

# 9

## ***Preparing your workplace***

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In short, don't! If you have never pondered this issue, you ought to now. In our book, *The Great Training Robbery – A guide to the purchase of quality training*, we spent a good deal of time discussing how an organization should develop a quality training culture. We did this through a market gardener analogy – preparing the ground (organization) for the planting of the seed in such a way as to ensure long-term success.

In the context of people management systems, we are now of the strong view that we cannot wait around until the conditions are perfect, that is, the ground has all the right nutrients, water and sunshine. If we do, the season and opportunity may well pass us by. Whilst there may well be some things missing, and therefore a risk, the risk associated with waiting too long is much greater. Just do it – you'll get better as you go, but make a start.

As with many other consultants, we have traditionally tried to ensure that various organizational change activities go through a preparation stage prior to the commencement of the main activity. Whether this activity is the introduction of performance-based training (learning), an improved assessment system, new selection or induction processes, or any other change in people management systems, the presence of a supportive culture would usually be seen as a prerequisite to success.

In terms of our approach (and particularly workplace coaching) we do not believe this to be the case. In fact we reduce the risk of failure by establishing

integrity and credibility at the outset. This occurs because what we do is based on our workplace coaching approach to people management which, perhaps for the first time, is giving people a clear understanding of what is expected of them. The activities associated with setting up our approach provide the vehicle to both fix the problems within the organization, and begin to change those things that caused the problems in the first place.

We now think differently about preparation. We see preparation in the context of emergency surgery. It can't wait until all the conditions are perfect: it has to be done now. The objective is to fix the present problem and then provide an opportunity to put actions in place to eliminate or minimize those things that caused the present emergency.

## **BARRIERS TO IMPROVING PEOPLE MANAGEMENT**

During the preparation of this book, considerable discussion took place about the impact that organizational culture (in simple terms, 'the way we do things around here') can have on the successful introduction of people management systems. For example, there have been numerous examples of organizations that have rejected the notion of people management, strongly resisted its implementation, or simply paid lip service to it until it was scrapped. We came to the understanding that, whilst culture was a potential barrier to success, if the systems were straightforward and simple they would actually help improve the culture through the implementation process.

Furthermore, we came to the belief that an understanding of organizational 'mood' – the organization's state of mind and the way it sees things – is vital and that changes of mood can easily work against the introduction of workplace coaching. In other words, organizations may have an underlying culture which is supportive but if the mood changes, the people management system could lose support. It is critical therefore that this is addressed during the planning stages to ensure ongoing support for the system at the most senior levels of the organization (sponsorship).

The third barrier we had experienced was the 'flavour of the month' or 'fashion' problem. Many readers will have worked in organizations where there was never any ownership of the people management systems by the line management. HR and senior management introduce the systems but the follow-through sustenance of the systems are left to line managers who have had no real role in the design or development of the systems. In these circumstances, any system, no matter how good, will be dead inside three years. So it is with our approach. Without real line manager involvement from the

beginning, there will be no ownership. If there is no ownership, the system will not be sustained and improved over time: it will just fade away.

We accept that many of you will have had bad experiences with the latest, greatest fads in people management systems. This book has presented managing people as a common sense, simple process that should form part of every manager's day-to-day activities. In practice, workplace coaching is about as simple as it gets. Set clear expectations and tell your people regularly as close to the event as possible, that they have done well or that there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

As you can gather, we therefore no longer subscribe to waiting time. If we waited until the trust levels between employees and managers were high enough, or the line managers were all brilliant at what they did, we could wait a long time. The best approach to introducing these systems is just do it!

That doesn't mean the development and implementation of new systems do not have to be planned – of course they do, and planned meticulously. What it does mean is that working up the performance standards and code of conduct to establish clear expectations can start tomorrow.

## GETTING STARTED

We need to start the introduction of new systems by bringing our people and managers together in an environment where actions speak louder than words. When you approach people to ask them how they believe we should treat each other and what conduct/behaviour should be expected as the standard, people are already starting to get the message we are serious. At this point you need to be confident and enthusiastic; if you're not, don't expect anyone else to be. You have to break through the façade and begin digging beneath the surface. This is where you will find the individual, group and organizational strengths and failings. This is what makes the implementation of new systems exciting.

In the early stages you expect managers to bring up issues like punctuality and attendance, whilst employees are more likely to raise issues like:

- workplace language;
- grievance processes;
- bullying/harassment;
- sexual harassment.

