Don’t Bail Out – Make Performance Evaluations Count

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The New Year is upon us. For many businesses, it’s the season for performance evaluations. Throughout my career, I’ve reviewed performance evaluations in many organizations. These have had various formats, but they often share two common characteristics - they are vague and dishonest.

Sorry to indict managers, but who else is there to blame? Managers are clearly responsible for the vagueness and dishonesty of performance evaluations, and the resultant collateral damage to their organizations.

Some of the vagueness is rooted in fuzzy thinking about job functions. Commonly used words like analyzing, coordinating, assisting and supporting are lazy verbs, describing generic activities that don’t relate to concrete results. For example, describing customer service as supporting and assisting customers is one thing. Describing it as answering phones by the third ring, resolving customers’ problems to the customers’ satisfaction the first time, and remaining polite, even if the customer is rude and insulting, is quite another.

Lofty-sounding but vague annual goals are equally bad. Telling someone to optimize departmental productivity, without defining how productivity will be measured and what constitutes “optimum” is a waste of time. How in the world will anyone know when the goal has been achieved? When a manager writes that an employee should make a vague improvement to a vague activity, the result is vagueness to the second power. Anything involving the words “leveraging” or “synergy” moves the vagueness needle off the chart.

Vagueness goes hand-in-hand with dishonesty. Many managers don’t like confrontation. So instead of being honest with people about competence, performance and behavior, they dance around the issues. Lengthy paragraphs are written, filled with luke-warm praise and irrelevant information, in order to camouflage murky suggestions that some kind of improvements might be in order.

I’ve seen this in my corporate experiences and as a consultant. I’ve had countless opportunities to counsel managers with under-performing employees, and I’ve inherited my share. Nine times out of ten, recent written evaluations give little hint of problems and offer no resolution. Employees who lack competence or accountability, or, who are unable to interact productively with other people, are given middle-of-the-road ratings and passed along with a few vague words about improvement.

This approach helps no one. The employee doesn’t learn anything, the manager is stuck with the problem and other coworkers and the organization suffer. Managers have a responsibility to be totally honest in employee evaluations. They should not hold back on praise where it is due. That's the easy part. They must also do the hard part and be explicit when employees are not meeting expectations. They must describe exactly what the employee must do to resolve the issue and they must be clear about consequences.

Regardless of the format of the evaluation an organization uses, managers should examine five key questions about each employee:

Does this person demonstrate support of the values and mission of this organization? This is the most fundamental question. If not, one must question why the person is employed. Those who don't pass this test should be reoriented or helped to find success elsewhere.

Is this person competent in all aspects of this job? If the answer is less than a resounding "yes," the employee must be informed and a written improvement plan is needed. This plan should require successful completion of training or developmental assignments by specific dates with regular progress reviews. People who are not fully competent are a burden to coworkers and managers, who must constantly fill the gaps. Fortunately, skills can usually be learned once the need is identified.

Is this person responsible and accountable? This covers a lot of ground; everything from coming to work on time to accepting tough assignments. Competent employees who are responsible and accountable generally don't need much supervision. People who need a baby sitter fail this test and need an improvement plan, in this case leading to a noticeable and sustained change in behavior. The plan should include specific changes needed, dates for progress reviews and specific consequences. Those who fail this test and are not challenged are free-riders who damage management's authority and credibility.

Does this person have a positive effect on coworkers, teammates and customers? People who can't get along with others, who are all about themselves or their department, who are passive-aggressive, manipulative or intimidating are problems that management must confront head-on. They should be given one not-very-long chance to demonstrate change.

Does this person have growth potential? This is the question that addresses the future. Sometimes there is no growth in the cards. When there is, managers should work just as hard to help these employees with training and special assignments as they do to help under-performers with improvements.

Honest answers to these questions should help managers and employees to see where employees are shining and where they need help.

Originally published in the Central Penn Business Journal, January 2011

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