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HR NEWS

IPMA HR

Organizational Culture & Employee Engagement

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The Secret to Turning Around Underperforming Employees

By Vicki Brackett

All leaders have had an employee with great potential who just did not perform. Regardless of how confidentially you handle the situation, employees are watching and putting your actions under a microscope. The secret to turning around an employee is to utilize an approach that engages the employee. This creates an environment that cultivates a leadership mindset and an increased level of professional maturity in frontline employees.

Putting First Things First

First and foremost, you have to truthfully examine how your leadership style supports the behavior your employees see. This can be a tough discussion to have with yourself. Start by honestly asking, "How am I contributing to the overall success or failure of this organization?"

Remember that as a leader, everyone on your team, as well as in your department and organization, is watching how you respond when an employee is not performing. Employees look at your body language. Do you cross your arms when you talk with the person? Are you shaking your head ever so slightly? Are you rolling your eyes? Sighing? Do you talk down to that employee or others? Do you cut them off when they are speaking? Is your tone angry or frustrated?

How you react to an employee who is not performing can set the stage for how others respect and follow you. Never assume you are hiding your feelings, even when you close your office door. Employees are perceptive.

Asking the People Who Know the Answer

From a strategic perspective, is the environment in your organization conducive to the success of your employees? Your people know what type of environment they want and will perform best in. So, ask them.

What's important to them? How do they want to feel when they come to work? How do they want interactions with their coworkers to go? If employees help create the environment that works for them, they will make sure it is successful.

Taking the Lead

Next, make the comparison between work and business relationships, explaining to employees that relationships are about give and take. Since a business relationship rests on what the people in it can do for each other, do not shy away from stating, "I want to know what you want from me?" Get them to be as specific as possible.

Doing this in a group setting will promote great energy and teamwork, as everyone will want to get involved. Ask for a volunteer to take notes, and let the list grow as long as employees can make it. Just keeping asking them, "What else do you need from me?"

You might be surprised what gets put on the list. Keep your emotions in check and just encourage them to talk more. If they say, "I don't want [fill in the blank]," acknowledge that by saying, "Great, so what do you want, then?" Never be afraid to ask them to be more specific. After all, this is their list, and you want to understand their needs.

Fostering Professional Maturity Benefits the Organization

When you ask employees what they want, you also receive permission to ask for what you want. Initiating the conversation creates a partnership. So, once employees have completed their list, you can share your own list of what you need from them.

Good leaders mentor and develop employees into future leaders.

At this point, you are gathering information. Approach the discussions with employees with curiosity.

For this reason, make a point of explaining why getting what you want from employees is important from a business perspective. You could say, for example, “I need everyone to show up on time

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because the team depends on each other and because our customers need us.”

Doing this communicates what you want while making it clear that what you want is more than a personal preference. As the leader, you are responsible for achieving organizational objectives. Fulfilling that responsibility requires employees to meet certain expectations for performance.

Giving the “why” when stating what you need builds a strong foundation for guiding employees toward professional maturity. When they understand requests to perform in specific ways to be invitations to help the organization succeed, employees gain a business perspective.

Putting Employees in the Driver’s Seat

After holding group sessions to share wants and expectations, schedule one-on-one meetings with your direct reports and make a professional development plan. Approach each discussion with the related goals of finding out what the employee wants to do next in their job or career and of brainstorming what you can do to help them get there.

This makes both of you responsible for taking action. You are also giving employees charge of their own destiny. Helping them is important, but their professional maturity will move up a notch.

Modeling a Leadership Mindset

Keep up your end of the development plan by doing quick 15-minute check-ins with employees each week to see how they are progressing and if the plan should change. More-frequent check-ins can be done via text or email to see if employees have specific questions or want to run things by you.

During the weekly discussions, have employees go down their list of their commitments and give updates on their progress. Examples of actions for which they could be held accountable include having someone help them with spreadsheet software and learning to use newly adopted equipment. For you, have you arranged face time between an employee and another department manager to discuss future openings?

It may make sense to acknowledge and praise employees for moving forward with their plan. Doing this reinforces new behaviors. Make sure, though, that all your praise is sincere so you do not lose credibility.

Instilling a New Organizational Mindset

Having ongoing conversations about performance and achieving

Employees own the change process because they are driving it and are provided opportunities to showcase their new skills and to tell you how they helped coworkers learn new skills. This increases their leadership skills, advances their professional maturity and helps them see where what they do fits into the overall plan for the organization. And as the team’s support for moving together toward operational excellence grows, morale improves.

Developing this new organizational mindset applies positive peer pressure to employees who are not performing up to expectations. This puts the responsibility squarely on each team member, and those worth keeping will mature as professionals.

Promoting Professional Maturity by Leading by Example

All it can take to turn an employee around or move them beyond self-sabotage is offering them a different way of looking at things. Employees who recognize changes in their and their colleagues’ behavior, as well as what you are doing differently as the leader, will know what level of professional maturity can be achieved.

When an employee stumbles and slides backward in their behavior, ask them if they are OK and what you can do to help. Ask them what is standing in their way to achieving a goal and if you are doing what you promised to help them develop.

Choosing Proactive Leadership Over Damage Control

Providing great leadership takes time out of your already busy schedule to create and carry out plans to develop employees. But a poor leader will also spend that time doing damage control when things or employees go sideways. The real choice is whether to make the commitment on the front end or the back end.

To help employees and meet organizational objectives, leaders need to take responsibility for how they lead. With sound strategy and excellent tactical execution, leaders can harness the energy and ideas of their team members. Doing that puts employees in charge of their own destiny and helps them grow in professional maturity and skills while moving the organization forward.

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goals for professional development increases overall team spirit and helps get everyone going in the same direction. It establishes strategic and tactical ways of thinking and executing. New processes are cultivated.



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