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Opening up

Making opposites attract is a matter of getting both sides to talk

By DANIEL SCHROEDER, *For Small Business Times*

Question:

About 18 months ago I hired a new sales engineer to work in our department with three others. He came to us with about 3-1/2 years of experience and a lot of get-up-and-go. He's about 27, a college graduate, and smart as a whip. However, since he's been with us, he's also alienated his three colleagues with his hard-charging ways.

One employee in particular is having a hard time with him. This employee is a 20-year veteran and the exact opposite of my younger employee — he's conservative, quiet, slow, cautious, etc. Here's the crux of the problem — the older employee just found out that I'm paying him less than the younger employee.

The two of them aren't talking to one another — they just do their work, even if it means working around each other. And they're not talking with me very much, either.

I'm afraid I could lose both of them if things don't get turned around. I need some help sorting through what my options are to solve this problem.

Answer:

At the risk of stating the obvious, this is a difficult situation. There are a couple of observations I'd like to offer before I address solution strategies.

First, your younger employee seems to fit the general pattern of what we are seeing with today's younger employees. They are eager, savvy, and self-directed. While those can be positive assets, they also can sometimes be a source of friction with older, seasoned employees who may believe in the adage "Rome wasn't built in a day."

Second, with respect to your older employee, I have to assume that he has been doing a technically acceptable job, or you would not have kept him around all of these years.

Third, I have to believe that you are paying the younger employee as you are because he brings current know-how and because getting him required you to pay the prevailing market rate (or higher). Thus, while he may be over-compensated relative to the department, he may or may not be overcompensated relative to the external market.

Now, to turn my attention to your problem, it seems to me that you have been focusing more on the technical aspects of the situation and less on the interpersonal. Employees must be held accountable for the products or services they support (the what) and also the processes (the how) they use. Processes involve a variety of resources including tools, techniques, raw materials, time, and people.

Remember your kindergarten report card? In addition to reporting your proficiency in using scissors, tying your shoes, reciting the alphabet, etc., there probably was a space for "works and plays well with others." I'm not being sarcastic when I say that you need to have a similar report card for your employees. It's too easy in today's go, go, go world to overlook interpersonal deficits and simply look at the bottom line. Did we get the job done? Did we meet our deadline? Did we satisfy our customer? Those are all important questions, but we also need to take a look

at how we satisfied our internal customers (i.e., our colleagues, our supervisor, etc.).

To resolve your situation, I think you're looking at a multi-step process involving three activities.

First, you need to have one-on-one discussions with each of your employees. In your meeting with the younger employee, you need to help him see how his behavior impacts those around him. Use representative observations to let him know that this isn't one person's opinion. Ask him to put himself in the other person's shoes. Have him discuss how it would be to be confronted with someone exhibiting his kind of behavior. Share with him the impact his behavior is having on the department and why it is important for him to change.

Then, point out precisely what you expect of him in the future (i.e., less soloing, more collaboration, less grandstanding, etc.). While you don't want him to hold back or "dumb it down," perhaps you can help him to see the benefits of becoming more of a team player.

When you sit down to talk with your veteran employee, I would not get into a discussion in which you justify your pay structure. The specifics of that are your business. What one employee earns should only concern that employee. But I would indicate that pay in your department is not a subjective, any-way-the-wind-blows affair. Remind your employee that compensation is based on objective criteria (i.e., compensable factors).

The thrust of your discussion with the veteran employee needs to be around his interpersonal deficits, namely, withdrawing from the group and from you. Sulking doesn't help the situation. In fact, it only makes it worse. If he wants to make more money, then I would identify for him specifically what he needs to do to demonstrate that he is worth more (i.e., the specific knowledge and skills that he must possess).

Second, you need to convene a meeting with both

employees. This is not a "venting" session so much as it is an action planning session for how the two of them are going to work together in the future and what your role will be in supporting their efforts (e.g., monitoring progress, one-on-one feedback sessions, etc.).

Don't mince words, either. Point out what is and isn't working in the way you see them collaborating and what you want to see change. Ask them to take ownership of their piece. Ask them to make a public commitment to take action to make the situation better. Put it in writing. Set a follow-up date and establish criteria by which progress will be gauged. Make you sure you follow up. Otherwise those meetings are only so much busy work.

Third, I would urge you to take a look at your performance evaluation form and the process you use in deploying it. My bet is that it more heavily weights factors having to do with work quality, quantity, and output. If that is the case, you will want to add other factors to your performance evaluation model. Those can include such constructs as communication, problem-solving, interpersonal relations, and so. The point is to bring into better alignment the technical (i.e., "hard") elements of the job with the interpersonal (i.e., "soft") elements.

In summary, you need to help your employees to see that they each need to augment their technical capabilities with stronger interpersonal acumen. As we see time and time again, the best employees are those that not only are subject-matter proficient but able to work effectively with their colleagues.

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