

HANDLING EMPLOYEE UNDERPERFORMANCE

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



Every effective performance

management system has mechanisms that comply with the basic management principles of goal-setting, clarity of expectation, measurability and a responsive feedback loop. It is a fact beyond dispute in management literature that most global brands that are competitively relevant, have survived disruption by adapting to the evolving trend in the business environment. A key ingredient of their success story has been effective performance systems that have been designed to draw out the leadership potential from employees no matter one's natural inhibitions or cultural barriers to performance. To put it another way, performance pressure is a product of deliberate cultural architecture that is built into the performance management system and not a left to the whim of management discretion or wishful thinking. This notwithstanding, every organizational system or structure is configured to rely on human operation to a certain degree. The role of the manager or supervisor is to monitor, provide feedback and coach direct reports as per the agreed plan in order to achieve performance goals. Problem occurs when natural performance inhibitors get in the way of a manager's role in ensuring that performance systems work optimally. The difficult aspect of any manager or supervisor's experience is when that time comes to have that difficult conversation with an underperforming



employee. The worst case scenario is when such discussion unavoidably must lead to severance of employment due to continuous recurrence of underperformance by the culprit. The anxiety could be so intense and so debilitating to a degree which might negatively affect the outcome of this interaction, causing the employee to leave with bitter feelings and a dented perception of the company's brand and reputation as an employer of choice.

The issue of employee underperformance has been a contentious one particularly in the Ghanaian labor market where an enormous chunk of skilled labor are employed by the public sector; a sector that has gained notoriety for weak performance management and a proclivity for actually rewarding underperformance. Staff underperformance maybe as a result of factors such as value misalignment, non-engagement, capacity inadequacy or poor work-life balance, inter alia. Building a corporate culture that has minimal tolerance for performance accountability gaps is a good step in

position your brand for success. Arguably, the crucial aspect of the performance management timeline is the number of times within a fiscal year that review sessions with direct reports are held in the interest of accountability. In addition to frequency, the skill required to carefully investigate and unearth the real cause of underperformance is a distinctive feature of management excellence and indeed, is the focus of this article.

Know These Things

Before sitting down with a direct report to have a



discussion about performance lapses, certain essential matters needs to be taken into account:

1. High power distance between reviewer and reviewee.
2. Awareness of reviewer's own emotional undercurrents.
3. The need for objectivity.
4. Recognizing the moment as a coaching opportunity.
5. Avoiding the blame game.
6. Using the win-win problem-solving model to create a sense of ownership.

I quite remember how I found performance reviews very stressful to the point of having nervous breakdowns. There were times I wove elaborate schemes just to avoid that dreadful moment of accountability. It's a heavy burden for any employee to bear, knowing you have to render account for your use of company time and resources, failure of which may be construed as your salary not been justified. I have always wondered why many employees experience this sense of trepidation. This question has preoccupied the minds of organizational researchers and business managers for many years. One way of understanding this phenomenon is through the lenses of the cultural classification model by Hofstede (1991) that categorizes national and regional cultures on six different dimensions i.e. power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, long-term orientation and indulgence vs. restraint. According to Hofstede, West Africa, and for that matter Ghana, has a very high power distance rating compared to countries in say, Scandinavia and Europe. Clearly understanding this cultural influence places upon a manager the responsibility to assuage the anxiety of his direct report in the interest of unbiased interaction. Understanding the state of mind of your direct report is an essential first step to having a productive interaction in the bid to unravel the question of underperformance. This basic skill of recognizing "ice" and making deliberate effort to "break the ice" has stood me in good stead throughout my years of

leading teams and managing people. It's a skill that every manager, desirous of engaging in a productive performance discussion, ought to learn as well.

Interestingly, the reviewee is not the only one to worry about emotions and how it might influence outcomes. It is normal for the reviewer to feel anxious, hesitant and even fearful of sitting down with an underperformer to discuss improvement strategies. These strong feelings may have a countervailing effect on the likelihood of things going southward if such difficult interactions are not handled skillfully and carefully. Emotional intelligence is the capacity to be aware of these subtle emotional influences and to formulate concrete strategies to balance out its effect. Its importance for managers to realize that being effective as leaders is not all about stone cold rationality, but also requires a certain level intuition and emotional intelligence for decision-making. Being aware of your emotional state of being enables you focus on the real issues without being sidetracked by peripheral distractions.

