

Your Role as a Leader

EVERYONE ADMIRES THE MANAGER who has a great staff of employees. His or her workers are both productive and cooperative. There are even one or two superstars in the department or work team. Guess what? That manager could be you as you apply the information in this book to your working relationships with your employees. As you demonstrate your coaching and mentoring skills, and as you turn around poor performers via counseling, you will be thought of as a leader as well as a manager.

If there is one thought you should take away from reading this book, it is this: people problems, whatever their nature or level of seriousness, shouldn't be ignored. Avoidance is the fastest way to make an employee situation get worse, even allow it to become infectious, expanding beyond the single worker to encompass an entire department. The situation can grow so large that it can hinder your relationship not only with the rest of the staff but also with your own boss and other managers, and even bring you to the attention of senior management for all the wrong reasons.

Even before coaching, counseling, and/or mentoring, there is a major step you can take. You can create a positive work environment in which employees are highly motivated to meet and exceed performance standards. Managers tell me how their own supervisors discourage performance by creating a bureaucratic organization in which they feel no motivation to demonstrate their creativity or show their initiative. They find themselves held back by an obsession with processes that leaves little opportunity for flexibility and responsiveness to today's fast-changing business conditions.

How can you begin to create the environment that can complement or supplement the performance-management system described in this

book? The answer lies in fostering communication with your staff. Actively solicit feedback about your own communication as well as exchanges within the organization. Ask your staff members questions like, “When we talk, are you clear about what I’m saying?” or “Do you think we communicate well around here?” or “Do you have any ideas about how we could communicate better?” In other words, open the door to critiquing the suitability of the workplace to generate the kind of performance you and your organization need to achieve competitive advantage.

Because it is repeated so frequently, the phrase “People are our most important asset” may seem only like rhetoric. Certainly the behavior of some companies has caused many employees and even managers to regard the statement as nothing more than corporate propaganda. But it is a fact of business life, and as a manager, your role is to increase the worth of that human capital. Consider the impact that competent, highly motivated employees could have on achieving your department’s mission and making its contribution to the bigger corporate mission as well as your organization’s strategic intent, not to mention your career.

Admittedly, you’re very busy. And people situations can be tricky. But the kind of attention to people problems that this book proposes should take no more than 10 percent of your time. On the other hand, failure to allocate that 10 percent when you first see a performance problem can cost you 50 percent or more of your time when the problem grows beyond coaching or mentoring to counseling. At best, you will have to pick up the slack from an unproductive employee. If the problem continues, you will find yourself taking time away from bottom-line assignments to justify the individual’s termination. And if you have failed to be upfront with the worker all along, you may find yourself preoccupied with fear of a lawsuit brought by the disgruntled employee whom you could have salvaged with some effort earlier on.

Not responding at the first signs of a problem can allow enough time for a small molehill of a people problem to grow into a mountain that you professionally never get over. Better to demonstrate your belief in the phrase “People are our most important asset” by coaching all your employees, counseling your poorer performers in order to turn their behavior around, and mentoring your superstars to keep them shining than to stand with your peers and look covetously at those managers with high-performing teams who are recognized and rewarded by senior management for all the right reasons. That’s the WIIFM (What’s in It for

Me) in taking action to boost employee performance when you become aware of the need.

Aside from the personal pride you will take in building and then overseeing a highly productive work group, you will have the knowledge that your team's successful track record is reflecting well on you.