The Manager As Coach And Causes Of Employee Failure

Although the concept of coaching in the athletic arena is certainly not new, the concept of coaching employees in the workplace has gained prominence over just the last ten years or so. More and more organisations expect their managers to become coaches, but unfortunately the coaching approach is often ill-defined. Just what does it mean to be a coach as opposed to being a boss?

For one thing, workplace coaches operate from a base of personal power. That is, they utilise their interpersonal skills in communicating and building relationships with employees to achieve success in improving performance.

The Position Power Approach ("Do it because I’m the boss, and I say so!") is not utilised by coaches, and generally yields disappointing results with today’s employees. Coaches seek to collaborate with, not control, their subordinates. They proactively seek ways to improve the performance of both their organisation and those individuals that comprise it; they are not simply fire fighters who operate in a reactive mode. Coaches strive to innovate and seek alignment with organisational objectives, as opposed to the status quo, "if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it" approach commonly followed by bosses.

When employed correctly, coaching results in a win-win-win situation: the employee’s performance improves, the organisation enjoys a better overall standard of performance from its employees, and, by increasing the competence of those within his team, the manager frees up time to concentrate on his managerial role.

Fortunately, we don’t have to be born with coaching skills in order to succeed as a workplace coach. Coaching can be learned, but may require a changed mindset for those with an autocratic management style.

Effective coaching requires the establishment of the following ground rules:

De-personalise negative feedback. So as to avoid causing defensiveness, the coach must focus on the behaviours at hand, not the person. (The opposite of this is true when offering positive feedback, however; heap personal praise on the individual who performs well.)

Focus on the means, not the end. In other words, when shaping an employee’s performance, focus attention on his behaviours, not the results of those behaviours. The effective coach realizes that positive results will occur if the employee simply follows the proper steps along the way.

Get the other person’s opinion. Above all else, coaching is a two-way process. An effective coach is also a good listener who actively solicits input from employees.

Emphasize mutual responsibility. Supervisors often underestimate the impact that their behavior has on that of their subordinates. A supervisor with a negative attitude toward the workplace and/or her employees will generally have a poorly-performing team of employees. An effective coach is keenly aware that she has a tremendous impact on the success of her work group and wields this impact carefully.

Work on building strengths, not improving weaknesses. Capitalize on what an employee does well and help him perfect those skills. This is a more positive approach than focusing on weaknesses that generally yields more satisfied and successful employees.

Be timely with feedback. Feedback, whether positive or negative, is a time-sensitive commodity. Its result is always more effective when it is given as close to the event as possible.

Be clear and direct. Don’t beat around the bush when addressing an issue with an employee. More often than not, employees misinterpret the meaning of a veiled message, resulting in unsatisfactory consequences.

Coaching is an individualised, one-on-one process. Each employee brings a different set of skills to the workplace. A one-size-fits-all approach to improving behavior just doesn’t work. To be successful in improving performance, coaches must invest the time and effort to truly know and grow their employees’ performance.

THE (ALMOST) PAINLESS PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

Conducting performance appraisals generally ranks near the top of most managers’ lists of least favorite tasks. Likewise, most employees also dread receiving appraisals. The reasons for this disdain of performance appraisals vary. In some cases, apprehension exists because of the heavy responsibility that comes with appraisals. Compensation decisions, career path opportunities, and confrontation of problem areas all are possible results of the process. Managers fear offending their employees, and employees are concerned about unfair criticism. On the other hand, some organisations view the performance appraisal process as no more than a tedious administrative requirement. As a result, appraisals produce no growth or improvement for employees. The good news is, if handled correctly, the appraisal process provides one of management’s best tools to improve employee performance and thus the overall effectiveness of the organization.

Following are a few tips for making performance appraisal less daunting and more effective:

Get feedback. Peers of the employee can be valuable sources of information. Select these peer appraisers carefully, and ask them to list 3 strengths and 3 weaknesses of their fellow employee. It is best to seek peer input from several individuals, so you can scan the feedback for common themes.

