A thoughtful approach to 'problem' employees

Dec 01, 2005 by Don-Grimme

http://www.megayachtnews.com/index.php?news=585

Have you ever had to supervise a problem employee?

All too often, when dealing with an employee whose performance or behavior does not meet expectations, we attribute the problems to some flaw in the person's character, labeling the individual a "problem" employee. Such attribution and labeling usually are unfair and unwarranted ... and always are counterproductive.

The true cause of most problems falls into one or more of the following five categories:

1. **Expectations**. Does the employee know what is expected? Does the employee even know there is a problem? It may be obvious to you, but often it is not to the employee.

2. **Training and Ability**. Does the employee have the requisite skills, abilities and aptitudes to perform the task? If they don't have the aptitudes, you'll probably have to reassign or fire them. But if it's a skills/abilities issue, you then need to ask yourself: Has the employee received the appropriate training to do it? Most likely, the employee needs on-the-job training. Show the employee how to do it.

3. **Job Design**. Does the employee have the necessary tools and resources to perform the task? Those resources include not only physical tools, but also convenient and timely access to information and to you. Does the system support good performance? This gets into such issues as communications, scheduling and teamwork (within a department and between departments).

4. **Work Environment**. Is good performance rewarded or punished? For example, is there an informal standard set by peer pressure to not work too efficiently? Or, are you assigning extra, more demanding tasks to your best employees without rewarding them appropriately? Is poor performance rewarded? That is, do you tolerate it? Do you treat marginal employees the same as outstanding ones? Hey, why not goof off? And, is the employee being treated fairly, not only in your eyes, but also in theirs?

5. **Personal/Motivational Problem**. Does a problem exist in the employee's personal life that may contribute to poor performance? Or is the employee's attitude or morale preventing the employee from successfully applying his or her skills and abilities? This may or may not be subject to your control or influence, but it's certainly worth looking into.

Prior to taking action on a performance problem (e.g., giving constructive feedback), you need to ask yourself all those questions. You probably won't be able to answer all of them without consulting someone else. So ask your in-house expert: the employee him/herself.

The feedback mirror

Feedback is information given to people regarding their behavior. Why is it needed? It's difficult for any of us to see ourselves objectively, especially the impact our behavior has on other people or on complex systems.

Feedback is like a mirror another person holds up for us to look into. And the best mirrors are those without distortion (i.e., the biases or hidden agendas of the person providing the feedback), untarnished by either animosity or fondness.

Feedback can be positive or constructive (what you might think of as "negative"). Since our focus here is performance improvement, let's start with constructive feedback.

Constructive feedback discourages ineffective behavior and redirects the individual toward effective behavior.

The first thing to know about constructive feedback is that it is not criticism or reprimanding. In Ken Blanchard's landmark book *The One-Minute Manager*, he talks about a One-Minute Praising (very similar to the positive feedback described in the next Tool) ... and a One-Minute Reprimand.

But Blanchard came to realize that "reprimand" was the wrong word. Short of illegal or immoral acts, none of us deserves to be reprimanded. Instead, what we deserve – and need – is to be redirected toward different, more effective behavior. So in all future versions of his book, the **One-Minute Reprimand is the One-Minute Redirect.**

Here's how to do it:

First, describe the specific, observable behavior using facts. Vague generalities and unsubstantiated opinion are useless in improving performance. Avoid judgments and evaluations. Describe the behavior, not the person.

Next, describe the impact of the behavior and why it is unproductive or undesirable.

Then check for the individual's understanding of your feedback and ask for input.

Finally, redirect the individual by describing desired behavior, i.e., your expectation.

We say "finally" but, in practice, you may very well go back and forth between these last two steps, continually checking for understanding – and soliciting the employee's ideas – as you talk about the desired behavior. Here's a simple example:

Behavior and impact: When you show up late, others have to cover your job.

Inquiry: We need you back on time. What has to happen to make that possible?

Expectation: I'd like you to be on the boat at 0800,

ready to go.

Even if you avoid criticizing and you give constructive feedback in the most benevolent way, it's not as much fun for the employee as receiving praise. So, it's often helpful to begin and/or end the feedback session with positive feedback. This is known as the Sandwich Technique – i.e., the constructive feedback is sandwiched between two slices of positive feedback.

But there is a potential disadvantage to this technique. If you always precede your constructive feedback with positive feedback – whenever you simply want to give positive feedback, your employees will be waiting in fear for the other shoe to drop!

We prefer the Open Sandwich – start right out with the constructive feedback. Then finish off the conversation with positive feedback. It puts the redirect into the perspective of the employee's overall performance. In effect, what you're communicating is: You are a good (or great) employee. Of course you're not perfect. None of us is.

The positive side of things

Just what is this positive feedback, to which we've been referring? Positive feedback reinforces effective behavior. Here's how to do it:

First, describe the specific behavior (not the person) ... using examples.

Then, describe the impact of the behavior on you, others or the task.

Finally, show appreciation for the person's effort.

And be sincere, not manipulative. Think about how this employee's actions really have contributed to your enterprise rather than on sweet-talking the employee into doing you a favor.

Here's a simple example:

Behavior: I appreciate your working late last night to finish the BoolaBoola project.

Impact: You helped us meet our deadline and that keeps our guests satisfied.

Appreciation: Thanks for the extra effort!

Notice that the process is very similar to constructive feedback. The inquiry step isn't needed here. And appreciation takes the place of expectation.

And why should you frequently give positive feedback? Because your employees deserve it. Studies show that what employees want most of all is full appreciation for a job well done.

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