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HRMORNING

WHITEPAPER

Secrets of Better Performance Management

Contents

There are secrets to improving performance management results.

Secrets of Better Performance Management

Every HR pro knows that there really is no "secret to better performance management." Strategies and techniques for improving individual and team performance evolve and new practices emerge but the overall concepts that make up performance management are well-known and widely implemented.

But there are secrets to improving performance management results.

The most important one is that you can't just discard techniques that you've tried and then set aside because they didn't to work as you hoped.

If you take a fresh look at some of these "failed" approaches you might find that they actually can work both for individuals and teams.

This White Paper provides a guide to improving performance management in your organization. It offers insight into:

- Why it's important to look at yourself first
- The most common employee performance issues.
- How poor individual performance affects team performance
- Collaborating with employees to address performance gaps
- Key strategies to improve individual performance
- How to ensure high performers influence team performance
- What to do when strategies don't work — and why a quick response is important

It's worth the effort — you'll see results in happier, more engaged workers; improved productivity, and a healthier work environment.


Square
Angle
Transparent
An experiment usually results in some means or proportion affect of different groups such as control and treated animals.
Means will differ because each animal is different.
The aim of the statistical analysis is to calculate the probability that differences as great as or greater than those observed could be due to chance.


FINANCE REPORT
ACCOUNT
REPORT
DASHBOARD > INCOME
DAILY
WEEKLY
MONTHLY
MON
TUE
WED
THU
FRI
SAT
SUN
TOTAL INCOME
37.91%
31.86%
30.23%

Manager, Know Thyself

Before you can be effective in helping an employee to improve performance, it's important to think carefully about yourself.

How might your own personality, work style, likes and dislikes, and unconscious biases and preconceptions color your assessment of a particular employee's work and how you communicate with that individual?

Remember, as you are working to help employees improve their own performance they are observing how you handle yourself.

- How quickly do you respond to issues?
- How do you react when faced with adversity?
- How do you interact with others?
- Are you overly formal or informal?
- Are you too blunt or too analytical?

Was the problem that the technique just didn't fit with your organization's environment or work style?

Or was it how you tried to put it into practice?

Looking back at a technique that didn't work through this lens can be really helpful in making it work for you this time.

Once you have a handle on these questions, you're ready to start the collaborative process of assessing and improving employees' performance.

What Are The Most Common Performance Issues

Based on decades of experience in working with employee and leadership teams at organizations of all sizes, these are the performance issues that come up again and again.

- Individual productivity or lack thereof — Employee's output of work is less than wanted and expected.
- Attitude and dealing with others — The employee may be consistently negative, won't speak up, is disrespectful to supervisors and co-workers, or exhibits other negative attitudes that hurt team morale and productivity.
- Ability to work with others — Whether they have interpersonal issues, produce at a different volume than their peers, or don't understand teamwork, some employees stand out in a negative way and negatively affect team performance.
- Quality of work — Even where the volume of work meets your standards and expectation, the quality of that work is consistently below expectations for their position, experience level, etc.
- Timeliness and responsiveness — An employee's work is often behind schedule, they don't show urgency in responding to requests, or they don't meet commitments.
- Refusal to follow instructions — Some employees resist being told how to do their work and fight against necessary changes.

Remember, when referring to the organization, avoid "words of obligation" like shall, must, or will. Instead, say that the organization may, could or can.

On the other hand, all language laying out your expectations for employees should include obligation words. One hint — don't use "should." It's ambivalent and leaves room for interpretation. Shall, will and must make it clear that these are requirements, not options.

Individuals Affect The Team

A team is only as good as its parts. A poor performer — whether a complainer, someone who doesn't show up on time or leaves early, or a is poor communicator — will bring down a team's overall results.

Even when an employee is primarily an individual contributor who's responsible for and can be assessed on his or her own output, they are still part of a larger team. Their performance and output are generally visible to their co-workers.

If those colleagues see that they are consistently producing more work or higher quality work that the poorly performing employee, over time their own commitment to quality work will slide.

If a bunch of co-workers consistently take off early for a long weekend, for example, even your most dedicated workers will begin asking themselves why they are sticking around to finish up projects.