Don’t overlook the value of self-appraisal; often employees themselves can help turn up problems or positives the manager may have missed. Self-appraisals also tell the manager the accomplishments of which the employee is most proud, as well as how open he is to criticism, and how realistic he is in his expectations.

Some questions to include in the self-appraisal form:

What were my specific accomplishments during this appraisal period?

Which goals or standards did I fall short of meeting?

What changes would improve my performance?

Do I need more experience of training in any aspect of my current job? How could it be accomplished?

What have I done since my last appraisal to prepare myself for more responsibility?

Simply copying the employee’s remarks is a temptation for some managers. Resist it, as simply parroting back an employee’s own thoughts does nothing to improve his performance.

Make performance appraisal an ongoing process. Most organisations require a formal performance appraisal annually. Our memories aren’t too reliable over a one year period, so keeping track of performance throughout the year is essential. One method that has worked well for me is to set up a folder for each employee and simply drop notes of significant performance events (good or bad) as they occur throughout the year. This takes just a few minutes, and the information is quite helpful when writing the annual appraisal.

Don’t hesitate to provide performance feedback whenever it is warranted, not just at "review" time. A pat on the back or an expression of concern from a manager can be much more effective when it is timely.

Set aside uninterrupted time. This applies both to preparing the appraisal and conducting the meeting with the employee. Preparation should occur away from the workplace to minimize interruptions. In addition, the internal consistency of the appraisal is better if it is written all at once rather than in several short sessions.

The best location for the performance appraisal meeting is a neutral one; not the manager’s office, but a conference room or other private meeting room. Schedule a minimum of 60 minutes for each appraisal meeting so as to allow plenty of time for discussion. The here-it-is, read-it-and-sign it approach to appraisal is insulting to the employee and generally non-productive.

Focus on the future. The primary focus of the appraisal meeting should be to set the stage for future performance enhancement, not to rehash the ups and downs of the past year. The cornerstone for performance management is setting clear expectations. Nobody wins when the rules are unknown or vague. In addition, make sure that employees feel free to turn to you when they need help. Finally, every performance appraisal meeting should include the establishment of measurable goals for the next appraisal period. Ideally, the employee should be involved with setting these goals, so as to increase his commitment to their attainment.

Most people respond to a show of confidence, and the performance appraisal process provides a great opportunity for managers to convey their confidence in employees. The "self-fulfilling prophecy" theory has demonstrated that most people will perform about as well as we expect them to. Let your employees know what you expect, provide them with the tools to do their jobs, and then get out of the way and let them shine!

The Manager As Coach And Causes Of Employee Failure

CAUSES OF EMPLOYEE FAILURE

One of the great truisms that applies to managing people is: No one comes to work with a desire to fail. Although at times it appears that employees try to perform poorly, most everyone actually wants to do a good, or at least adequate, job. So why is it that people sometimes do fail at work? The causes of workplace failure are many and varied, but let’s examine a few of the more common reasons that employees don’t perform up-to-standard.

They do not know how or what they should do. Surprisingly enough, employees sometimes fail because they simply don’t know what is expected of them. Managers frequently make false assumptions about employees’ understanding of both their jobs and the expectations of the workplace. Attributing many of the more basic expectations of the workplace - things such as work attendance, promptness, willingness to help others, etc. - to common sense is a dangerous practice, particularly because common sense isn’t so common anymore. The only way to be certain an employee understands what is expected is to expressly tell him or her.

They fear a negative consequence. The impact of peer pressure can be as significant in the workplace as it was in high school. Many employees succumb to concerns about being ostracized by others in the work group if they perform too well. The general view is that an employee who works quickly and efficiently will raise the standards for everyone else, and co-workers can exert lots of pressure to make sure that doesn’t happen.

