

Creating High Performance

Employees want and need feedback

I received a call recently from a front-line manager who reports to a division president. In a teary voice, she said, "I like my job, and I'm good at what I do. Yet, when I ask my boss for feedback, he always responds with, 'If I have an issue with your performance, I'll let you know.'" she said. "He makes me feel like I don't matter."

Good or bad, she wanted feedback.

Have you ever been in this place or know of someone who has?

Unfortunately this experience is all too common. Most employees I meet want to make a meaningful contribution to their company. They struggle with trying to manage more priorities than they have adequate time to complete. Their relationship with their supervisor is more tactical (e.g. "I need to get this done by Friday...") than strategic (e.g. "How would you suggest we respond to...") or supportive (e.g. "How can I best support you?").

I, too, have had this experience. When I stepped into a divisional management position for a consumer goods company, it was apparent that my team felt much the same as this front line manager. Previous management offered little in the way of clear expectations or quality feedback. The team was frustrated and discouraged, but I needed their ideas and suggestions – they had worked in this business for years and years, I had been on the job only months. I needed them to re-engage and be inspired. They had to become part of the solution.

As a first step, I held a team meeting to discuss the situation. Not unexpectedly, they initially measured their words. They were very cautious about what they disclosed. As they became more candid Over

the course of the day, the conversation became more candid as I earned their trust. At an opportune moment, in response to a question, I was able to discuss the six steps necessary to create a high performance organization. I asked them to identify the steps that were missing or inadequate and for suggestions about how we should address this. I enlisted their support about

what they thought should happen next.

Based on their input, I agreed to meet individually with each team member to discuss the type of support they needed to achieve higher performance. Together, we then developed a plan to adequately fill each missing piece.

Building trust, asking for their input and suggestions, and offering a model that put them in charge of their performance



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results, contributed to a shift in the culture I know for my team experience that these steps helped shift the culture and direction of our organization. Retention numbers doubled, promotions were offered and barriers to team communication came tumbling down.

Here are the six steps we discussed:

1. Communicate clear performance expectations:

Expectations must be mutually understood by both the employee and supervisor, and easily tracked. This positions the employee to self-monitor, self-evaluate and self-correct their behaviors and results. It also gives the employee permission to ap-

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proach their supervisor when confronted by a challenge or roadblock. To achieve high performance, employees need to have the information that puts them in a position to excell... and succeed.

2. Assess competencies:

Not all employees step into their position with the knowledge, skills and experience needed to meet each expectation.

Competency is not a matter of motivation, but often of know-how. If an employee lacks the required skills, training, or experience, they will eventually become discouraged and performance will suffer.

3. Provide training:

When an employee lacks either the skills, knowledge or capability to achieve the defined performance expectations, explore what type of training would provide the greatest benefit. Training doesn't just mean classroom style learning. Think about mentorship, a day in the field with an expert, specialized reading, etc. Get creative – there are often many choices available and the goal should be to match how the employee learns to the type of training experience.

4. Offer feedback:

Everyone has blind spots – areas that may inhibit or limit success. As a leader, glossing over these issues will not make them go away. Rather, they perpetuate into conscious or unconscious habits that, over time, become increasingly more difficult to manage or change. When an issue is discussed person-to-person, heart-to-heart, a safe place is created where people can discover the underlying motivators behind their behavior and create workable solutions to self-correct.

Feedback helps the employee to stay focused on what is important and to make smart decisions, which is especially important in today's business climate of ever-changing corporate priorities.

5. Be accountable:

To achieve high performance, the employee must take charge of his or her performance development. This includes taking initiative to schedule a meeting to discuss a particular opportunity or difficult challenge. Learning and action are fast-tracked when issues are discussed early.

6. Discuss consequences:

While you expect the very best from each employee, over time you may find that there may exist a fundamental incompatibility between the person's talents and the job requirements. Consequences of poor performance should be discussed as soon as performance issues arise. As seemingly difficult as this conversation may be, the employee has a right to know that their performance does not meet expectations and that other options should be pursued.

When employees regularly check and recheck work effort against the desired performance objectives, obstacles to high performance are quickly removed and replaced with a solid plan of action. It is much easier for an individual to make small adjustments than large ones. This model provides the clarity, encouragement, recognition, feedback, and accountability needed to support the employee on his or her path toward high performance.

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