The key is to find ways to flip that script, where the examples set by high performers raise up the work of the whole team.

The first thing is to analyze the team in question. Breaking it down into groups is a useful exercise.

Generally, teams can be separated into three groups.

A-team players make up about 10 percent of your total workforce.

These are the employees that are reliably productive and responsive. You ask for something and they are on it. They are self-managers who understand priorities and how their work supports the larger organizational goals.

Your C team members are the bottom 10 percent or so of your workers. You are probably spending most of your time with this group, coaching them, explaining what you want, correcting work or attitudes, trying to catch them up with the rest of the team. They impact your productivity as a manager, as well as hurting their team's results.

The B team comprises— everyone between those two groups who make up approximately 80 percent of any team.

Raising Team Performance

The reason it is so important to understand where people fall in these categories is that your goal is to bring everyone up a level.

While your specific process will vary depending on the type of work a specific group does, you'll generally want to put A- and C-team members together, both physically and in terms of what they are working on.

You want your highest performers to interact with your least productive employees. That could mean just putting a cheerful, upbeat A-teamer with a consistently disgruntled colleague or mixing them together on a project.

If your stars are working and interacting regularly with the bottom 10 percent of their team you're likely to see improvements in those employees' work and in the team's results.

If you leave your poor performers interacting only with other C-team folks — or have them working only with the middle group while your stars are off working by themselves — the performance of your C team group will stay below what you want, and your B teamers will tend to slide backwards.

Remember you are not making value judgements about individuals. You are just making a realistic assessment of everyone's measurable performance.

Development Opportunity

And there's another benefit as well: doing things this way creates valuable development opportunities for your top employees.

Before you pair a top performer with one of your problematic employees for the first time, it's a good time for a conversation like this:

"Based on your performance, I expect that you will take on more official or unofficial leadership roles, whether as manager or a team lead, etc. For anyone in that position, one of the most challenging things is dealing with difficult people."

"Because I think you are ready for that challenge, I am going to put you and Frank together on a [team, project, workers' council]. As you know, he can be a little tough to deal with and I think that this is a good opportunity for you to build your leadership skill set."

By expressing your confidence and explaining your intentions, you've set up your A-teamer for success.

Similarly, when you explain your plan to Frank, position it as a benefit for him. "You're going to be working with Sally on this project. She's got a wealth of experience to share that will help you to learn new skills that will be very valuable to you and our organization."

Frank is likely to grumble no matter who you pair him with or how you explain things, but you will have at least given him a reason to make an effort and indicated how you'll measure success. And if it works, Frank will stop being a drag on the overall team's performance and show other marginal employees a path to grow, if they want it.

Unfortunately, not every employee is salvageable – set the stage, provide support and assist with improvement, but don't support someone who can't carry their own weight.

But, if the problem isn't that the employee simply isn't willing to do what's expected in their position, you are then in a great position to work collaboratively to improve how the quality of their own work and what they bring to the team.

Collaborate With Your Employees

There are steps you can take right now to increase collaboration with your employees around their performance.

Just as you assessed your own strengths, weaknesses, preconceptions and blind spots, the first thing you need to do is think about how you see their individual traits and abilities and if your perceptions are really accurate.

The most effective way to do that is to sit down with the employee and explore some key questions together.

First, why is that individual here? What are their objectives and expectations for their job? Why are they here, in this role right now?

Have you put him or her in an environment that allows them to enjoy their job? If, for example, you put an introverted person into a team of boisterous, talkative highly energetic people, that employee is probably not going to be able to do their best work.

You really can't change people at a fundamental level. If someone simply does not want to be a public speaker, you are unlikely to be able to force him or her into that mold. If you try, the employee might find that they can grow into a new skill, but it isn't very likely.

More likely, they'll feel inadequate, resent you for forcing them in that direction and, ultimately, leave. It's worth remembering that survey after survey shows that people don't leave jobs or companies, they leave bosses.

That's an example of the importance of recognizing every employee's individuality. Of course, you are going to strive to treat everyone fairly and consistently, but the way you interact with a specific worker needs to be geared to each person's personality.