They are allowed to not do what they should do. Sometimes, they are even rewarded for not doing what they should do. In some cases, managers are unaware that an employee is performing poorly. More often, though, managers are aware of the performance problem but choose not to address it. This creates a "snowball effect" and the performance of the overall work group gradually declines as others realize there is no penalty for poor performance. Managers’ reluctance to confront performance issues may stem from a variety of causes, one of which is not wanting to change the rules in the middle of the game. In other words, if the manager has let employees get away with certain behaviors in the past it may seem unfair to "raise the bar" now. Standards and expectations are subject to change, and allowing sub-par performance in the past should not preclude addressing it in the future.

They think they are doing just fine. Most of us operate on the belief that "no news is good news". Thus, employees who are not told that their performance is unacceptable generally don’t realise that it is and will continue performing poorly.

They have obstacles limiting their performance. Poor equipment, outdated technology, or a lack of training can prevent an employee from succeeding at his or her job. Sometimes we simply have a round peg in a square hole, which results from a hiring mistake. Placing an employee who, for whatever reason, is not suited for the job is a ticket to that employee’s failure.

The implication of all this for managers is that they must carefully examine their influence. Strangely enough, managers generally underestimate the impact of what they do (or don’t do) on their employees’ performance. Managers’ influence exists on both the input side (what is done to get performance started) and the consequence side (what is done or is not done after performance has happened).

Key questions for managers to ask of themselves on the input side are: Do employees know what to do? How to do their work? When to do their work? Keeping in mind that some people are more self-motivated than others, things such as requests, directions, policies, procedures, training, goal setting, and schedules should be considered here.

Logic tells us to expect positive, or pleasant, consequences to result from good performance and negative consequences to result from poor performance. Managers who apply consequences in this manner are most effective in shaping their employees’ performance. Items in the manager’s tool box in this area are: feedback, praise, criticism, bonuses, raises, recognition, rewards, discipline, and inattention.

Managers play a key role in directing the future of the organisation by shaping the performance of its employees. By exercising their influence thoughtfully and carefully, managers can make the difference between an employee’s success and failure.

POSITIVE STEPS FOR ADDRESSING PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

All of us have crossed paths with an employee with performance problems. These problems can take many forms. Whether we have worked beside such individuals or supervised them, we know the signs - habitual disregard for workplace policy, work that is flawed more often than it is correct, inability to keep up the pace the job requires, perpetual tardiness, perhaps a pattern of Monday and/or Friday absences from work, and on and on.

There are two ground rules for supervisors to keep in mind regarding their employees’ performance problems:

Rule #1 Employee performance problems rarely improve without supervisor intervention.

Tempting as it may be to let things work themselves out, they generally don’t. One exception to this rule might be problems resulting from interpersonal conflicts between employees. Faced with this situation, the wise supervisor should allow the employees in question some time to resolve the matter themselves. If they are unable or unwilling to do so, in the end the supervisor may become involved, but having a supervisor in the middle of these types of conflicts sometimes results in further muddying of the waters.

Rule #2 All employees in the work group are generally aware of the performance problems of a particular employee.

Thus, all eyes are on the supervisor to take corrective action. By failing to intervene, the supervisor’s credibility with other employees is seriously at risk. Furthermore, supervisor inaction sends the message to other employees that this substandard behavior is somehow acceptable, or at least will be tolerated, which threatens to lower overall standards for the work group.

The obvious implication for supervisors of employees with performance problems, whether they like it or not, is to take corrective action - and quickly. The supervisor’s goal in addressing problem behavior should always be to rehabilitate the employee, not to get rid of him or her. Such problem behavior is much easier to remedy if it is "nipped in the bud". Allowing problems to fester before they are addressed significantly increases the difficulty of bringing the employee back on track.

The first step for the supervisor to take in addressing problem behavior is to pull the employee aside and simply mention that he has noticed that the employee has "gotten off track" and let the employee know of his concern. Sometimes merely calling the issue to the employee’s attention in this manner is all it takes to get the behavior corrected.