These are just a few of the behaviours that get brought up for inclusion in code of conduct discussions. The fact that we talk about punishment (and rewards), and document and circulate these codes before implementation, ensures that employees know we are not only serious but that they have a key role to play.

Similarly with performance standards. How can people be expected to know the level of their performance without clearly defined standards? Whether in a service environment (customer service standards), a manufacturing environment (OH&S and environmental standards), or food processing (hygiene standards), without the benchmarks being clearly established you not only won't be successful, you invite disputes over whether people are actually performing satisfactorily or not.

A critical aspect of our system is to clearly articulate expectations for both performance and conduct at a realistic level. Over time and through workplace coaching, we can strive for excellent performance by dealing with individual or team underperformance in a systematic way.

To achieve excellent performance all employees must relate to the concept of continuous improvement – the pursuit of individual best and team best. We stress again, no matter how poor the present culture may be or appear to be – make a start.

To get a total commitment to continuous improvement we require a work culture that has clearly defined work expectations (performance standards and code of conduct), and people who are ready, willing and able to engage in feedback that is timely, valid, reliable, fair and consistent. They will support it because it is performance-based, contains no surprises, and ensures excellent performance is celebrated, whilst underperformance is managed in a way that produces positive improvements in our people.

A good example of this is performance improvement plans. They provide significant development opportunities for our people. The approach to learning can stretch across a broad spectrum of activities:

- one-to-one coaching/mentoring;
- job rotations;
- secondments;
- project work;
- work placements and exchanges;
- work schemes;
- participation in consultative groups.

These activities will deliver improved and confident performance that is assessed and sustainable over time. Without these tight connections between learning and performance development, we argue the effort and expense will be wasted. We believe that, more often than not, the failure of individuals to comply with work safety and environmental standards is due to poor learning design.

The whole objective of employees working and learning together is that each individual takes responsibility for performing to expectations and for improving their own performance where necessary. Continuous improvement in performance must not be seen as something managers do to workers but something which involves all employees; a dual mandate where managers and workers do it together. The very nature of work is that it is inextricably linked to learning. We strive for a workplace where employees learn as they work and powerful learning is workplace learning! We work hard together to develop workplaces where eventually the workers teach themselves, so as to sustain continuous improvement in everything they do.

The process of managing performance and the pursuit of its continuous improvement should be seen as the lifeblood of organizational life.

## **A REMINDER OF THE NINE PRINCIPLES**

A good place to finish is our nine principles of managing people, discussed in the Introduction to this book. We produced these as the nine steps and they are set out as building blocks in [Figure 9.1](#). Read them again before moving on.

In reminding you of these, it is important to reinforce the point that sacking people comes at a high financial, emotional and personal cost to those involved, and while you will never prevent all dismissals, you can reduce the number of sacked people as a by-product of getting better performance and behaviour.

Of course these nine steps have to be managed and this is where our people management approach comes in. It is about managing people on a day-to-day basis and is designed to be particularly useful at the middle manager and operational levels.

To move through the nine steps you will need to be very clear about the key activities that drive people management. Our emphasis is on the development of a people management process that we believe is easy to comprehend, learn, put into practice and maintain.

You have now read the book, so you can make a judgement about how easy it is to comprehend and to learn. As far as putting it into practice and maintaining it is concerned, you will not know that until you have 'finished