The Objectivity Imperative

Understand that raising questions about an employee's performance is tantamount to ruffling the person's ego, particularly where there is a woeful deficit of undisputable facts to support claims of underperformance. Being objective is not only essential but its foolhardy to attend a performance review meeting without clear facts. Such facts may be obtained from management information reports, peer

review and feedback reports and the manager's own observation. The entire controversy over performance review discussions is centred on this component. If not handled professionally, it might fuel suspicions of unfairness and witch hunting on the part of the manager/reviewer. Reducing subjectivity to the barest minimum therefore, ought to be the guiding principle in designing management information reports. Ensuring that every assigned task has an in-built formal reporting mechanism is strategically relevant to the value of objectivity in performance review discussions. It stands to reason then, that companies with rampant employee complaints about performance management systems, lacks robust and comprehensive formal reporting arrangements for all type of tasks and work schedules.

Big-Picture Thinking

Thinking big is not the exclusive prerogative of C-Suite management executives only. Every manager with responsibility for P&L is obliged to consider the big picture in all decision-making. Recognizing performance review with an underperformer as a coaching opportunity, will help avoid playing the blame game and foster a sense of personal responsibility and ownership of improvement strategies that may evolve out of such discussions.

Solve Problems-Don't find Faults

Ultimately, performance improvement discussions are all about problem-solving. Fully appreciating this worldview is an important step towards effective decision-making about task-to-skill alignment, attitudinal adjustments, motivation and many other issues that may play a role in improving the performance of an otherwise underperformer. The rational model of problem-solving is a useful tool in guiding any manager through a performance review discussion. It has certain predetermined steps that requires strict adherence for maximum effect.

1. Identify the problem
2. Define what success should look like (set clear parameters and goals)
3. Explore options through brainstorming
4. Choose the option(s) that may best satisfy the set criteria and provide a push towards meeting agreed goals.
5. Clarify execution plan; When, with whom, by what time and how to measure progress.
6. Set times for progress review meetings.
7. Follow through with implementation to discuss successes and variance.
8. Re-iterate process, particularly point 1&5 to ensure continuous improvement.

Most often the game is lost on point one, especially when, what ought to be an impassionate inquiry turns into a session of criticism and name calling, with the manager being the “abuser”. Problem identification is a competency that could be learned by anyone. It is not a trait inherited genetically, neither does it come effortlessly to certain temperament types such as a Sanguine or a Phlegmatic. It requires an appreciation of the Socratic art of inquiry; critical questioning, believing that any issue, problem or crises is as a result of a complex interplay of factors that may be buried deep beneath the surface of what appears to be. An employee’s underperformance may be attributed to stress, poor work/life balance, ineffective leadership oversight, poor job design, and the list could be endless. Essentially, all these factors, whichever may be subtly influencing the underperforming employee in question, will engender low morale/motivation and produce untoward behaviors that signify disengagement. Identifying a problem in this context therefore cannot and must not be taken lightly by any manager seeking to improve employee performance. The process of digging deep itself may yield new insight regarding the internal environment and its effect on employee performance. That ought to be a secondary goal in

undertaking this problem identification exercise.

It is a critical imperative for the manager to demonstrate his capacity to listen and not foist recommendations on the employee based on his own “diagnosis” of the performance problem. Listening

and been seen to be listening is needed to sow seeds of ownership. After all is said and done, what every manager wants is an employee who takes full responsibility and ownership of

a problem. It reduces resistance to change and fuels the drive for implementation. Listening is an intricate art and a fine expression of emotional intelligence. This is because it requires patience, humility and most of all, self-control. The natural inclination of any

manager in such an imbalanced power relationship, would be to, breath fire, pound tables and spit dictums, all the while expecting nothing short of full compliance to whatever recommendations (or should I say dictation) about behavior changes that need to be made by the underperformer. Switching the script therefore, to be the guide on the side instead of the sage on stage, is nothing short of excellent emotional intelligence.

Next Issue

Our next issue will examine further strategies for problem-solving or formulating performance improvement strategies. It is important for every manager or supervisor with team leadership responsibilities to be aware of the power distance relationship with direct reports, within our cultural contexts, and to adopt clear strategies for problem-solving when issues of underperformance come up.

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