If the situation does not improve following this discussion, a more formal meeting between the supervisor and employee is in order. This meeting should be documented on paper, with the documentation containing the following information: the nature of the concern; steps to improve performance - which ideally have been agreed to by the employee and the supervisor; and the consequences that will follow if improvement does not occur. Another essential component of the documentation is the inclusion of both the supervisor’s and the employee’s signatures. Often, employees will balk at signing such a statement; however, by signing, they are merely acknowledging that the information was discussed with them, not necessarily that they agree with it. Some employees may wish to make their own comments on the documentation form, in which they may state their disagreement with the situation. Although their remarks may be distasteful to the supervisor, employees are entitled to make such comments. Following the meeting, all documentation should become a part of the employee’s personnel file.

Unfortunately, documenting discussions regarding performance problems is often overlooked by managers. There are two reasons documentation is essential. First, if the problem behavior is not corrected and the employee is ultimately terminated, the documentation becomes vital to substantiating the employer’s termination decision. Secondly, outlining performance discussions on paper minimizes the possibility of misunderstanding that often occurs with verbal communication. By spelling the situation out in writing, the supervisor ensures that the employee is clear about the problem and, most importantly, the consequences if the problem is not corrected.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to determining consequences if problem behavior does not improve. Rather, each situation must be considered separately, with the supervisor taking care to be consistent in assessing consequences for the same types of infractions. For example, it generally would not be appropriate to demote an employee for low productivity if the supervisor recently provided additional training to another employee with the same problem.

If performance does not improve, subsequent discussions may be held with the employee, with more severe consequences being imposed. The final step, carried out if problems are not corrected, is termination. Contrary to popular belief, there is no magic number of written warnings that must occur before an employee is terminated. For example, an employee found to be embezzling from his employer would likely be terminated much more quickly than an employee with work quality problems. Again, however, the supervisor should strive for consistency in her handling of similar problems.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS: (1)

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

It is often said that change is the only constant in today’s business climate. While no one disputes the frequency with which change occurs, to what degree organizations benefit from change is a matter worthy of debate. Most people in an organization view change with some degree of skepticism. No doubt, organizational change is uncomfortable and bothersome. But is it worth it? Can change occur in more palatable form?

Much is made in both business literature and the general media about the management fad that is currently in vogue. We have all heard and read perhaps more than we care to about TQM, reengineering, and most recently, rightsizing. The biggest mistake an organization can make in implementing change is rushing to jump on the bandwagon of the latest fad. No savvy manager these days will openly advocate a status quo perspective, but too much change can be as harmful to an organization as too little. Managers anxious to "keep up with the Joneses" in terms of the latest management fads often get so caught up in the buzzwords and trappings of process that they overlook three basic rules for business success: 1) take care of your customers (or your competitors will!), 2) give employees the tools they need to do their jobs, expect them to do their best, and reward them appropriately and 3) cut out bureaucracy and unnecessary procedures that inconvenience customers and employees. Changes that help an organization focus on these basics should be pursued. Those that obscure the basics should be avoided.

Research shows that most change efforts that are less than optimally effective fail to fully address the people side of change. So many organizations tout the importance of their employees to their success but fail to "walk the talk" when implementing change. All too often, while the technical and procedural aspects of change are well planned and implemented, the people issues are woefully overlooked. All of us realize that people inherently resist change, but resistance can be minimized if change is approached carefully and properly. Not surprisingly, communication is key to effective implementation of change. A Wall Street Journal article citing a survey of 164 chief executive officers indicated that they realized communication helps create more employee commitment to change, but 86% said other demands prevented them from devoting more time to communicating. Sounds like a question of establishing priorities!

Employee resistance to change often occurs because they have a high degree of comfort with the "old" way of doing things and do not see benefits for either themselves or the organization from the "new" way. Thus, upfront communication about the impetus for change is critical. Generally, change occurs due to competitive pressures, changes to organizational structure, or technological advances. To increase their acceptance of change, employees must understand why the "old" way is no longer the best way.

