

Pat on the back

Positive reinforcement can improve employee performance

Question:

Last year, my company moved me into a manager role. Things have gone OK. My biggest challenge has been the performance management process. I've never had any training in performance management or coaching. As a company, we seem to focus on what's not working. We do a better job of criticizing than praising. Being honest with myself, I fall into that trap, too. I don't like it, but that's the way it is. What advice do you have for me to become better at performance management?

Answer:

This is a frequent situation for first-time supervisors. Many people come to managerial roles with sound technical or subject matter skills. Frequently, that's the basis for them being promoted into supervision - they have proven themselves to be strong producers and performers.

That's not necessarily a bad thing. After all, you want the people in charge to know a thing or two about how to do the work. The challenge in all of this becomes that while subject matter skills relate significantly to success as a producer, to succeed as a manager you must draw upon interpersonal skills as you orchestrate and facilitate the work of others. In your case, to be an effective performance manager and coach, you must possess

effective interpersonal skills.

So, what can you do to hone your interpersonal skills as they relate to performance management? An excellent starting point is to make sure you are following a systematic performance management model. You indicate in your question that your company uses a once-per-year performance appraisal process and that you are encouraged to coach employees in between appraisals. On the surface, that sounds like a decent model. I'd need more details to really evaluate the efficacy of your approach.

In general, though, I recommend a five-step model of performance management. Here is a brief overview of each of these steps.

1. Document essential functions

A job analysis should be undertaken to document the important facts about a job. Subsequently, a job description can then be written that summarizes the key findings such as job function, key tasks, percentage of time spent on each task, level of supervision received and exercised, etc.

2. Establish standards of performance

Standards of performance are a benchmark against which to evaluate work performance. They define how well each function or task must be performed in order to meet or exceed expectations. Performance expectations may be described in terms of timeliness, cost, quality, quantity, etc.

3. Observe and gather data

To be maximally effective, observing work performance and gathering data

should be a routine part of the performance management process. You'll find that you are more confident and effective offering feedback when you have ample accurate information on hand regarding an employee's performance.

4. Conduct the performance appraisal

Prior to meeting with the employee, review his or her job description and work record for the review cycle. Give the employee advance notice of the appraisal so he or she can prepare for it. When you meet with the employee, focus on the essential job tasks and recognize strengths and developmental areas. Create a performance development plan with the employee that describes the steps to be taken, people who will assist the employee, end dates for the completion of the plan, and how successful completion of the plan's objectives will be evaluated.

5. Monitor performance, offer feedback and coach

As employees move forward in their performance development plans, you, as the manager, need to monitor progress as a basis for offering feedback. You need to let your employees know how they are doing. Feedback should be given as close to the original event as possible. Work-related behavior or results should be the focus. The employee should be invited to offer input and feedback, too. In this way, a dialog takes place. Finally, any effects or consequences of the employee's performance should be noted.

I've found this model of performance management to be effective. If your approach is not as comprehensive as the

one I outline, see how you can incorporate some of my suggestions. It sounds like you're struggling the most with Step Five of my model. To do a better job here, my suggestion is to do performance management in small doses as often as you can (e.g., daily, weekly). Seek out opportunities to catch your people doing something right. Document performance regularly by taking contemporaneous notes. Later, when performance appraisal time comes around, you can reference your notes and incorporate them in your review.

Ultimately, while you alone cannot change the corporate culture to be more positively reinforcing, you do have the power to alter your own performance management approach. Work on balancing your tendency to be critical by offering more positive comments. Saying things like, "Thank you," "Way to go," "I appreciated your

effort on that project," etc. lets your employees know you value their efforts.

Over time, adopting a posture of positive reinforcement will help you be a more effective performance manager and coach.

In fact, from my way of looking at it, by offering positive feedback to your employees, you just may be on your way to becoming a performance catalyst.

Give it a try and watch the results.



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