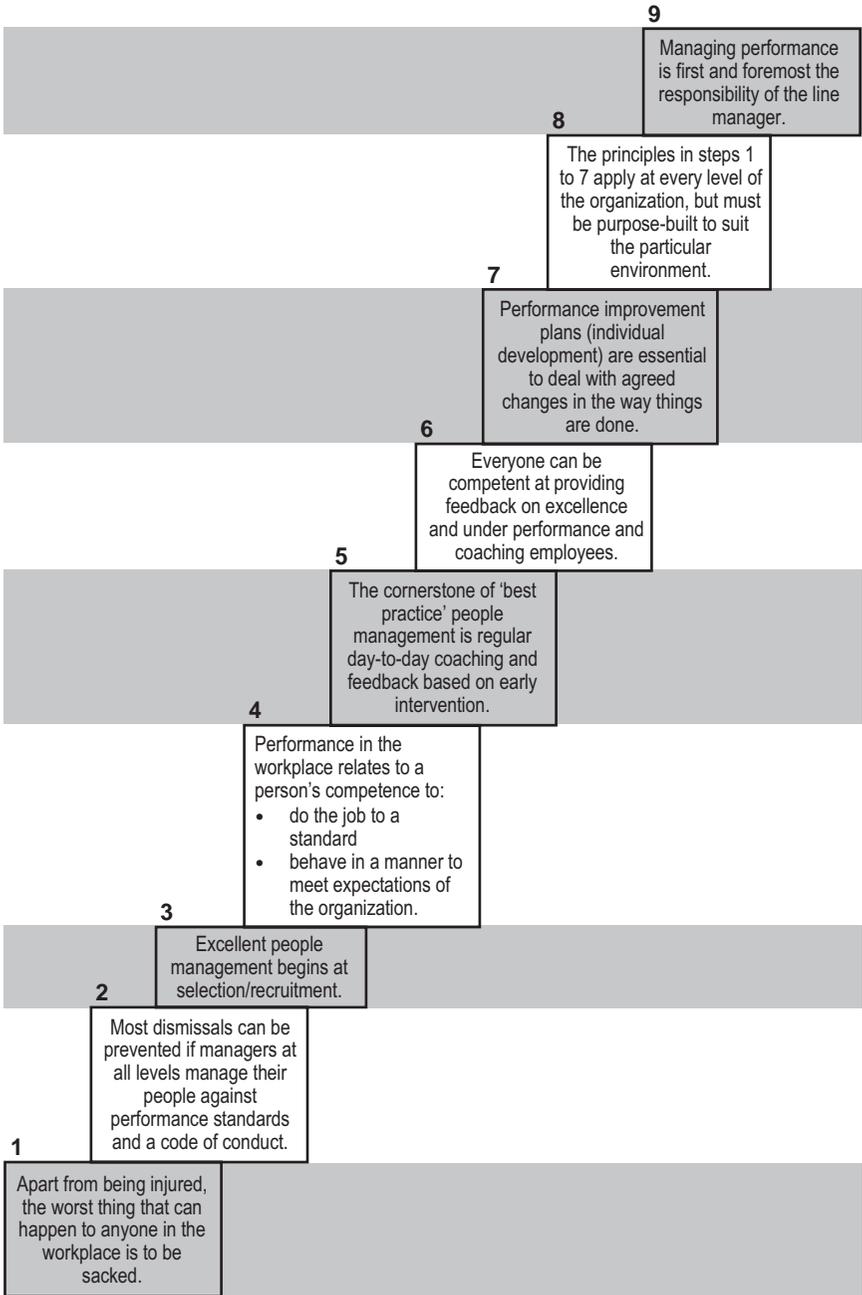


Figure 9.1 What we are on about

starting' and 'begun finishing'! The system is designed so that the managers in your organization can create a corridor through which all employees

can find enjoyment and safety in what they do, and explore new ways of individual development/learning and adding meaning to their work.

The corridor will only become open through a common purpose and language that is based on management:

- providing leadership through commitment and role modelling;
- planning the people management system with all managers and team members;
- communicating the people management system, its principles and practice, to all those affected by it;
- coaching the work team;
- sticking to the plan.

It also relies on workers:

- making a commitment to work to standards of performance and a code of conduct;
- providing feedback to each other on excellent performance and under-performance;
- accepting responsibility for their individual day-to-day performance and continuous improvement/development where deemed necessary;
- taking responsibility to ensure work is enjoyable and everyone experiencing that enjoyment and safety;
- accepting that continuous improvement means lifelong learning/development – it does not end;
- delivering sustainable performance on a day-to-day basis.

For this to happen, everyone in the organization needs to see themselves as engaged in learning. This is not a new approach, but it is one that is valued and respected in the spirit of the cooperative endeavours it echoes in those organizations which achieve it. It is important that we strive to achieve this as it will continue to provide the way forward for all current and future employees.

## THE LAST WORD

Sadly we conclude this book with some reflections on the recent headlines about chief executive officers and senior managers who have watched over the demise of a number of previously successful companies. We would argue that board members and senior management need a version of people management to set up expectations regarding behaviour and performance over the length of their employment, instead of year by year. This action may do something to prevent firms being destroyed, employees losing their jobs and shareholders losing money, while the manager who was responsible and supposedly accountable for these things, walks away with millions for their failed performance. We take up the issue of managing and rewarding the performance of senior managers in Appendix 4.

Happily though, we now know that these managers are being treated the way they ought to be – placed on trial and dealt with by the courts. We believe this is a turning point, a return to the good old days when business ethics were an unwritten way of life, but with the addition of continuous employee improvement being paramount for business survival.

Keep this in mind as you begin to put people management into practice and maintain it. In conclusion, we leave you with our best message: simplicity can be so moving!