EMPLOYEE UNDERPERFORMANCE

HOW TO STOP FINDING FAULTS AND START SOLVING PROBLEMS

In the first article, published August 20, 2014, we focused on the subtle influence of culture and emotional intelligence on employee performance. The article essentially argued for a change in approach to how performance reviews are conducted in order to ensure that managers are solving problems for which they are hired, and not just finding faults with underperforming employees. This approach is a useful one since new knowledge in management practice has reinforced the notion that underperformance is a construct and for that matter aptly described as an effect of a cause, known or unknown. The essence of using the rational problem-solving model is therefore to methodically unearth root causes in order to eliminate them, as oppose to finding palliatives for what may just be symptoms of the core problem i.e. underperformance. In this article we continue our elaboration on the problem solving approach and what behavioral warning signals to look out for on the part of the underperforming employee in question. Before we delve into today's issues, a block review of the concluding points in Part 1 of last week's article, would do justice in terms of context.

The argument was made that ultimately, performance improvement discussions are all about problem-solving and not fault-finding, hence adopting a standard problem solving approach as an integral part of the performance management system would yield immense benefits to a company. An argument was made also that management appreciation and adoption of this evolving worldview is an important step towards effective decision-making with regards to task-to-skill alignment, attitudinal adjustments, motivation and many other issues that may play a role in improving the performance of a hitherto chronic underperformer.

The rational model of problem-solving is an approximation of Herbert A. Simon's bounded rationality decision model, and indeed a useful tool in guiding any manager through a performance review discussion. It has certain predetermined steps that requires strict adherence for maximum effect:

Employee Evaluation
Work quality — 5
Knowledge of job — 5
Work skills — 5
Enthusiasm — 5
Initiative
Judgment

1. Identify the problem

2. Define what success should look like (set clear parameters and goals)

3. Explore options through brain-storming

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.

Starting the Discussion

Before having that difficult conversation about why an employee's performance has

deteriorated, it would be helpful to find creative means to address the defensive poster that may characterize the employee's behavior under conditions of scrutiny. Following the timeless wisdom of the legendary Dale Carnegie, winning people over to influence them positively has everything to do with how you affirm their self-worth. Starting off a delicate performance review session with genuine complements about work or certain observed behavior is guaranteed to disarm a defensive person and set the tone for a more cognitive engagement as oppose to an emotionally charged one. It is important however to ensure that the complement is based on something factual with relevance for work or positive group impact and not sheer happenstance that may be construed as flattery. If the employee senses flattery that might strengthen his defenses much to the chagrin of the reviewer, and nothing productive is bound to emanate from a session held under such circumstances. 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. It is instructive to note that an employee's poor performance may be as a result of stress resulting from poor work/life balance, ineffective leadership oversight, poor job design, amongst others. Part of the services Metis Decisions LLC provides is to help our clients understand, through regular employee surveys, the fundamental causes of satisfaction and/or engagement. In our experience, it has become increasingly clear, that satisfaction or engagement (variables in the performance equation) has far more deeper root causes, mostly environmental, than what individual performance behaviors in themselves suggest. Identifying a problem in this context therefore cannot and must not be taken lightly by any manager seeking to

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improve employee performance. In an attempt to dig deeper, the process itself may yield new insights about the internal environment and its insidious effect on employee performance.

The role of emotional intelligence provides a crucial guidepost in this discovery process. In last week's article, we mentioned an emotional intelligence competence called LISTENING. Listening is the capacity to pick up profound meanings, unarticulated assumptions and perceptual biases in conversations through attentiveness, issue focus and apt questioning. Listening is a delicate art and no doubt an expression of emotional intelligence in its highest form. The reason being that it requires patience, humility and self-control for a manager to go against his natural inclination of dominating a formal interaction session with a subordinate. It is crucial 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 essential in promoting the values of ownership, responsibility and leadership within an organization. After all is said and done, what every manager wants is an employee who takes full responsibility and ownership of a problem. The benefits, in terms of lowering resistance to change and efficient execution of agreed plans, are immense.