Do they expect to sit down in a formal setting and have a structured discussion? Or do they prefer to talk things over during a lunchtime walk or sitting at their desk?

Try to get employees to share some personal interests, to the extent they are comfortable. What are some of their interests and hobbies outside of the job —what makes them tick?

If you can find interesting topics to talk about as you are working on getting their best performance, you can be more effective in influencing their behavior and attitude.

Making improvements in an employee's performance is a process. It's going to be an evolution, not a revolution.

And successful performance management puts a lot of the work of changing on you — if one approach isn't working with an employee, you have to keep trying new things and adjusting in how you interact with them.

Consider Other Influences

It's also important to look at what outside issues that you are not aware of might be impacting your employees' performance. Here are some examples:

1. Has the employee been trained and mentored properly?
Over the course of an HR pro's career, they are almost certain to encounter employees who have progressed in their own careers but who have puzzling but real gaps in their skills and capabilities.

Those can range from not knowing a few common time-saving tricks to near-illiteracy – whether with words or with numbers.

Often managers assume that everyone is up to speed because they've been in the job for some period of time. But that is rarely the case.

It's critical to figure out whether it is going to be possible to address what is preventing the employee from succeeding and producing quality work.

Training is often haphazard, without a formal structure for making sure that employees are learning what they should.

Or, if there are not processes in place to test that they have absorbed the training they do get, they may have attended classes but still not know how to handle everything you expect of them.

It's your job to explore whether they really have been trained properly.

The best way to do that is simply to ask them directly.

If they have gone through training but don't show that they've absorbed it, it might be that they learn differently from other workers.

If you can work with an employee to better understand how they learn best and modify training to better suit that learning style, you'll see much better results and a more confident and engaged worker.

2. Do employee expectations align with yours?
How do they understand their role? What do they think their "output" should be? What do think you should be doing as a leader to enable them to do their best work?

If you don't understand how they see themselves in the job, it is very hard to know what you need to address to help them elevate their performance.

3. Do employees have enough resources and time to perform up to your expectations?
Someone who is painstaking and highly detail oriented will produce great work but is unlikely to hit super tight deadlines.

If you put that person in a job with frequent changes and quick turnaround but less emphasis on quality, they won't be comfortable and their performance won't be what you need.

4. Are employees content in their current role?
Anyone doing a job that they simply don't like is never going to produce really good work. Part of that is putting them with the right team. Do they understand how they can grow in their role and prepare for new responsibilities over time?

5. Are there underlying personal issues involved?
Some of your employees are probably very open about what is going on in their personal lives and are proactive in talking to you about issues that could impact their work. Others will never come to you to discuss those kinds of things and you won't be aware of them until their work falls off.

When you are working to maximize your employee and team performance you need to probe carefully to understand if there are any personal issues you can help them to deal with or if, unfortunately, those issues are going to make it impossible for them to fulfill their job responsibilities.

In most cases, taking the time to understand why issues are arising and being clear-eyed about helping employees to learn and grow is worth the investment in time and money.

> Recently, I was asked if I was going to fire an employee who made a mistake that cost the company $600,000. No, I replied, I just spent $600,000 training him. Why would I want somebody to hire his experience?
> - Thomas J. Watson

Coach, Inspire, Motivate

Successful performance management includes coaching employees on how they can achieve success in specific areas; inspiring them to make sustained effort; empowering employees by giving them authority that matches their responsibilities; and motivating team effort, improved performance and professional growth.

Coaching

1. Form a foundation for success.
When you coach an employee, start from a positive place.

First, be open — let them know that you are going to be working with them to help them improve their work and, ideally, their job satisfaction.

2. Coach towards a very specific goal.
The idea that you can sort of subliminally encourage changes through subtle manipulation only works in fiction, unfortunately.

Let them know what you will focus on and give them time to think about how they are doing in that area. Ask them to come to the session prepared to share their own impression of how they are doing.

If their impression matches well with yours, less coaching is probably needed. If there's a big mismatch between your impressions, you'll be prepared for more intensive work with that employee.

