

Strategy To Improve Employee Performance

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What should a manager do when it seems a specific employee's work output fails to consistently meet quality and/or quantity standards? Of course, this is a problem and, like all others, it cannot be resolved until one first discovers its cause.

Some managers, especially experienced ones, seem to have the innate ability to identify the root causes of a problem. Perhaps, for example, they have "been there and done that" and have useful insight to bring to the present discussion-working situations. Sometimes, however, they lack the ability to successfully analyze the workplace and the employees within it to generate tactics for problem resolution.

Inexperienced managers probably have more difficulty in correcting problems that involve under-performing staff members. They have, by definition, a background which has provided fewer opportunities to interact with subordinates as problems are identified and successfully addressed.

One reason both inexperienced managers and their less-experienced counterparts may have difficulty with problem resolution in situations involving people is because it is never easy (in fact, it is typically a challenge) to "manage" problems which involve employees—each of whom have their own differing attitudes, viewpoints and perspectives.

Many observers consistently note that a manager's most important responsibilities are those which involve employees. Yes, managing equipment, products and materials, time and, of course, money are absolutely critical; however, most of the work in the most departments is performed by employees. Use of strategy to quickly identify potential problems for interacting with staff members can give the manager a big start when developing problem resolution strategies.

Think About a Strategy Matrix

Let's assume that a manager is confronted with an employee who is having performance problems. Perhaps the quality of his/her work output is unsatisfactory or, alternatively, the staff member may be having difficulty interacting with peers or is not meeting productivity expectations. What should the supervisor do? One suggestion is to utilize the strategy matrix shown in Figure 1 (below).

Figure 1: Strategy Matrix:Tactics to Improve Employee Performance



Here's how the strategy matrix works. Assume the manager carefully considers the specific staff member and assesses that employee's level of knowledge about the job (the employee may have a low or a high level of job knowledge). The manager also attempts to assess the employee's attitude toward the job (this can range from "good" to "poor"). *Note: recall that the consideration of the staff members' attitudes is being undertaken by the manager. It is doubtful that any employee, if questioned, would state that he/she has a poor attitude. In effect, the manager making this assessment is likely thinking, "The employee's attitude is different than mine; my attitude is the correct one for the situation. Therefore, the employee's attitude must be incorrect."*

What does the strategy matrix suggest to the manager aiming to identify the type of corrective actions, if any, that can help improve the employee's performance? The matrix suggests from possible strategies based upon the manager's perception of the employee's attitude and knowledge:

- Box A – Training is needed. This strategy is often best when the manager believes the employee has a good attitude but a low level of knowledge. In fact, training is most useful to develop (improve) knowledge and skills. If, therefore, the manager believes that the employee wants to do the work (he/she has a good attitude) but does not know how to do so, this tactic for problem resolution should be chosen.
- Box B – manager must do something. In this situation, the manager believes that the employee has a high level of job knowledge (he/she knows how to do the job) and, at the same time, has a positive attitude (the employee wants to do the job). If the employee knows how to do the work and wants to do it, how can there be a problem? In fact, something outside of the employee's control must be at fault.

Perhaps there is a facility and/or workstation design, equipment malfunction, work overload or some other problem (which, hopefully, is within the control of the manager) but is not within the employee's ability to resolve. In this situation, the staff member is not at fault because the problem involves an employee who has a positive attitude and high level of job knowledge. Instead, the manager (management) must do something to help the affected employee become successful on the job. *Note: it has been said that the vast majority of all problems are caused by a manager, not by subordinates. It is, after all, the manager who selects, orientates, trains, supervises and evaluates the work of employees. It is also the supervisor/manager who provides (or fails to provide) the resources which the employee needs to do the job.*

- Box C – An HR action is needed. In this instance, the manager identifies that the employee has a low level of job knowledge (he/she does not know how to do the work). At the same time, the employee is judged to have a poor attitude (he/she does not do the work). In this instance, an HR action may be the best tactic. Depending upon the healthcare facility's policy, an oral or written reprimand may be in order. If there is still not an improvement in performance, additional HR actions such as transfer, demotion or even discharge may be necessary.
- Box D – Motivation is the tactic. Here the manager believes that the affected employee has the knowledge required to do the work but has a poor attitude and, therefore, does not want to do the work. A "Box D" situation requires a motivation tactic.

How does a manager motivate an employee? Motivation is an inner drive whereby a person (in this case, a central service employee) has to attain certain goals. It becomes the challenge of the manager to find ways that enable the employee to meet personal goals on the job while also doing a fair share of the work to meet performance requirements.

Conclusion

Managers are not trained as professional psychologists, so they certainly cannot be expected to understand the many wants and needs of their employees. Even if they could, there would likely be times that many of an employee's concerns could not be consistently addressed on the job. In most departments, technology has not been able to find ways to replace trained technicians with machines, and because this is the case, managers will need to continue their practice of the "art and science" of personnel management and supervision.

Use of a strategy matrix, such as the one described, may be one helpful tool in the manager's toolbox to help formulate the most effective approach for problem identification. As this occurs, the professional manager will be well on the way to developing tactics to address it.

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