

Don't Reward Mediocrity

By Kari Ulrich

Let's face it, we live in a world where being politically correct is the order of the day. So much so, that we've come to reward mediocrity rather than raise the bar for our employees. Many managers struggle with giving employees feedback. Unfortunately, this can create an ongoing cycle of sub-standard performance.

Yet, research shows that an immediate supervisor or manager can have the most profound impact on an employee's success if they manage the role of coach successfully.

Recognizing poor performance is, for most of us, counter intuitive. Unfortunately, it's all too common – or the phrase “The Peter Principal” wouldn't have such a popular connotation.

The single most important variable is a manager's level of engagement. How do we measure their level of engagement? We look at several things including:

Direct Observation - How many times is the manager personally engaging an employee? Unfortunately, many managers eschew face-to-face interaction in favor of e-mails and instant messages to maintain an ongoing dialog with their workers. This prevents them from forming a true coaching relationship. We recommend that managers spend one-on-one time with their employees and closely observe what they are working on, how they are managing client and coworker relationships, and how they are managing the tasks.

Clearly Communicating and Reinforcing - Does the manager clearly tell the employee what his/her expectations are? Are these expectations subsequently measured against a baseline? We recommend that managers express expectations in ways that are measurable and that they recognize employees for improvement throughout the process, rather than at the end.

Knowledge/Best Practice Sharing - Managers cannot assume employees know the basics, which is a common mistake. Is the manager sharing knowledge and Best Practices in a way that is measurable? Many managers get to where they are because they were good at their former non-management jobs. The problem is, they are ill prepared to teach the things they intuitively know, such as knowledge of the product, how to communicate this knowledge to customers, etc. One way to do this is to set up bi-monthly conference calls between managers so they can share what's working on the coaching front. This way the managers coach one another on the best ways to communicate and reinforce knowledge and Best Practices to their employees. The data in a well-designed performance acceleration rewards program will show you which managers' teams are improving the fastest...and which manager to copy.

Once managers realize what fully proactive coaching can do, how to give productive feedback, and how to use recognition the right way, they are amazed at the way employees will react and how quickly performance levels will rise.

So, what's really holding them back? - Many of the managers we work with complain that they just don't have the time to proactively coach. Our answer? Motivate your managers to make the time...because time is money. The more time you put into coaching toward performance improvement, the higher the ROI. By the way, this isn't an ephemeral science; it's measurable.

Let me give you an example:

We recently worked with a client in the B2B segment that was adding new products regularly that required product knowledge and application skills. The company needed to sell more of the new, high-margin products while still selling its traditional products. At the same time, they were experiencing high turnover, had insufficient time to train employees, and their supervisors were not observing due to other responsibilities.

Employees were asked to successfully complete online product quizzes. They were measured based on managers' observations of product knowledge demonstrated during customer interaction and volume sales on target products.

For consistent communications and a motivating Call to Action, we launched a party-in-a-box, which was shipped to each center (decorations, food, posters). Senior management participated in person or via a conference call at each launch celebration. Promotional reminders and flash emails were used throughout the campaign.

Management and coaches received instant online reports communicating successful quiz completion by their teams. Managers also were asked to input daily observation ratings of good or excellent.

Supervisors and coaches were rewarded for employees passing the quiz and for completing complex new product sales.

The program ran for two months and delivered a return on investment of 140 percent!

In this case, managers did not have the time to coach, so we provided incentives not only for the managers who completed their observations, but also for the reps for each excellent observation. Therefore, reps were pressuring their managers to make sure they were observed! Now that's push/pull.

At the end of the day, mediocrity is consistently rewarded because managers don't know how to improve performance. And, if you're not sure how to improve it, how can you reward it? Breaking this cycle requires time and commitment. The good news is that your company can develop performance improvement programs that will not only raise the bar for your employees, but also teach your managers how to be better coaches. This will create a new cycle that can have a profound impact on your bottom line.

Kari Ulrich has more than 12 years of experience in analysis, organization, and management and holds a master in liberal studies from the University of Minnesota with focus on individual, process, and organizational performance improvement.