Employee involvement in planning and carrying out change is encouraged to the greatest extent possible. Change is threatening to employees who fear they will be unable to learn the new ways or that they will lose their jobs as a result of the changes occurring. In addition, most of us have an urge to "dig in our heels" when we have no control over changes that affect us. When employees have some role in engineering change, they are less threatened, and the likelihood of employee acceptance is dramatically improved.

Finally, implementing large scale change in an organization is, and should be, a time-consuming process. Patience is the watchword. Sometimes, though, management takes a "flip the switch" approach by making changes to organizational structure, processes, or management style and then expecting corresponding changes in employee behavior and attitudes to miraculously occur overnight.

Managers overseeing change must not underestimate the impact it will have on the people, as well as the processes, of the organization. With proper analysis, communication, and implementation, however, organizational change can truly result in organizational improvement.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS: (2)

TIPS FOR GOOD EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION

Poor communication is perhaps the most common problem among businesses large and small. Most employees, regardless of their position in the organization, will cite communication as an area in their workplace that needs improvement.

Here are a few pointers to help you get your message across to workers:

Make employee communication a principal management objective.

The most common communication problem in organizations is simply a failure to communicate at all. Many employees tend to believe that they are deliberately being "kept in the dark" when they aren’t told about something in the workplace that affects them. When in fact, however, the cause of the failure to communicate is usually an oversight on the part of management. The first step in achieving good employee communication, then, is committing the organization to making an effort to communicate with employees. Effective communication is a proactive, not reactive, process.

The quickest and most convenient ways to get the word out are often by memo or e-mail messages. Resist the temptation to rely solely on these communication methods, however. Words actually spoken to employees are critically important; sincerity and a genuine concern to employees are best communicated verbally. Many times, written and electronic communication serve as effective tools to reinforce what was previously communicated verbally.

Communicate honestly.

Be straightforward and don’t be too entrenched in delivering the "party line", which represents management’s sometimes overly rosy view of a situation. The honesty of your communication determines the character of the company and its ethics in the minds of employees.

Communicate quickly.

Don’t let the grapevine speak for you. Keeping employees informed on matters that affect their jobs and the company will boost motivation and job performance.

Talk in workers’ terms.

Management jargon or technical words are often considered pompous or alienating to employees. Get to the point early (by the 3rd sentence is a good rule of thumb), then fill in the details.

Be prepared to share bad news.

Bad news is never pleasant, but it’s worse when it’s badly delivered. You will gain the respect of employees if you have the guts to deliver bad news in an honest manner. Remember, it’s better if

bad news comes from management – not the grapevine.
Invite questions.
Two way communication is important. Wise managers realize that they won’t have all the answers to employee questions. "I don’t know at this point" is an acceptable response to en employee question, as is "Let me check into that and get back to you." The key here, of course, is follow through. If you say you’ll get back to the employee with more information, do it!
Consider special circumstances.
In situations where litigation may result, every word uttered or issued by management should be monitored with care. To limit the chance of misunderstandings, it is wise to read from a prepared statement approved by legal counsel.

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS: (3)