The Color and Texture of Success

Performance criteria setting is usually addressed by the employee's role profile document or the Performance Management Plan (PMP) agreed between the employee and HR at the beginning of the fiscal year. This notwithstanding, it may be a unique opportunity for you as the manager or reviewer, to rethink and reset the goals higher, in agreement with the

underperformer. Always expect resistance at this stage, especially with "legalistic" employee types who are only interested in doing "what the company says" or expects. But your skill as a motivator and a supportive manager, would be proven by the degree to which your are able to secure an agreement from the said employee in question regarding goals that stretch far beyond what is contained in the PMP. This should address the color bit. In terms of meeting the texture criteria, the company's brand values, minimum standards and codes may provide guidance in defining very clearly what excellent performance ought to feel like. The color/texture criteria or performance parameters is just a way of setting clear boundaries for what is acceptable and what is not, in the quest for performance improvement. Failure to clearly define these parameters may knowingly or unknowingly lead to ethically inconsistent behaviors.

Getting Down to Business

The meat of the matter, after understanding (hopefully) what the underlying causes of poor performance are and setting target goals, is to search for workable alternatives that will shape future behavior and advance the cause towards these goals. In brainstorming for alternatives, the manager must be careful not to endorse any fuzzy statements of intentions. Statements such as "I will do this, I will do that", are nothing short of travesty and unworthy to be labeled as strategy. All options that are considered for performance improvement must speak to

the five imperatives of strategy; what, when, how, who and why. What strategy is being considered? Why is it a good strategy? How will it deliver results? Who are the key stakeholders or target segment, and when are results like to show? Anything short of this level of rigor and clarity is bound to fail, again. Indeed, it's important for every manager to understand that rigor in itself is a challenge to our emotional intelligence and cognitive capacities. Producing that level of detail requires more than average thinking and tons of patience and endurance. This is why short and cursory performance review sessions are ineffective in addressing issues of poor performance. Sessions that are detailed, methodical and appropriately lengthy (with timely tea breaks, of course) are much more effective in setting a framework for performance improvement that can be tracked and measured. As a point of caution, reviewers or managers must allow the employee to lead in the brain-storming session, all the while remaining mindful of a possible cognitive limitation on the employee's part. Care must be taken by the manager to ensure that suggestions as to what should be done are presented as just that, suggestions, and not dictation, with compelling arguments for adopting same. The key is to ensure the employee takes full ownership and responsibility for any agreed improvement plan emanating from this review session. Brainstorming, designing strategic alternatives and clarifying execution plans is an iterative process and so can be done over and over again till what emerges meets the test of rigor and clarity. Incorporating timelines and milestones in the plan makes tracking easier. Of course all of this is based on the assumption that the company has robust management information systems that provides data on

essential aspects of staff

performance that are directly linked to organizational goals. Hence monitoring and measuring improvement plans should not be a challenge.

How to Know If Plans Are Working

Agreeing on dates for review is crucial if performance improvement is to work effectively. Reviews must be based on hard evidence and not subjective evaluation of performance. So, for example, a sales manager should have sales data for all products within the review period. Facilities officer should have data on number of reported malfunctions within the review periods juxtaposed against vendor servicing schedules. Services centre officers should have the ratio of complaints resolved to that logged and unresolved. Effective organizational design should ensure that every task or every activity is subject to measurement and the metric must demonstrate performance trajectory, whether falling or increasing. Anything short of this is a structural hindrance to organizational success. The focus of the review sessions should be to celebrate successes and correct variances by re-iterating the planning process by strengthening the weak links.

The Whole Matter Is This…

The matter of employee performance is undoubtedly the single most contentious issue in both private and public sector in Ghana. Whilst a structured and responsive Performance Management System (PMS) would eradicate 98% of the problem, inadequate management skills in using the system as a tool to raise performance per capita, more than any other factor, would continue to perpetuate non-performance, underperformance and worst case, rewarding such behaviors through collective bargaining certificates. Building a corporate culture that has minimal tolerance for performance accountability gaps is an important first step in addressing some of the rigidities in the labor market.

To summarize the key points in this two-part article, every manager interested in providing transformational leadership must be fully cognizant of the following and to take them into account when handling difficult interactions such as performance reviews with an underperformer:

1. High power distance between manager and subordinate – Refer to Hofstede's cultural classification.

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.

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