds strategic credibility.

So what about loyalty these days? In 2016 we believed they would leave if they were bored. The reality of 2026 is that they'll leave if they don't see growth, they don't feel challenged, they don't feel visible and they don't feel valued. And Fulyana has talked for 10 years about valuing and letting people know that they are valued and that they are visible. There's plenty of podcasts that you can go back and listen to her cover those areas. But what I would like you to go away from today is with the equation about retention. Retention equals growth plus recognition plus meaning plus flexibility. It's not protection from the boring jobs.

If we look now at some practical frameworks that we can use today, there's something called the 70/20/10 growth model. For high flyers that means that 70% of their work is focused on core delivery and that can be with AI optimization, 20% is on strategic stretch projects and 10% is on innovation and systems redesign. And what that does is give them some interesting work or work that looks like it might add to their relative worth without abandoning the fundamentals that we need to have done as an organisation.

The second of the practical frameworks is the AI accountability rule. So if AI is used they have to validate the output. They have to remain accountable for the quality of the output and they cannot outsource the thinking that goes into writing the prompt to use AI. AI increases the capability, it doesn't excuse responsibility.

And the third of those frameworks is visibility without ego. What we have to be showing these high flyers is that influence leads to attention. Reputation leads to exposure and contribution leads to a spotlight. So high flyers need to learn that sustainable leadership is built in the boring layers of developing a career.

In 2016 we asked how do you get bright young high flyers to do the whole of the job that we've employed them for. These days we ask how do we help these people redesign the job without losing the discipline that makes them excellent. So the heart of what we're asking hasn't changed. It's accountability, it's mentorship, it's whole of role ownership, it's pride in the outcome. But today as leaders we also have to be technologically fluent systematically aware and developmentally strategic.

In today's climate the challenge is not eliminating the photocopying, the boring jobs. It's ensuring that every task, automated or manual, connects to purpose, performance and professional growth. And I really don't think that that has changed, it's just that the tools we are using and the way we are approaching it is somewhat different because the environment is different.

I'm Kim Baillie and this is Inside Exec.