OPEN BOOK MANAGEMENT
"Employees today are just not like they used to be." "No one is loyal to their company anymore." "What happened to dedication from employees?" Statements similar to these are commonly heard from business owners and managers these days. The fact is, expectations of the American worker have changed. With media attention focused on our current recession, corporate reorganizations, mergers, and sales and the resulting downsizings and layoffs, the American worker has good reason to wonder whether his or her job will be around for long. Facing such an uncertain job future, it is no wonder that workers often don’t get too committed to their current employer. Not surprising, since commitment is a two way street.
There is no doubt that a dedicated, loyal employee is a more productive, pleasant employee. Many employers, realizing the "two-way street" mentality, have adopted a different approach to managing their workers. Called open book management, this approach focuses on shifting employee attention beyond the parameters of their own jobs and toward the overall performance of the business. The objective of open book management is to get employees to think like owners of the company. This objective is reached by sharing information about the company’s direction and financial performance, as well as sharing the financial rewards of the company’s success with employees.
The implications of managing employees in an open book environment are many. "Hire for attitude, not aptitude" is a buzzword these days and is particularly good advice for an open book company. The hiring process must be modified to help open book employers find people who want to pitch in, learn new things, and take on new challenges. Many companies have adopted personality profiles and/or structured interview formats in their selection processes to help uncover these traits in potential new hires.
Training is of key importance to an open book company. In order for employees to focus on business performance, they must first understand business basics, such as what those numbers on their company’s financial statements mean. The most effective training, of course, includes not only classroom lessons, but real life experience as well. Repeated exposure to and emphasis on the company’s financial performance helps employees clearly grasp the concepts and their importance. A scoreboard in the lunch room showing sales and net profit on a month-to-date and year-to-date basis helps keep these figures at the front of everyone’s mind.
Incentive compensation plans involving bonuses, profit sharing, and distributing company stock have become

increasingly popular in recent years. The goal of such plans is obviously to encourage employee retention and improve productivity, which is pretty tough to argue with. What has been more controversial, however, is how effectively such plans realize that goal. Some incentive plans are paid out at the discretion of senior management, leading to employee claims of favoritism and unfairness. Others are paid out based on complicated formulas that no one understands. Further, plans that have been in place for a few years often become viewed by employees as an entitlement, not as a performance motivator. As mentioned earlier, however, sharing the financial rewards of the company’s success is a key component of open book management. What sets successful plans of open book companies apart is three primary factors. First, pay outs are tied to attainment of clear performance goals. Second, the workings of the incentive plan - the numbers that determine the bonus and when and how it will be paid out - are an important part of the company’s training program. Finally, progress toward these performance goals is tracked in a highly visible manner on an ongoing (weekly or monthly) basis.

As with most changes undertaken by management, when adopting an open book approach care must be taken not to overwhelm employees. Changing too much too fast generallPERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT: (3)

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Some questions to include in the self-appraisal form:
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Which goals or standards did I fall short of meeting?
What changes would improve my performance?
Do I need more experience of training in any aspect of my current job? How could it be accomplished?
What have I done since my last appraisal to prepare myself for more responsibility?
Simply copying the employee’s remarks is a temptation for some managers. Resist it, as simply parroting back an employee’s own thoughts does nothing to improve his performance.
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They do not know how or what they should do. Surprisingly enough, employees sometimes fail because they simply don’t know what is expected of them. Managers frequently make false assumptions about employees’ understanding of both their jobs and the expectations of the workplace. Attributing many of the more basic expectations of the workplace - things such as work attendance, promptness, willingness to help others, etc. - to common sense is a dangerous practice, particularly because common sense isn’t so common anymore. The only way to be certain an employee understands what is expected is to expressly tell him or her.
They fear a negative consequence. The impact of peer pressure can be as significant in the workplace as it was in high school. Many employees succumb to concerns about being ostracized by others in the work group if they perform too well. The general view is that an employee who works quickly and efficiently will raise the standards for everyone else, and co-workers can exert lots of pressure to make sure that doesn’t happen.
They are allowed to not do what they should do. Sometimes, they are even rewarded for not doing what they should do. In some cases, managers are unaware that an employee is performing poorly. More often, though, managers are aware of the performance problem but choose not to address it. This creates a "snowball effect" and the performance of the overall work group gradually declines as others realize there is no penalty for poor performance. Managers’ reluctance to confront performance issues may stem from a variety of causes, one of which is not wanting to change the rules in the middle of the game. In other words, if the manager has let employees get away with certain behaviors in the past it may seem unfair to "raise the bar" now. Standards and expectations are subject to change, and allowing sub-par performance in the past should not preclude addressing it in the future.
They think they are doing just fine. Most of us operate on the belief that "no news is good news". Thus, employees who are not told that their performance is unacceptable generally don’t realize that it is and will continue performi

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