3. Overcome competing biases.
It's worth repeating: Your personality, work style, likes and dislikes, and unconscious biases and preconceptions can color their assessment of a particular employee's work and how you communicate with them. Take a hard look at any unconscious filters that might give you an inaccurate read on your employee's work or attitude.

4. Include attitude and productivity as performance expectations.
Whether you praise an employee's cheerful and pleasant attitude while also critiquing work quality, volume, or timeliness or need to see an immediate improvement in behavior and how they interact with co-workers, attitude needs to be part of the coaching discussion.

In both cases, the employee needs and deserves very specific guidance.

Just as a vague discussion of improved work expectations won't change anything, "Fix your attitude" doesn't give them much to work with.

5. When discussing areas that need improvement, provide social and quantifiable proof using examples.
While you don't want to identify specific people in most cases, you also don't want the employee to perceive what you're sharing as "Just your opinion." In most cases, co-workers or other managers will have noticed any significant performance issues and discussed them with you and it is important to note that.

As with every other aspect of people management, of course, it is critical that you document and share proof of specific performance issues at the start of the coaching process.

6. Follow up through the W x W x W (W3 formula).
What will be done by Who by When? Effective coaching requires that both you and the employee make solid commitments to each step in the process. For example:

- You will provide specific success metrics and target dates
- You will schedule a follow up meeting in two weeks and again in two months.
- They will demonstrate specific changes and improvements by these dates.
- If either of you need to request changes to the schedule, you will provide at least 3 days' notice.

Inspire Employees To Take Action

As discussed in detail earlier, to inspire employees to take initiative and be positive, you need to consider and constantly re-assess:

- Your own attitude
- How well they fit with their role
- Composition of the team
- Knowledge and skillset
- Tools and resources
- Personal situation
- Setting clear goals and objectives
- And the overall organizational dynamic

If employees are just showing up for the paycheck, you'll likely never see performance improvement from them. When they look forward to showing up and creating value each day, you're likely to see continuous individual improvement and team members who mentor each other and boost each other up.

Motivating Employees To Higher Performance

Building and sustaining an energized workforce that takes initiative and is positive requires creating an inspiring atmosphere. Some of the key features of such a workplace are:

- A creative work environment where employees are able to express themselves openly.
- A work environment not stifled by unnecessary process and policy hurdles.
- A challenging and constructive work environment featuring constant feedback.
- Leadership that listens and responds to employees.
- A collaborative and cross-functional workforce where diversity is cherished.

Employees recognize the difference between empty slogans and real commitment and will respond to an organization that walks the walk in creating a great place to work.

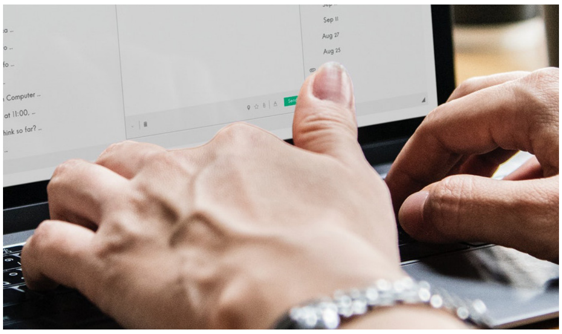
A recent study found that employees who are happy are 12 percent more productive than those who aren't.

Whether or not the specific percentage is totally accurate, we can all confirm the general point from our own work experiences.

Happy employees get to work on time, work hard, and take responsibility.

So how to keep a happy workplace?
Here's some ideas

- Make humor part of the agenda – work is stressful. Find ways to lighten things up occasionally
- Within the constraints of your particular process, don't insist on rigid schedules. Give employees some control over how they use their time during the day.
- Respect and encourage respect for differences
- Fewer managers and official leaders
- Make fitness and physical activity part of a normal day
- Create a bright atmosphere and encourage interaction



Key Steps To Success

- Recognize empowerment as a key strategy
- Set your employees up for success.
- Recognize and engage on an individual basis.
- Overcome distractions.
- Use coaching as your key tool for success.
- Make your environment one that supports happy employees.
- Take action NOW