

Make the Most of Who You Have:

Strategies for Getting Peak Performance

What manager wouldn't like to wave a wand and have the perfect team? These people would work well together, love the work, and be committed to the company. They would all consistently function at their highest capacity. They would produce awesome results, delight customers, and conserve resources. On top of all of this, they would have pleasant, cheerful dispositions. This is every manager's fantasy...just as employees have fantasies about wise, communicative managers able to provide clear direction and constant support. But, alas, both are just fantasies.

by **JoanneSMIKLE**

In the real world, managers have to contend with a diverse array of people, each presenting unique strengths and weaknesses. The labor shortage is becoming more and more of a reality. There are fewer applicants for more positions. This means that managers must find ways to utilize the available talent. This article presents five strategies for making the most of who you have.

Strategy #1

Analyze current levels of competence

It is essential to know which employees excel at which assignments. And, it is important to remember which employees are ill-suited for which assignments. It is even more important to know why. For instance, there may be a call center employee who is especially adept at researching customer complaints. This person undoubtedly excels because of their investigative abilities. Employees like this are wonderful. They are problem-solvers who add bench strength to the team.

That same employee may not work well on team assignments. They may be intimidated by groups or have disdain for group work. It is equally as possible that the person may simply be shy and prefer his own company.

While it is important to know that the employee is a good researcher, it is interesting to know why. A conversation will reveal the root of these skills. For some it is because they enjoy the challenge of finding information. For others it may stem from their part-time work as a librarian in high school. They may have loved working in the dusty stacks and card catalogs.

Understanding why a person excels helps managers build stronger connections with employees. They are connecting at the human level which is always more deep and sustainable than simply connecting over the work. Building this level of connection and understanding will be continuously helpful when staffing projects. Knowledge of strengths gives a manager useful information for making work assignments.

Strategy #2

Assign based on skills and interests, not just departmental needs

It is tempting to make work assignments based exclusively on departmental needs, but anyone who has been in a management position for even a short period of time knows that this does not always work. Yes, there is work that has to be completed. But that work is best completed by interested, capable team members. This is the reason for investing time in building the connection that comes from analyzing current levels of competence. You will be able to make staffing decisions based on facts that you have learned about team members.

By maintaining dialogue with staff about the work that they most enjoy, you can make knowledgeable decisions about everything from special projects to shifts to team composition. This is not to say that any busy manager has time to consider every predilection when staffing projects. It simply means that you will be well-informed when making assignments. This gives you an advantage in working with your staff. They will have greater confidence in your leadership abilities because they know that you are interested in partnering with them so that they can achieve peak performance.

Strategy #3

Educate consistently and comprehensively

Don't rely on one-shot training or flavor of the month education. Instead, develop comprehensive developmental plans for each position or category of positions. For instance, if you are in a bank or credit union, what is the developmental plan for tellers, loan officers, marketing managers, etc.? Each position should have a suite of required learning that each employee must complete within a specified timeframe.

A mistake that plagues companies large and small in industries ranging from healthcare to finance to widget making is a reactive approach to employee education.



Rather than approaching it as a strategic endeavor and linking it to the mission and vision of the enterprise, it is instead the result of leadership whims. If a senior manager reads a great book on customer service then service training is the next thing up. If another senior manager thinks that there is a skill deficit in communication—everyone has to endure communication training. In addition to reducing the credibility of the organization, this scattered approach cannot yield sustainable results.

Opt for a clear, well-planned comprehensive approach to education that targets very specific competencies for each band of employees. This type of approach gives you the opportunity to plan for two- to three-year timeframes, to integrate measurement into your education and to track participation. While using a comprehensive model takes an investment of time on front-end planning, it is well worth the effort. Employees will be able to connect the dots in their learning. They will be able to develop mastery in the core competencies required for success in their positions.

Strategy #4

Create a coaching culture

Much lip service is paid to coaching. In fact, the burgeoning field has experienced phenomenal growth in the past ten years. It is important to get beyond the rhetoric and get to the brass tacks of coaching. It is a critical component of the performance management process. It involves observation, conversation, and behavior modification. Coaches who repeatedly catch people doing things well and coach them in affirmative ways get better results than coaches who choose to frequently have a punitive position. Coaches who affirm the best behavior get more of it because they are constantly reinforcing the work that adds worth to the enterprise.

Creating a coaching culture requires that coaching be included as a component of a comprehensive leadership/management development education program. Coaches need to have tools—books, articles, and resources. They need to learn how to track their coaching. A written record of the conversations will give them fodder for evaluations. It will also enable them to examine their comfort with coaching conversations. They will be able to review their individual records to see how they continue to apply principles presented in the tools provided through their on-going education.

A coaching culture allows for peer-to-peer coaching, as well as coaching up in the organization. People are encouraged to provide feedback throughout the organization without fear of reprisal or retaliation. Healthy, open communication is characteristic of a coaching culture.

Strategy #5

Don't be afraid to discipline

Skillful leaders understand that discipline is a component of managing people. While it would be wonderful if there were no infractions worthy of discipline, we live in the real world which is full of recalcitrant, moody, insubordinate people who do not respond to coaching, counseling, or mentoring. These misfits must receive swift, progressive discipline. Think of it as a service that you are providing to the company, the team, and the individual. Equitable discipline creates an environment where standards are adhered to and accountability is the norm.

Discipline establishes boundaries. These boundaries are the acceptable parameters for performance and productivity. Without them there is a very likely possibility of inconsistent outputs and questionable quality. Your approach to discipline need not be heavy-handed. Instead it should be a firm reinforcement of acceptable limits, standards, and conduct. Use an approach that is unambiguous and direct so that there is no room for misunderstandings.

Summary

Each of these strategies assumes that you, the leader, have developed the ability to communicate well. You must refine your ability to not only get a message across, but to hear from your team. Building fluid lines of communication will enable you to gather information about what your employees want and need. Understanding their motivations will enable you to reward and recognize appropriately. The combination of the strategies mentioned herein, coupled with thoughtful communication, will enable you to work with the talent that you have.



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