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Become a 'feedback fanatic'

Perpetual engagement will boost under-performers

Question:

You covered a number of productivity factors in your Dec. 12 column in BizTimes Milwaukee. One of the toughest challenges I've faced as a manager is dealing with the employee who has the ability to do the job, but doesn't always "put it in gear." I'd like to see you talk about how to break through to these employees so they deliver all of the time, not just some of the time. Thanks.

Answer:

I'm sure this is a familiar issue to many readers. Is there a more frustrating performance scenario than the "turn it on, turn it off" employee? As a manager, you are left to playing guessing games. Which button should you push? Will doing so encourage or hinder performance?

At the outset, let me observe that the under-performing employee is not operating in a vacuum. He or she did not get to this point by himself or herself. To get to the heart of the issue, to truly understand what is the cause of the uneven performance, you need to look at the situation more broadly. While the employee is the focus of the analysis, take care to consider all of the performance variables, including your role in encouraging performance, the role played by peers/colleagues, situational variables like work load, tools/technology, client or vendor relationships, etc.

So, from my way of looking at things, the managerial role of mentor must be emphasized in these kinds of performance

situations. A mentor engenders trust by demonstrating genuine concern for the development of the employees. They operate as guides or coaches. They work hard to develop authentic two-way relationships, communicate effectively, and fully develop the talent of the employees.

As a mentor, in order to bring the performance realities to light, the manager must assess the employee. I should note that in its original Latin, to assess meant to "sit by or near." So, to assess an employee is very consistent with our current understanding of having a "crucial conversation." Such conversations are discussions between two or more people that

onstrated he or she can make a "base hit" some of the time, then the focus for the manager must be to create circumstances under which the base hits come more frequently.

Beating your employees over the head with a two by four might be attention-getting. It is, however, a very poor choice as a performance management strategy, over the long term.

Demonstrating caring and concern for the development of employees is not being soft, weak or wimpy. In fact, researchers have demonstrated quite the contrary.

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have three main characteristics: (1) stakes are high; (2) opinions vary; and (3) emotions run strong. Handled well, they can be relationship-building discussions in which the manager communicates genuine concern for the employee.

Let me be absolutely clear on this point. I am not telling you to "play nice," minimize the circumstances or phony things up. What I am saying is that to encourage peak performance, managers must recognize the interpersonal dynamics that are at play. This means understanding how one's actions influence employees' actions.

Let's face it, if the employee has dem-

The findings are pretty clear: the most effective managers tend to be those who are most interpersonally proficient.

Still don't believe me? Well, perhaps the following findings, derived from decades-long research at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), might change your mind. Briefly, this organization has documented that derailed executives (i.e., "rising stars" who subsequently crashed and burned as "plummeting comets") tend to suffer from an interpersonal flaw or deficit, manifested in the following kinds of behavior: insensitivity to others; overly demanding; not willing to listen to others; intolerant of dissent; taking credit

for success; blaming others for mistakes; cold, aloof and arrogant; untrustworthy; and dictatorial study.

The prescription in this situation, then, is to sit down with your employee to share your impressions of his or her performance as you have observed it relative to the expectations for the role. You need to point out that you have seen him or her display a pattern of uneven performance.

Following these feedback guidelines will improve the effectiveness of your session:

1. Before giving feedback, examine your motivation and make sure the receiver is open to hear you.
2. Make sure to give the person feedback in a private setting that allows for further dialog.
3. While giving feedback, use "I" statements to indicate that these are your perceptions and thoughts.
4. Provide feedback on both positive and negative behaviors – no one is either all bad or all good.
5. Offer specific examples of behavior that you have observed (make sure your examples are timely and relevant).
6. Ask the other person to clarify, explain, change, or correct your observations.

Prior to ending the meeting, make sure to spend some time setting some collaborative goals for moving forward. What is the employee expected to do? What will be your role in support of the employee? What criteria will be used to evaluate behavioral gains? When will another formal feedback meeting be held? And so on.

Most importantly, make a commitment to stay engaged as things unfold, to consistently follow-up and monitor the employee's efforts. To encourage lasting behavior modification, make it a point to catch your employee doing something right. Become a "feedback fanatic."

Effective managers create effective organizations. Creating an environment of peak performance is, therefore, an important concern for any manager.

Daniel A. Schroeder, Ph.D. is a principal and co-founding partner of Brookfield-based Organization Development Consultants, Inc. (www.OD-Consultants.com). He can be reached at (262) 827-1901 or Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com.